Article

Purpose, Spirituality and Moderate Secularism: The Contribution of Religious Institutions to Purpose Development

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Abstract: Building on moderate secularism, this article proposes a contribution that religious institutions could make to the common good of pluralistic societies, making more salient their relevance in the public sphere. In particular, based on the latest academic research on the many personal and social benefits of having a clear sense of purpose, it is explored *whether* religious institutions could contribute to identifying and developing the person's purpose as a central aspect of spiritual growth, and *how* to take on this task with the specific means religious institutions have available. Purpose is understood as a superordinate/second-order aim that organises short-term or low-level goals in a way that they are interconnected and can be read teleologically, and which necessarily includes a self-transcendence or other-regarding dimension. Even though this transcendence has, for many nowadays, a purely secular/horizontal meaning, it is argued that religious institutions should get involved in deliberately fostering purpose in a well-informed way, since purpose is a component of spiritual development. In addition, this could help to widen participation and reconnect with those who have moved away from institutional religion but still have a clear concern for spiritual development: the spiritual 'seekers', regaining their interest. This poses the challenge of bridging the gap between horizontal and vertical self-transcendence.

Keywords: purpose; purpose development; religious institutions; spirituality; moderate secularism

1. Introduction

The relative separation between the religious and the political that we find in the historical praxis of most Western European states stems from the—either explicit or implicit—acknowledgement that religions are meaningful and have significance in the public sphere. They have a public impact not only in traditional, pre-modern societies but also in pluralistic contemporary ones. As Modood (2010) puts it, religion is "a potential public good or national resource (not just a private benefit)" (p. 6). On this basis, political institutions have accommodated religion and intervened with the idea of fostering its positive effects and hindering the potential negative outcomes of using the power of religion in a destructive way.

Moderate or *accommodative* secularism builds on this assumption of the public significance of religions. It is a particular form of political secularism used to describe societies in which the relationship between political and religious institutions is *porus*, so that their autonomy and separation do not entail radical or absolute mutual exclusion. Moderate secularism describes well Western European societies, with some exceptions like France, that moved from traditional religious homogeneity to recognising formal rights to all individuals regardless of their religion, with the subsequent weakening of confessional states, but where political institutions maintained the traditional support they provided to religion based on "a sense of history, tradition and identity" (Modood 2010, p. 6) and, based on that assumption, the potential of religious institutions to play a part in the common good. This support has gradually pluralised and extended to accommodate different religions in increasingly diverse societies, and it reflects the core assumption of moderate secularism:

"a historically evolved and evolving compromise with religion" (Modood 2010, p. 5) based on certain sensitivity to the value that religions might contribute to society and not just to the private sphere.

This idea is being revisited and addressed in an explicit way to rethink the ways in which religions and religious institutions are politically significant and can add to the common good, how they can become more meaningful and appealing in contemporary pluralist societies, where interest in spirituality—though not always in the traditional forms of institutional religion—is growing, and how can currently available political mechanisms be better adjusted to benefit from their positive potential (Bhargava 2014). For instance, Modood (2010) details "five possible reasons for the state to be interested in religion" (p. 4) and, among them, lists its apparent utility in producing specific desirable personal, social, and economic outcomes, its contribution to identity formation at different levels, the truth that it might contain, and its own character as a good in itself, which is worthy of respect and not just toleration: "We can think religion is a good of this sort regardless of whether or not we are a believer just as we can think music or science is a good whether or not we are musical or scientific" (p. 12). One of these contributions of religions is that they help find meaning in life. In other words, religion acts as a central source of meaning for people that have a religious orientation. In fact, as Newton and McIntosh (2013) explain, every religion itself is "a global meaning system, an interpretative lens through which all aspects of life are organized and understood" (p. 257). There is much research that has found a strong relationship between religious commitment and the feeling of meaningfulness in one's life. For instance, in addition to confirming that meaning is more present in theists' than atheists' lives, Nelson et al. (2021) studied the differences and similarities between them regarding the sources of meaning on which they rely. Prinzing et al. (2023) looked into the specificity of religious meaning compared to that coming from other meaning-making sources, and Hicks and King (2007) found that religious commitment moderates the relationship between positive affect and meaning in life. In other words, religious people rely less on their actual mood when judging if their life is meaningful, in contrast to what happens for those low in religiosity, for whom positive affect leads to a perception of enhanced meaning in life.

In connection with the concept of meaning, this text focuses on personal purpose and explores how religious institutions could foster it as a way of contributing to the common good. As Moran (2019) explains, "life purpose should not be considered an individual attribute or private good, but rather a public good that benefits the community" (p. 14). Purpose in life is a central aspect of spiritual development (Arias and Lemos 2015). The concept of purpose has recently attracted the attention of scholars in the fields of positive psychology (Seligman 2011) and moral philosophy, particularly in virtue ethics (Han 2015; Kristjánsson 2017). But it is of interest not only to psychologists and philosophers but also to theologians and philosophers of religion. As Francis et al. (2010) note, "purpose in life is understood to be central to the very essence of religion" (p. 5), and many empirical studies have found a positive relationship between purpose in life and religiosity using different instruments to measure purpose in life and drawing on different conceptualisations of religiosity (i.e., intrinsic or extrinsic religiosity orientation, or a quest orientation to religiosity). For instance, Francis et al. (2010) found a positive association between intrinsic religiosity and purpose, and other studies (Francis 2000; Francis and Burton 2006; Robbins and Francis 2000) have found a positive and significant correlation between different aspects of religiosity (church attendance, prayer, Bible reading) and purpose in life.

This piece of research is based on the idea that the positive potential of religions in the public sphere is not sufficiently exploited, so it aims to suggest a practical contribution that religious institutions could make to develop life purpose in individuals as a way to further contribute to society. Therefore, in this text, it is analysed *whether* religious institutions could contribute to identifying and developing the person's purpose across the life span as a central aspect of spiritual growth, and *how* to take on this task with the specific means they have available (Tirri and Quinn 2010). In other words, this article seeks to examine life

purpose development as it can be fostered by religious institutions, building on the idea that having a clear sense of purpose is an essential ingredient of spirituality and of a flourishing life and, therefore, has a significant effect on important personal and societal outcomes.

