



# The Relation between the Meaning in Life and the Sensitivity of Conscience in the Life of Polish Students with Different Levels of Experience of God's Presence

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## Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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## ABSTRACT

**Aims:** The aims of the research was to define the level of meaning in life and the level of conscience sensitivity in groups of students with a high and low level of religious experience of God's presence, and to examine the relationship between these variables.

**Methodology:** The study was conducted in Kraków among university students. All the respondents claimed to belong to the Roman-Catholic Church. 235 sets of correctly completed questionnaires were used for the results analysis. In the research the following methods were applied: The Scale of Religious Experience (SRE) by Glaz, The Purpose in Life Test (PLT) by Crumbaugh and Maholick, and The Scale of Conscience Sensitivity (SCS) by Buksik.

**Results:** Students with a high level of experience of God's presence appear to have a higher level of meaning in life and conscience sensitivity than students with a lower level of the experience. Moreover, in a group of students with a high level of experience of God's presence, meaning in life is more strongly related with conscience sensitivity than in a group of students with a low level of it.

**Conclusion:** The findings of the author's study of the problem make an empirical contribution to increasing the understanding of religious experience concerning meaning in life and conscience sensitivity in the development of the psychology of religion.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

People are accompanied by all sorts of existential experiences, such as a sense of meaning in life, inner satisfaction with attainment of life goals, or being pleased with living their lives the right way [1–3]. However, there is a clearly noticeable lack of more detailed research in this field. The author tried to deal with this problem in the context of religion experience [4], and therefore, his focus of interest is the relation between meaning in life and the sensitivity of conscience in the life of Polish students with different levels of experience of God's presence living in a country with a Catholic tradition.

### 1.1 Religious Experience

Related literature reveals that researchers differ as to their understanding of religious experience [5]. It can be perceived as a kind of human experience occurring in the context of the ultimate value [6]. With regard to religion, it denotes a process of direct acquisition of knowledge about religious reality as well as the whole spectrum of human experience [7,8]. Yet for other researchers religious experience is a kind of communion with a force perceived as divine [9]; it is a feeling of sacredness and dependence at the same time [10]. It is so specific that it cannot just equal any human experience. Montmorand [11], in turn, claims that St. Paul's vision near Damascus was a result of a dysfunction of the occipital lobe of the cerebral cortex. Freud [12,13] suggests that religious experience is a result of a conflict between id and ego. According to Freud, a religious experience – is the 'oceanic feeling.' What he means by religious feeling is the simple and direct fact of a feeling of 'the eternal' (which may very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and as if oceanic). This feeling is in truth subjective in nature. Newberg and d'Aquili [14] have studied the brain-correlates to such experiences. They scanned the brain blood flow patterns during such moments of mystical transcendence, using SPECT-scans, to detect which brain areas show heightened activity. They have concluded that religious experience correlates to observable neurological events, which are not outside the range of normal brain function. Smith [15] thinks that religious experience can be invoked by psychedelic substances. For some, such an experience is positive; in others, however, it can lead to irrevocable mental dysfunctions [16–18].

Researchers, drawing on the theoretical background worked out by thinkers like Allport [19], Glock and Stark [20], James [9] and Maslow [21], have created several study tools. They are used for studying religious experience (Mysticism Scale) [22], Centrality of Religiosity Scale) [23], Mystical Experience Questionnaire [24]. Paragament [25] created a test – The Religious Coping Scale. The Polish cultural adaptation of it was made by Talik [26]. In order to obtain empirical data, these tools are used by many researchers. These researchers agree that religious experience is an important part of human life [27], and it is related to cognitive process and to emotion and effect [28]. People who claim to have had religious experience show greater satisfaction with life [29,30] and have a sense of well-being [31], which are mediating variables for meaning of life and thus they are important in the study of personality [28].

Mystic literature by John of the Cross [32] and Ignatius of Loyola [33] reveals that a human being can experience God's presence as well as God's absence. During this experience he or she acquires new knowledge. The experience of God's presence is accompanied by feelings of happiness and satisfaction, whereas while experiencing God's absence a man feels forlorn by God, dissatisfied and is in fear. The author of this paper, on the basis of the concept of religious experience in accordance with the Christian religion [34,35], created a study instrument for measuring the intensity of religious experience: experience of God's presence, and experience of God's absence (Scale of Religious Experience) [36], which was applied in the present study. The statements refer to the Christian religion and cognition that is related to it. Religious cognition occurs in a relation which exists between man and God. The Scale distinguishes the following elements: the object of religion (God personified), the subject of religion (a human being with their cognitive, emotional and volitive spheres) and religious relations, which are in personal character. Religious experience is a cognitive character. It gives human beings a new content. They enrich their lives both in the individual and the social dimension. A human being, when entering a relation with God, gains new knowledge and experience about himself or herself, other people and God [36,37]. Through that knowledge and experience God 'speaks' to them and a human being responds with their faith, love and

involvement [38]. According to the researchers – James [9] and Otto [10] – what decides about the type of religious experience are elements brought in by both human personality and Ultimate Reality, taking into consideration the uniqueness and distinctive features of them. That is why a human being shows two different kinds of religious experience in his or her life: first, experience of God's presence and second, experience of God's absence.