The structure of the text is as follows: After looking into the construct of purpose and its connection with spiritual development and addressing the many well-researched benefits of its development as well as the contextual/cultural factors that shape it, it will be analysed how religious institutions could promote it with the specific means they have available and which challenges they might face in this task. Furthermore, the consequences of adding this new dimension to pastoral work will be discussed, with a special focus on the implications it has for the understanding of religions and the redefinition of their role in pluralistic societies, where a decoupling of the religious and the spiritual (Halik 2022; Carr 2018; Kristjánsson 2016) and of their perceived worth can be identified due to processes of individualisation and deinstitutionalisation (Rodríguez et al. 2021; Jasinski 2020).

In particular, it will be underlined that supporting purpose discernment and its pursuit could help to reconnect with those who have moved away from institutional religion but still have a clear concern for spiritual development: the spiritual 'seekers' (Taylor 2012), regaining their interest, based on the fact that both searches (the one that any religion involves about ultimate and existential questions, and that of purpose) share a common ingredient: a self-transcendence or other-regarding dimension that has a clear impact on political construction. As Thomas Halik (2022) points out, the churches need a new kind of pastoral work that includes spiritual accompaniment, which, according to him, is the main way to be present in the culture nowadays due to what he calls a change of paradigm. The change of paradigm that is taking place consists, according to him, of "the turn from religion to spirituality" (p. 6). Spirituality is "a living faith [that] precedes intellectual reflection (the doctrinal aspect) and institutional expressions of faith, [and] transcends them and sometimes revives and transforms them in moments of crisis" (p. 8). A focus on the spiritual seekers—which in Halik's view can be found both among believers and non-believers—is key, as he states: "I am convinced that the future of Christianity will depend primarily on the extent to which Christians relate to the spiritual seekers" (p. 4), although different psychological types of faith need to be considered (faith as a certainty, faith as a way, the Church as a home, the Church as a community of pilgrims...). On this basis, purpose development can be a way to develop spirituality. In addition, this task appears to be decisive in light of the results achieved by Nelson et al. (2021) regarding people's "search for meaning", since the authors found no statistically significant differences between theists and atheists with regard to this search, in contrast to "presence of meaning" and "need for meaning", for which theists scored significantly higher. This means that the search for meaning appears to be equally important for both groups, so religious institutions face the challenge of engaging not only the faithful but a wider public in addressing this human concern. The research questions guiding the more comprehensive research line in which this study takes part are the following: (1) What might the contribution of religious institutions be regarding purpose development? (2) Can a contribution like this be meaningful in secular societies, i.e., for people with a laicist/atheist standpoint? (3) Can purpose development as a new dimension of pastoral work help people regain an interest in religion, and if so, to what extent? (4) How can religious counsellors help people advance from the sometimes only *horizontal* self-transcendence that purpose entails to the experience of *vertical* self-transcendence? In other words, how can religious counselling bridge the gap between horizontal and vertical self-transcendence, considering the necessary respect for the plural outlooks in a secular society? (5) Which principles should guide that accompaniment for purpose development that either leaves the door open to or actively invites the possibility of its religious grounding?

2. The Construct of Purpose and Its Contemporary Relevance in Liquid Welfare Societies

Purpose provides an overarching, "central, future-oriented, goal-organising framework" (Machell et al. 2016, p. 845). It is a second-order aim or high-order goal that organises

short-term, lower-level goals. All these second-order goals are interconnected through it, and the person can form a narrative that helps her understand a key component of her identity. As Ricoeur (2009) points out, humans are narrative beings, and our narrative nature drives us to find the clue or the thread that connects all the events because only then do they acquire global meaning. Bronk (2012) also points to the importance of life narratives in defining who we are and in inspiring purpose.

Due to this second-order nature of purpose, Han (2015) proposes to understand it as a second-order (meta) virtue, similar—but distinct—to *phronesis* (practical wisdom). According to him, purpose provides "an appropriate direction and guide to first-order virtues" and "modulates dispositions or motivations" (p. 7). In other words, it gives first-order virtues a direction and, by doing so, it makes them contribute to flourishing. In his own words, "purpose is a second-order virtue that enables a person who possesses it to decide which actions to take and which virtues to exercise at a specific moment for the achievement of his/her noble long-term goal, and ultimately for flourishing" (p. 9).

Damon (2008) characterizes purpose as an "ultimate concern" (p. 45) of long-term significance. It is "an end in itself" that "can organise an entire life, imparting not only meaning but also inspiration and motivation for ongoing learning and achievement" (p. 36). In its best-known formulation, it is "a stable and generalised intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential for the world beyond the self" (Damon 2008, p. 44; Damon et al. 2003, p. 121). This definition has some features in common with that of meaning proposed by Wolf (2011) as something that arises "when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, and one is able to do something about it or with it" (p. 26), since both include the two-fold dimension of objective and subjective aspects as indissociable parts of the concepts: on the one hand, objective worth, an objective contribution to the world beyond the self and, on the other hand, subjective attraction, personal meaningfulness.

Central to the construct of purpose is the contribution to the world that it entails, its beyond-the-self orientation or other-regarding dimension, so that purpose "goes beyond personal meaning" (Damon 2008, p. 44). As Bronk (2012) explains, it involves a "desire to act in the world beyond oneself or in pursuit of a larger cause" (p. 80), so finding a way of matching personal talents with social needs is key in its development. According to Damon (2008), only noble, prosocial purposes provide the moral elevation that we are drawn to seek based on the social constitution of our species, and they are those in which "both the means and the ends are honourable" (p. 50) so that the intention is pursued in an honourable manner, in contrast to what happens in antisocial or evil purposes. In fact, it is connecting the person's interests, aptitudes and actions to something grander than herself guided by a strong moral sense that enables the person to commit herself and endure hardships. This contribution to the world has to do with self-transcendence or a disposition to resonance (Rosa 2019), which is a relationship to the world and to others in which the person is open to them and understands herself in a fundamental relatedness to them, instead of being curved in on herself and feeling all the things as foreign. Positive psychologists (Peterson and Seligman 2004) have understood transcendence as a virtue that includes the character strengths of gratitude, humour, appreciation of beauty and excellence, hope, and spirituality/religiousness. Kristjánsson (2016) explains that self-transcendence or the transcendent urge that is characteristic of the human condition includes, in addition to a contribution to goods that are larger than the self, an orientation towards ideals such as the true, the good and the beautiful. These can be appreciated in the aims that very purposeful people want to pursue (Damon 2008).

Purpose and meaning are often used interchangeably, but their differences should be clarified. Purpose involves a direction towards a specific end or a target that is not necessarily present in the concept of meaning. Therefore, as Kristjánsson (2017) explains, "every 'purpose' includes meaning, but not viceversa" (p. 16), and "meaning" should not only be taken in the (restricted) sense of ultimate, fundamental or higher meaning. Chan et al. (2019) also make a distinction between meaning and purpose, underlining

that only the latter is "future-oriented and broadly motivational" (p. 2). As Han (2015) notes, purpose involves not only intention, but also motivation and concrete action and, therefore, commitment. Moran (2019) explains that purpose is "more agentic than a worldview . . . and more proactive toward an existential possibility" (p. 11). Bronk (2012) refers to the same and adds that "a primary motivation for purpose is to affect causes or individuals beyond the self" (p. 80). In the PURE model of meaning (Wong 2012)—Purpose (motivation), Understanding (cognition), Responsibility (social and moral) and Affective (enjoyment or evaluation)—purpose is considered to be part of the construct of meaning. Nelson et al. (2021) point to something similar when they explain that "meaning in life represents the subjective experience of attaining a sense of purpose (i.e., having goals and direction), significance (i.e., extent to which an individual's life has value and importance), and coherence (i.e., structure in life)" (p. 111). Purpose enables the person to actively seek some effects of her actions on other people and, therefore, to realise how these effects impact their lives in relevant ways. As an example, Damon (2008) explains how purposeful work transforms the meaning that working has for a person by elevating it: "When someone thinks of work as a calling rather than merely as a job, the experience of working is transformed. The most routine accomplishments become sources of pride. Chores that once felt like drudgery become valued ways to make a difference in other people's lives. Feelings of frustration diminish" (p. 52), and burnout diminishes, too. This happens precisely when the person realises the effects that work has on the others to which the work is directed. And "this can be found in even what may appear to be mundane jobs and endeavours" (p. 53). Therefore, this other-regarding dimension makes actions, and thus life, significant: where an activity could be tedious, it suddenly acquires meaning by referring it to others through purpose.

Four dimensions can be distinguished in the concept of purpose, and the stronger the sense of purpose is, the more these integrate: "personal meaningfulness, future intention, active engagement and beyond-the-self impact" (Moran 2018, p. 145).

As Damon (2008) states, the concept of purpose "is an underutilised tool . . . and remains a marginal concern in the human sciences" (p. 15). While he acknowledges that the *idea* has a long history, *practical* or empirical research on how to cultivate it is scarce. However, the characteristics and dynamics of modern contemporary societies, where it appears to be increasingly threatened, have aroused greater academic interest in it.

In fact, it is disturbing that precisely in societies where people can enjoy higher levels of comfort, well-being and fulfilled desires, "modern disappointment has radicalised and multiplied to an unprecedented extent in Western history" (Richard 2008, p. 9). As a consequence, "the society of leisure and well-being lives together with the difficulty to live and personal discomfort" (Lipovetski 2008, p. 19). Damon (2008) describes "a prevalent sense of emptiness" that "looms as one of our greatest contemporary psychological dangers" (p. 10), and he calls it "the meaning gap" (p. 114) that manifests itself in varied ways: lack of enthusiasm, apathy, indifference, directionless drift, ambivalence, indecision, confusion in the face of a wide range of possible choices, anxiety, alienation, lack of control, disconnectedness, self-absorption, hedonism or, at the other end, difficulty in finding pleasure in daily activities, frustration, disappointment, burnout, extended disengagement, cynism, even misery and depression. As he takes from the words of an interviewee in his own studies, "unhappy for no reason" (Damon 2008, p. 28). According to Davis and Wadell's (2016) diagnosis, it is all about the vice of *acedia*. These unsettling descriptions of the prevalent contemporary moods can also be found in other diagnoses of modern societies as "risk" (Beck 1997), "liquid" (Bauman 2022) or "disappointment" (Lipovetski 2008) societies.

According to Damon (2008), the core problem does not lie primarily in stress, pressure or the highly demanding environments where people live—since, in his view, it is high demands that make people thrive—but in the absence of something that needs to be cultivated and fostered with the help of different educational agents: it has to do with purposelessness. In this regard, Damon shares Frankl's (1979) idea that people can endure anything as long as they have some purpose: those with a 'why' to live can bear almost

any 'how'. And this purpose must be personal, discovered by the individual and pursued by herself. Therefore, it is not enough to understand education as something that prepares a person for 'the' future in general terms but as something that prepares for 'his' or 'hers' (Moran 2018). This is especially important at a time in which "the social institutions that people have depended on to give meaning to life experiences are perceived to be shifting rapidly, creating a downward spiral of uncertainty" (Moran 2019, p. 12). Arthur et al. (2014) have worked in this line to make a proposal to enhance the virtues of future-mindedness in young people.

What is particularly appalling is, according to Damon, that these sentiments related to purposelessness are increasingly common among the youth, and these fundamental attitudes to life are replacing the natural optimism, enthusiasm, idealism, hopefulness and wonder characteristic of this developmental stage. Drawing on nationwide quantitative and qualitative data collected across the USA, only 20% of the youth was identified to be purposeful in the full sense, and the rest fell within some of the other groups that he profiled based on his findings (the disengaged, the dreamers and the dabblers, that add to the purposeful).