## 1.2 Meaning in Life

Meaning in life can be understood in many ways. From a psychotherapeutic point of view, the question of the meaning of life could be reinterpreted as “What is the meaning of my life?” [39]. A human being reaches self-actualization when he or she discovers and accomplishes meaning in life [40]. A man fulfills his or her sense of meaning in life by striving for perfection within a certain community [41]. Meaning in life is up-dated by self-accomplishment of one's own potentialities [21]. It is supposed to be revealed in pursuing one's own interests [1,42]. According to Frankl [39] meaning in life is related to “will of the sense”, which constitutes in a dynamic tendency motivating a man to take action in order to fulfill his or her needs. A human being exists not to “be”, but to “become”. The subject of meaning in life can be considered as a need and as a state of meaning in life. The state of meaning in life is connected with the subjective experience of the sense of one's own life. The decisive role in this dimension is played by the emotional sphere. The need of meaning in life, however, is fulfilled by attainment of goals and their realisation and by affirmation of one's own life. The aspiring element dominates here. Meaning in life has got its specific features, whose detailed explication was provided by Frankl [43]. These include: being common, particular, unique as well as continuity and changeability. Being common appears in any everyday situation and in every man's life; being particular in a given situation it can be ascribed to a particular person; being unique – what has not been done cannot be done ever again; continuity and changeability – every day expects a man with a different sense, and some sense always exists. Crumbaugh and Maholick [44], on the basis of Frankl's theory, created a test – The Purpose in Life Test – which was used in this paper. It is used to study the intensity of the meaning in life. The Polish cultural adaptation of it was made by Popielski [45].

## 1.3 Conscience Sensitivity

Investigating the subject of meaning in life also requires considering the concept of conscience. What is conscience? In psychological terms conscience is often described as leading to feelings of remorse when a human commits actions that go against his or her moral values and to feelings of rectitude or integrity when actions conform to such norms [46]. Frankl understands conscience as “a practical instinct”. This is a characteristic level which regulates the up-date of meaning in life [39]. It is in a way an instrument of security in life [12]. It can be authoritarian or humanistic in character [47]. The authoritarian conscience is the internalised voice of an external authority, which includes parents, tutors, or any other person who represents a certain set of moral values in a given society. The humanistic conscience, however, is a voice present in every human being. Emotionality and cognition are part of it. Conscience calls on a man to live productively and to develop in full. There is a connection between conscience and productibility. The more productive life is, the stronger the conscience and the more productivity development it encourages.

According to Allport [19] conscience is a conscious part of the inner (psychological-spiritual) reality of a human being. It makes judgements about what is morally right or wrong, it directs a man towards values. It is an organ of meaning in life; it brings it out. On the one hand, conscience comprises a set of rules according to which a man assesses his or her own conduct with regard to the internalised moral norms and values; on the other hand, though, as a control system, it signals whether a given activity has been performed well or not. It is set in a man's personality [48]. Conscience as a control system encompasses an attitude both to oneself and to other people, to a man's surroundings and to values. Conscience has an important characteristic – sensitivity. It is up to sensitivity how morality will be experienced and whether it will be authoritarian or humanistic in character. Sensitivity is an ability of a human being to react to what seems morally right or wrong and values – both in their objective and subjective dimension. It is a human ability to acquire certain stimuli which trigger clear reactions. They are 'directions' of a relatively permanent and specific way of behaviour, a result of learning and self-upbringing, which are acquired in the process of personality development [19]. In this paper Allport's concept of conscience was adapted, on

the basis of which Buksik [49] created a study tool for measuring conscience sensitivity and which was also applied in this paper (Scale of Conscience Sensitivity).

#### **1.4 Problem and Objective Research**

According to Allport's [19] and Frankl's [50] theoretical assumptions there is a significant relation between an individual's intensity of religiosity, its kind and between meaning in life and conscience sensitivity. The existence of that relation was demonstrated in related studies. People with a high level of religiosity reveal a higher level of a sense of meaning in life [51], seem to recognise their life goals better [52], and are characterised by higher conscience sensitivity to values and other people [49] than people with lower intensity of religiosity. People whose religiosity is mature exhibit higher affirmation of their lives [40] and have deeper relations with God [31] than people with immature personalities. A significant relation between religious experience and an individual's personality traits was indicated by researchers like Jung [53], Fromm [47], Vergote [6]. The existence of this connection suggests that people with a high level of religious experience – God's presence, which, in researchers' view [7,54,55], comprises an important element of a person's religiosity, may be accompanied by a higher level of meaning in life and conscience sensitivity – rather than in the case of people with a lower level of it. Research also suggests that certain variables relating to meaning in life may have a strong impact on conscience sensitivity in a group of people with a high level of experience of God's presence, and other variables in a group of students with low level of experience of God's presence.