> Only about one in five young people in the 12–22-year age range express a clear vision of where they want to go, what they want to accomplish in life, and why. The largest portion of those we interviewed—almost 60 percent—may have engaged in some potentially purposeful activities, or they may have developed some vague aspirations, but they do not have any real commitment to such activities or any realistic plans for pursuing their aspirations. The remaining portion of today's youth population—almost a quarter of those we interviewed in the first of our studies—express no aspirations at all. In some cases, they claim that they see no point in acquiring any. (Damon 2008, p. 23)

In addition, the greatest concern is that "our hypermodern society does not provide 'institutionalised devices' to remedy it" (Lipovetski 2008, p. 23). On the contrary, purposelessness is a consequence of a system that avoids asking fundamental, ultimate, connecting or big-picture questions, which inquire into "the deeper meaning of our efforts" (Damon 2008, p. 14) and into the connection of everyday activities to broad purposes, and fails to make them a central and explicit part of our conversations. Instead, it concentrates on other interests such as short-term, instrumental goals (partial specialised knowledge, material success, high performance or academic achievement, recognition, awards. . .) (Machell et al. 2016). For instance, instead of helping young people to identify their calling (a kind of job they can find personally meaningful and that is socially relevant), it is often seen how they are encouraged to give up too idealistic, romantic views of professional life and be pragmatic and realistic, making the career choices that will merely secure their financial stability (Damon 2008).

However, hard work to achieve these outcomes is not likely to last long when it is devoid of the intrinsic motivation provided by having a sense of purpose, that makes efforts rewarding and meaningful. In other words, complying dutifully but without a clear sense of why, does not lead to personal fulfilment. Conversely, when these medial outcomes remain disconnected from the most crucial concern or ultimate purpose that has to do with the kind of person someone wants to become, with the desired self-identity, in the long run, they lead to "a dispiriting sense of emptiness once the initial glow of self-gratification has worn off" (Damon 2008, p. 108). As Damon (2008) summarises, purposelessness "cannot continue indefinitely without psychological costs" (p. 21), and it "can destroy the foundations of a happy and fulfilled life" (p. 30).

The pervasive omission of these questions in educational institutions and public life (i.e., community conversations, mass media) and the lack of assistance in addressing them can be explained by the people's lack of knowledge and preparedness to do so. However, religious institutions find themselves in a good position to address these questions and can be of great assistance to this end. As key educational agents, taking on this task is a prominent way to foster spirituality and contribute to the common good of pluralistic

societies since, if this is not done, people "may well seek guidance of a less positive sort", as Damon (2008, p. 80) notes when referring to the radically antisocial purposes of the deeply disturbed. As Robbins and Francis (2000) point out, pastoral work—in particular, the one that takes place in church-related institutions, e.g., in church-related colleges of higher education—should not ignore this situation to better serve the people. As the authors state: "A church-related institution may wish to take particularly seriously the fact that between one-fifth and one-third of entering students arrive in college without having developed clear goals, aims, and a sense of purpose in life" (p. 233).

Actually, a clear sense of purpose has been listed as one of the ingredients of spiritual development. Arias and Lemos highlight the three different dimensions—cognitive, affective and performative—that spiritual intelligence involves and, in connection with the cognitive one, they refer to a search for meaning that consists of finding and developing the person's calling or mission in life, together with self-transcendence (Arias and Lemos 2015; Pérez-Lancho 2016). Furthermore, the positive effects of having a clear sense of purpose have been well-documented. Firstly, it has been found to be connected with life satisfaction and virtually all dimensions of well-being (Bronk et al. 2009; Damon 2008). In this line, Byron and Miller-Perrin (2009) found out that life purpose is a mediator between the constructs of faith and well-being. Purpose leads to personal fulfilment, deep satisfaction, exhilaration and the flow generated when engaging in personally meaningful, compelling, challenging and socially valued activities in which one finds herself absorbed, so it is crucial for happiness (Csikszentmihalyi 1997). It also predicts health in old age and helps overcome psychological deficits in case of mental health problems and disabilities (Van Dyke and Elias 2007), and it increases the sense of command over one's life and a positive self-image (Damon 2008). Furthermore, it "adds both energy and resilience to our lives" (Damon 2008, p. 37): the former because purpose is inspiring and brings joy, and the latter, because it makes salient the connection of the person's actions to something broader than herself.

Its benefits are not only personal but also social. There are strong positive associations between purpose and relationship-building skills (Damon 2008) and, in the *phronesis* (practical wisdom) model recently developed by Kristjánsson et al. (2021) that predicts virtuous action, one of the four components that make it up refers to having a blueprint of a flourishing life, which has to do with purpose and personal moral identity, i.e., the most essential aspirations, values and objectives of the person. If this is so, then purpose is a crucial ingredient of a flourishing life.

3. The Development of Purpose in a Context

According to Damon (2008), "every person, however talented or gifted, has the capacity to find and make a sustained commitment to a purpose" (p. 84), but this is something that needs to be learned. Bronk (2012) makes a similar point by highlighting how important it is to expose people to activities that might later become personally meaningful, taking into account that action often precedes meaningfulness, in other words, that "meaning was the result of, rather than the cause of action" (p. 90), so meaning grows through involvement. Bundick (2011) also notes that purpose can be developed in emerging adults by engaging them in guided discussions of their values, life goals, and purpose.

Developmental scientists are putting increasing attention to the study of (1) how purpose is discerned by the individual in relationship with their context and (2) how it develops across the lifespan, taking into account that it cannot be considered only individually but in interaction with other components of the person's character. For instance, Malin et al. (2017) discovered a correlation between purpose and the character strengths of gratitude, compassion and grit, meaning that fostering these could result in effects on the person's purpose and that people with/without purpose or only halfway purposeful showed different measures in how grateful, compassionate and courageous they were. Damon (2008) also refers to gratitude as "a window into purpose, because it

helps us identify the things that we find particularly significant in our lives" (p. 136) and increases awareness of the things that we value the most.

In the same line, Damon (2008) also found that there are some common features that extraordinarily purposeful people share: *ambition* that arises from a very clear, critical view of the things that need changing, which leads to *persistence* based on the confidence or *optimism* that their work will pay off, that is compatible with a realistic *humility* that involves recognising their limits and not feeling defeated when something does not work out. Furthermore, extraordinarily purposeful people are highly *effective*, and this practical effectiveness leads to *empowerment* and entails important emotional benefits (self-confidence, optimism, gratitude, personal fulfilment) that reinforce their motivations, making them increasingly committed to their purpose in what Damon (2008) calls "a snowballing effect" (p. 87).

From all this, we can learn which character strengths need to be nurtured when helping a person develop their purpose, taking into account that those character strengths are not necessarily preconditions for pursuing a purpose but sometimes develop in the process. The impact these have on each other has to be further studied to better understand the development of a person's character and how purpose interacts with different personality traits. Bronk (2012) attempts to build a grounded theory of the development of noble youth purpose by distinguishing different stages in which commitment to a purpose is initiated, sustained, increased and evolves, and pointing to the key factors that foster it in each of them.

One clear thing is that discerning and pursuing a purpose is something that happens in a context, and this context and its culture affect what the person finds personally meaningful and what is socially significant. In effect, there are normative purposes in every culture, purposes that in some way have turned conventional, that find support in institutions, the media and cultural practices (Moran 2018). Furthermore, what is 'socially' significant is also context-dependent because what is understood by the 'others' to which purpose is directed depends on culture (i.e., if it is a more individualist or collectivist culture). Moran (2018) highlights the need to frame life purpose in a context, which allows for certain conceptions, experiences and also timings of purpose, while at the same time setting their limits. These assumptions need to be analysed because they act as a background that segregates meaning and offers a range of possibilities. Exploring personal purpose means critically analysing conventional purposes and the influence that context and the different groups exert on the formation of individual purposes, not only regarding their content but also their timings. Becoming aware of this influence is the first step to taking some distance from it and assessing it, and can result in creative purposes that "can transform worldviews to be more open and inclusive" (Moran 2019, p. 16). By doing so, individuals negotiate the possibilities that the context offers, make use of the available resources, and by choosing among them, affect their culture in turn to a certain degree.

Therefore, there are two levels of meaning-making on which purpose builds: there is "cultural shared meaning" and "individual subjective meaning-making" (Moran 2018, p. 154; Moran 2019), and they are not independent but in constant interaction. In addition, with regard to the latter, a further distinction can be made between 'global meaning' and 'situational meaning' or, as Wong (2012) puts it, between existential meaning and situational meaning. A person's global meaning has to do with their capacity to make sense of their world as a whole, while situational meaning "derives from day-to-day experiences and life events" (Newton and McIntosh 2013, p. 258). Although they can conflict with each other, the person tries to match them and make them cohere.

If this is so and fundamental beliefs (cultural shared meaning) influence and inform the conception and experience of purpose, purpose must be affected by secularism as a worldview, its values and expectations. In fact, in modern Western societies, where secularism is not just an option or an *idea* to be 'had', but a *worldview* or a *belief* in which we 'inhabit' (Ortega y Gasset 2007)—or, in Wittgenstein's (1997) terms, it is not any more contestable *knowledge*, but a *certainty* that cannot be put into question, that is taken to be identical with reality (Ariso 2015; Ariso 2019)—purpose as a second-order goal is not necessarily

grounded in religious aspirations. In other words, it often lacks the religious foundation that it used to have in the pre-modern world, which means that, although it includes an other-regarding dimension or a beyond-the-self orientation as a key component, the 'others' included in it might have a purely secular—horizontal—meaning. As Nelson et al. (2021) state, the fact that "the Western world is by many metrics becoming increasingly secular . . . has potentially powerful implications for how people find and maintain perceptions of life as meaningful" (p. 111).

Indeed, purpose is found in different domains, and context plays a part in the areas where people find purpose more frequently. Although the same domains are cited as sources of purpose across cultures and times (career, family, religion, public life, community service), the extent to which some prevail varies throughout time and places. Damon found that, while some people derive purpose from religion (Warren 2012), religious, as well as political and societal purposes have declined sustainedly in the last decades. In fact, the latter is, nowadays, at least for North American youth, one "of the less frequent contemporary sources of purpose" (Damon 2008, p. 63).

Consequently, religion is not necessarily (and for most people, according to recent surveys) the key factor articulating purpose. How can, then, religious institutions promote purpose in a way that is effective in pluralistic societies? In other words, how can they foster purpose development in a way that appears to be relevant and is attractive to different types of people? Can those who have a religiously-grounded purpose help to become more purposeful to those who seek purpose in other (secular) foundations? As Newton and McIntosh (2013) found out, religious and non-religious meanings differ, and Prinzing et al. (2023) point to the same conclusion. However, religion and purpose share a common ingredient: a search for transcendence, so fostering this beyond the self-orientation—whether it is just a horizontal or a vertical transcendence—is a necessary step towards spiritual development, to which religions aspire and in which they find their most profound meaning.

Furthermore, the search for an in-depth understanding of personal purpose draws the attention of a growing number of people who are clearly interested in spirituality but have moved away from institutional religion. If religious institutions assumed the task of fostering personal purpose, it could help them find a way to redefine their role in pluralistic societies by extending their action scope and widening participation, i.e., reaching a broader and more varied public to address questions that deal with transcendence. Doing so might help religious institutions reengage people in religious activities, especially spiritual seekers, when the accompaniment for purpose development is done effectively, as explained below drawing on current research.

4. What Could Religious Institutions Do to Foster Personal Purpose?

Moran (2018) is very clear that, of the three ways she has tried to help people develop purpose, community service has been the most useful, particularly, service in which impact on others becomes apparent to the subject (being the other ways, first, a theoretical approach aimed at understanding the concept of purpose and its relationship with other concepts, and, second, a practical approach that draws on different tools to apply to a person's life). This is so because service makes "salient all four dimensions of purpose" (Moran 2018, p. 149). She proposes a "feedback-loop model of the reciprocity of purpose and service" (Moran 2017), according to which finding opportunities to contribute depends on how the person *perceives* a situation and results in *effects* on others. Through the *feedback* of those that have been served (and the emotional impact this feedback has on the person, which can generate emotional meaning), the *perception* of the situation is transformed so that more opportunities to act can be spotted and the intention to contribute is strengthened. This way, the person becomes more proactive, and this engagement increasingly becomes a central part of her identity (Moran 2018, p. 150).

Based on this model, we can say that two lines of action could be taken for purpose development, so the scaffolding that religious institutions could provide should be directed to these goals.

On the one hand, they could seek to affect the person's perception of a situation through a guided exploration of both the self and the world around them, increasing knowledge about them, since this perception frames the opportunities to act that open up for the subject. This involves, on the one hand, identifying the character strengths and virtues that the person has and what she cares about, what matters most to her, i.e., the person's aspirations, interests and concerns and, on the other hand, the social needs and gaps that claim for attention. For finding cultural opportunities that match the person's interests, moral sensitivity is crucial, which can be trained with the help of moral dilemmas as well as through service activities themselves (Kristjánsson 2021). Damon (2008) points out that in the lives of extraordinarily purposeful people, this perception of the situation often occurs as a revelation that follows a shock, in which the individual realises that something needs to be changed. It has to be noted, though, that for developing purpose several studies emphasise the need to focus on a future time perspective instead of engaging in reflection too much. As Moran (2018) puts it: "Purpose encourages people to proflect" (p. 153), and, for this, moral imagination, which envisions different possibilities to transcend the current state of affairs, is central.

On the other hand, for service to help foster purpose, it is essential to make the person aware of the effects that her action has on others by exposing her directly to those that have been served and receiving firsthand their feedback. Moran underlines the importance of this as a way of showing that the person's actions matter and thus the value of her work, and this is so especially for the non-purposeful or for people who are in the early stages of purpose development. Therefore, contact with those served is essential for service to be more effective in developing purpose: "Simply doing volunteering acts without effective feedback may not stimulate prosocial purpose" (Moran 2018, p. 153). This feedback helps to shift focus from the I to the others, which is some of the most challenging things in purpose development. Actually, as Manninen et al. (2018) found out, even people doing a prosocial profession do not do it sometimes for prosocial but for self-serving reasons. Damon (2008) finds the same difficulty—that of developing a self-transcendent interest—in the group he categorises as dabblers. In fact, in liberal individualist societies, where short-term and self-focused goals prevail, there is a need to foster prosocial attitudes and behaviours and, therefore, to cultivate altruism, generosity and empathy, as defined by Machell et al. (2016): Altruism is a "tendency to be motivated to increase other's welfare", generosity is a "willingness to give time, attention, or resources to others without necessarily expecting benefits to the self, and represents another facet of a prosocial disposition", and empathy is the "affective motivational component of helping behaviour . . . linked with prosocial acts" (p. 850). By its very nature, service involves concentrating primarily on the benefits achieved for others, not for oneself, and this requires presenting its *moral* dimension, that goes beyond its instrumental advantages. In other words, it demands moving from self-serving reasons, and the external goods of the activity performed, to a deeper sense of its significance for others, to its intrinsic good, thus connecting personal and social benefits. Without this shift of focus that goes from a self-absorbed to a beyond-the-self larger view and aspiration, many activities that could be purposeful end up not being so. This is also valid for the capacity of religiosity to foster purpose. As Francis et al. (2010) explain, only intrinsic religiosity—namely, an orientation to religion for its own sake and not for the extrinsic, instrumental and utilitarian motives that are associated with it—was found to be related to a better sense of purpose in life, in contrast to an extrinsic and quest orientation to religion. It should also be noted that, although the conception of the 'others' is context-dependant (for instance, it varies from more individualist to more collectivist cultures), it should tend to become broader, encompassing other people apart from the loved ones based on the idea of interconnectedness, i.e., that the self and the others are not dualistic and opposed categories.

For both things—affecting the way situations are perceived and becoming aware of the impact of the person's actions on others—conversation is essential because genuine communication can result in a change of view and helps to proflect, to imagine other possibilities and set objectives based on the feedback and support that the interlocutor provides. As Kristjánsson (2014) points out, moral growth happens, at least in part, as a consequence of dialogue with significant others, in which other perspectives can open up one's horizons, and identifying personally meaningful goals and commitments becomes easier. Machell et al. (2016) also notice that this accompaniment to build purpose "should include conversations about what people find meaningful and important" (p. 857) and Damon (2008) and Bronk (2012) say that the first step in the sequence of events that can be identified in the lives of highly purposeful people is inspiring communication that triggers a moment of revelation.

From other investigations, we can also learn that it is recommended to offer spaces to share the person's purpose, convey her worries and aspirations to others, and present what has been achieved. Berkowitz and Bier (2005) explain that when people have to transmit what they do to others, they find their effort is worthwhile. Furthermore, by doing so, the concept of the 'others' to which their action is directed is broadened, including those who can potentially become interested in the same thing, as Bronk (2012) explains with regard to the stage when the commitment to a purpose evolves and expands its focus. While these public presentations and the dissemination of one's purpose help to *strengthen* purpose (in stages in which it has already developed to a certain extent), community service can help to *identify* it in the first stages. However, service has been proven to be useful for individuals at different stages of purpose development and, therefore, for those who have developed intrinsic motivation to various degrees. These exchanges generate new friendships that can inspire and support one's pursuit of purpose, and they are especially relevant when old friends do not share the same interests (Bronk 2012; Damon 2008).

Traditionally, religious institutions have been involved in social and service activities that make a difference. Then, engaging people in service is by no means a novelty. What is proposed here, then, is pursuing this very same objective with the new explicit, deliberate, well-planned and well-informed aim of stimulating personal purpose. This way, religious institutions would be doing something similar to what they are used to, but through a new lens that might be appealing to a broader public and that results in long-term commitment on the part of participants since it starts as an exploration of personal identity or authenticity (Burrow and Hill 2011; Taylor 2016). Regarding impoverished or disadvantaged populations, whom religious institutions are used to serving, developing purpose would work particularly well and would contribute to bridging persistent divides. In fact, having a purpose in life reduces hopelessness and stimulates the imagination as a faculty that can envisage things in a different way as a first step to changing the insufficient aspects of the world that demand intervention. Therefore, purpose helps to empower these populations, to move forward and overcome difficult circumstances. According to Machell et al. (2016), purpose acts as a protective factor that mitigates the effects with which poverty is associated; namely, increased antisocial and decreased prosocial behaviours. In particular, while strengthening purpose in marginalised youth did not lead to an increase in prosocial behaviours, it did reduce antisocial ones: "Youth in poverty engaged in fewer instances of disobedience and bullying behaviours when they had a greater sense of purpose in life" (Machell et al. 2016, p. 855).

Moreover, both religion and purpose promote and require hope as a central virtue for the person. In fact, "purpose in life provides a sense of potentiality, and instils possibilities for a future life" (Machell et al. 2016, p. 847). The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues provides resources specially made for these populations that have proved to be highly effective for purpose and character development, which has a clear impact on the common good (Arthur et al. 2017).

5. How Could Religious Institutions Carry out Their Accompaniment to Develop Personal Purpose?

If, in the last section, the question of *what* religious institutions could do to foster purpose has been addressed, in this, some guidelines are offered on *how* this task could be carried out. In particular, we concentrate on some indications that should be especially beard in mind when religious institutions take on purpose development.

Damon clearly states that talking about purpose should happen in a way that is not preachy, intrusive, domineering, too assertive, commanding or controlling. Rather, it should show great sensitivity to the other person and take place in a delicate manner that is truly respectful of the other person's own interests. If this is important in any case, it is even more when religious institutions carry out purpose development. This means that purposes cannot be 'given' in any way but are something that the person finds on her own, and that should be genuine to the self since they have to do with deeply personal aspirations (Moran 2019). Therefore, the accompaniment required for purpose development consists in performing a supporting, not a leading, function. As Damon (2008) argues, people "must have a sense that they are finding their way toward purposes of their own choosing" (p. 127), so assisting someone who is seeking or pursuing a purpose is not about telling the other person 'what to think', but steering toward possibilities that are available in the context, that are socially relevant and match the person's interests.

Then, helping someone to identify and develop their purpose involves a great deal of active listening, guided by a special sensitivity to the person. Then, most of the talking should come from the person involved in pursuing purpose, rather than revolving around giving advice based on the other person's experience. The first rule of Free listening (Urban Confessional 2023)—an imbalanced conversation in which 80% of the time is spent listening and 20% speaking (Tietsort et al. 2021)—should be applied, where that 20% is devoted to clarifying some points, moving the conversation forward and asking good Socratic—fundamental, 'why'—questions that raise awareness of potential sources of purpose and prompt the person to find her own answers by reflecting on her deepest aspirations and interests. Active listening is also essential to determine at which stage the person finds herself on the path to purpose so that adequate support can be given.

Depending on this stage, the assistance can range from opening up potential sources of discovery of purposes, when there is no sense of purpose, to giving support when something has already sparked interest and is socially significant. This support includes providing more information or looking for relevant sources to make the person think about the meaning of the perceived situation, helping to articulate this interest, figuring out which possibilities the person has to contribute, assisting in making a realistic plan or offering emotional support to keep going at difficult times. And this includes, according to Damon (2008), withholding support if what the person wants to pursue is perceived as harmful or destructive in any way.

Bronk (2012) and Damon (2008) emphasise the importance of a structure of social support, especially when the person is young, so it is vital that the community understands the purpose that the person pursues and recognises the value in it: "This message [of support] can make a world of difference in the search for direction" (Damon 2008, p. 49). Mentors' or deeply knowledgeable people's guidance is key for purpose commitment to escalate (Bronk 2012).

6. What Challenges Does Religion Face When Pursuing to Develop People's Purpose?

In accompanying this process of articulating the person's ultimate concern, religions face some challenges. The first has to do with avoiding the risk of sounding too preachy and trying to impose views. As noted above, it is essential to avoid a domineering attitude and provide assistance that is not seen as a way to recruit people at all costs.

Apart from this, the greatest challenge lies in elaborating on the self-transcendence ingredient that purpose includes in order to advance from horizontal to vertical self-transcendence, and explaining how the first can be ultimately grounded in the second and,

therefore, finds its most perfect expression in the complete connectedness (*religare*) of pure benevolence without rest of self-interest, instrumental or self-serving goals.

Therefore, while purpose may not, at first, be linked with religious aspirations nor have a religious grounding, religious counsellors should find ways to express their connection. First, this can be done through their moral character by showing that there are not two histories, the history of salvation and human history, but transcendent and political praxis are two sides of the same coin (Ellacuría 1990).

Second, and most importantly, it can be done by explaining the *distinctiveness* of religious meaning, in other words, what religion *adds* to other meaning-making sources. Hicks and King (2007) pose the question of whether meaning coming from different sources is different. In particular, in their study, they found that positive affect is positively related to perceived meaningfulness, and religious commitment also predicts higher levels of perceived meaning in life, but they wonder if "the feeling of meaning [is] equally meaningful if it comes from mood vs. religious commitment" (p. 55) or other sources. According to Prinzing et al. (2023), it is not. Religion has a distinctive and irreplaceable role as a source of meaning; namely, it provides meaning that is one of a kind: it endows the person with a sense of *cosmic* significance—the conception that the person has a role in a grand plan according to which the universe was designed. This is specific to religion and the meaning that can be derived from it: it is something no other source of meaning can provide. In fact, Prinzing et al. found out that while secular substitutes of religion can be in the same good position as religion to provide meaning in a person's life by making her part of a community and making her feel that she belongs and matters to others in it (that she has 'social' significance), they cannot provide the sense of 'cosmic' significance that religion offers to the person, which goes beyond social importance so that no other thing can take its place.

This means that purposes that are ultimately religiously grounded derive from a broader comprehension of the person's link to reality that includes not only their social—but cosmically insignificant—dimension, but a deeper ontological sense of what it means for her to exist: to be part of a grander plan and with a role in it.

Prinzing's findings contrast with Chan et al. (2019) thesis that people mainly derive purpose from social relationships—"social relationships may be the most central factor underlying a sense of purpose in life" (p. 2)—so any kind of worldview that fosters them can provide it. For instance, religion involves social relationships and, therefore, can be a source of purpose by inserting the individual in a community where there are increased opportunities to engage in activities, and this is even so for socially disconnected people who have religious beliefs since, inasmuch as these beliefs allow for at least some social relationships (with divine figures), they can compensate for the purpose that social relationships provide. However, according to Chan et al. (2019), other "analogous, non-religious worldviews may confer the same benefits" (p. 14) as long as they include social relationships. Nelson et al. (2021) suggest something similar when they state that religion plays an important role in finding meaning "in part, because it helps facilitate other sources of meaning" (i.e., social interaction, volunteer work) (p. 111). In contrast to this, as we noted, Prinzing et al. (2023) argue that what is specific to religion—and therefore cannot be acquired through other means—is not that it allows for a sense of belonging and mattering to others, but that it endows the individual not just with social, but with cosmic significance. Newton and McIntosh (2013) point to the same idea when they argue that religious and non-religious meanings differ (for instance, regarding global meaning, meaning is "more complex and coherent and resulting in greater subjective sense of coherence when derived from a religious versus a non-religious source" (p. 260).

7. Conclusions

Since purpose is a component of spirituality, religion is a key player in its development. In fact, in a secular world, a more significant role of religious institutions in this regard could be explored, since the inspection and strengthening of purpose can be an initial search

for a deeper (vertical) transcendence in the age of authenticity. Furthermore, performing this role in a decisive and intentional way represents a way for religious institutions to better serve their societies, without ignoring that many people are struggling in the search for meaning and purpose. Given the multiple personal and social benefits of having a clear sense of purpose, such an educational endeavour is a crucial way of participating in the public sphere, since purpose is directly connected with socially significant activities that directly impact the common good. In addition to enabling people to think about their deep aspirations and concerns, their personal strengths and interests and how these can be applied to cultural circumstances and put them into action, purpose development is seen as a way to escape the individualist drift of liberal societies, and provides the direction that is missing in the lives of many and that is essential for flourishing so that an intention to contribute for the good of others is integrated into personal identity.

If religious institutions take on this task explicitly and deliberately, basing their approach on current research, they could widen participation, making their role more relevant and appealing to different types of people. In particular, they could reengage the seekers who ponder their own way into spirituality in a time in which people are shifting "from a *given* worldview and life purpose to a *chosen* worldview and/or life purpose" (Moran 2019, p. 9). When the search for personal purpose is addressed following the guidelines that research has proved effective, this search can well reflect the path that a seeker goes through from discovery or revelation to an effective contribution, and to acquiring the skills and making the necessary efforts to pursue her purpose, and, in the end, maybe, that advances from horizontal to vertical transcendence with the help and guidance of religious counsellors.

This proposal can only be successful in moderately secular societies, where there is still a certain sensitivity towards the value that religions might contribute to society and not just to the private sphere. In laicist or radically secular societies, such an initiative would not have a broad impact, since in them religions are viewed in an insignificant or even negative way (as something outdated that needs to be overcome, at best; or as a threat, at worst). In any of these cases, not only are religious institutions not supported by political institutions, but it is also more difficult to engage a wider audience when the social image of religion has been degraded to something that is only relevant to the private sphere.

As was explained above, service has been shown as an effective way to develop purpose no matter at which stage the person finds herself in purpose development. Since service has traditionally been inexorably linked to religious institutions, it could easily be carried out with the aim of exploring, deepening and strengthening the person's purpose as a way both of contributing to society and cultivating the person's spirituality, thus developing a healthier and more humanising sense of personal identity (Sanli and Ersanli 2021).

This work has limitations inasmuch as it is just a proposal that builds on current academic research on purpose development and asks how religious institutions could contribute to this end with the orientations that follow from recent empirical studies. As a proposal, the effectiveness of this line of action needs to be tested in empirical longitudinal studies. However, its value lies in the fact that it takes a first step in exploring and applying research on purpose development to the pastoral work that religious institutions carry out as a way of spiritual accompaniment. Building on this proposal, further research could delve into the causal correlations between religion and purpose. While we already know, on the one hand, that religious beliefs are associated with an increased purpose in life—"religious beliefs facilitate psychological processes that have practical benefits for purpose" (Chan et al. 2019, p. 14; Nelson et al. 2021), since religion is itself "a global meaning system, an interpretative lens through which all aspects of life are organised and understood" (Newton and McIntosh 2013, p. 257), it remains to be proved if there is a causal connection between both, i.e., if religion itself is what increases purpose in life or other (previous) features of the person—precisely those that move the person to engage in religious activities—do so. On the other hand, empirical research is needed to determine

whether fostering purpose leads to increased religious beliefs so that people with a clear sense of purpose are more likely to engage in religious practices.

Furthermore, the practicalities of this contribution of religion to purpose development should be worked out by analysing which programmes are more suitable for religious institutions to foster purpose and could be implemented under their guidance in effective and realistic ways. In particular, it should be explored more closely how, in this process of accompaniment, the gap between horizontal and vertical transcendence could be bridged by pointing to the distinctiveness of religiously-grounded meaning.

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