In order to determine the intensity of religious experience – that is God's presence and God's absence within Christianity, the author of this paper has designed the Scale of Religious Experience (SRE) as a study tool [36,54,56–57]. Studies carried out by applying the Scale among numerous groups of Roman-Catholic Church suggest that people with a high level of experience of God's presence reveal greater curiosity in seeking something new, greater involvement in pursuit of goals and a sense of meaning in life than people with a low level of it [54]. A high level of a sense of meaning in life is revealed by males studying forestry who have a low level of the experience of God's presence [58]. Other studies show that students studying

philosophy have a higher level of God's presence than students of vocational schools [59]. The analysis of yet another study reveals that openness to experience appears to be a strong variable accounting for the experience of God's presence in the students' lives [58]. The conscientiousness appears to play an important role in explaining the experience of God's presence [60]. A competence instrumental value – helpfulness – contributes most to the occurrence of experience of God's presence both in the group of students of theology and students of physics [57]. Studies of other researchers suggest that having an artistic bent has a considerable influence on the dynamics of religious experience [28]. Research by Taliik [26] demonstrates that people more open to experience turn out to be more susceptible to religious experience. The intensity of religious experience strongly correlates with frequency of religious practice [61]. People with intensive religious experience far more often than others realised the significance of a positive meaning of religious experience in their lives [62,63].

Empirical data concerning religious experience: God's presence, meaning in life and conscience sensitivity found in related literature is rather ambiguous, due to the fact that it depends on the specificity of the study subjects and on the understanding of the subject matter applied in the study procedure. Therefore, the problem poses a challenge for researchers and requires numerous further detailed studies.

Assuming an existence of a relation between those important aspects of human life, the following questions arise: To what extent does the level of an important element of an individual's religiosity – religious experience of God's presence – differentiate meaning in life and conscience sensitivity living in a country with a Catholic tradition? To what extent does meaning in life – as a human being's individual property – imply conscience sensitivity in people with a high and low level of experience of God's presence living in a Catholic country? Also a question arises: who should be subjects of the study? In the period of socio-economic change in Poland, looking for new solutions in one's individual and social life by young people, departing from existing values in favour of the newly-arisen ones, it seems only essential to conduct the study among university students. Those young people are in the process of transition from the world of education to the world of work [64]. Early adulthood is a time when

authentic religiosity is formed and differentiating criteria appear, such as religious from non-religious feelings [40,65].

### **1.5 Hypotheses**

The definition of the study subject in this paper hence suggests investigating the existence of a relationship between particular indicators of human life such as religious experience: God's presence, meaning in life and conscience sensitivity. The research questions suggest posing the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. The level of religious experience of God's presence differentiates a sense of meaning in life – as a state of meaning in life and attainment of goals as well as affirmation of one's own life – as a sign of accomplishment of the need of meaning in life, and a conscience sensitivity to oneself and others, and conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings.

Hypothesis 2. A sense of meaning in life (as a state of meaning in life) contributes to a great extent to explaining the variance of conscience sensitivity to oneself and others in a group of students with a high level of experience of God's presence.

Hypothesis 3. Attainment of goals and affirmation of one's own life (as a sign of accomplishment of the need of meaning in life) contribute to a great extent to explaining the variance of conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings in a group of students with a high level of experience of God's presence.

## **2. METHODS**

### **2.1 Participants and Procedure**

The subject group consisted of male and female students. The study was conducted in Kraków in 2011–2012, and 273 people took part in it. The scheduled study was conducted after university classes. All participants were personally instructed how to complete the questionnaires. Over a dozen of the questionnaires were only partly completed, which resulted in excluding the respondents who failed to answer all the study questions. The study analysis was conducted on the basis of 235 correctly completed sets of questionnaires. All the respondents claimed to belong to the Roman-Catholic Church and declared that they had experienced God's presence. The age of the respondents ranged

between 21 and 25 ( $M = 22, 8$ ,  $SD = 1.121$ ). They were all students of a public state university. All respondents were born in Poland. Students originate from a country with a Christian tradition and came from households of average income.

### **2.2 Instruments**

In order to solve the research problem the following tools were applied:

The Scale of Religious Experience (SRE) by Głaz. The statements referring to the Christian religion, which include the cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions concerning religious experience of God's presence and God's absence. Each statement on the scale is accompanied by seven possible answers. The task of a respondent is to choose an opinion on the seven-point Likert-type scale expressing to what extent he or she agrees or disagrees with a given statement, ranging from 1 (completely disagree), over 4 (neither agree nor disagree), to 7 (completely agree). The scale has three sub-scales. The first one describes the intensity of the experience of God in general (DB); Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency is .92. The second scale serves to measure the intensity of the experience of God's presence (OB), with Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency at .94. The third scale describes the intensity of the experience of God's absence (NB). Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency is also high and stands at .91 [36]. In the present study the second sub-scales was used. Criterion validity: correlation ( $\rho$  Spearman) between the Scale of Religious Experience and Prężyna's Scale of Religious Attitude is .63.

The Purpose in Life Test (PLT) by Crumbaugh and Maholick. The test consists of three parts. In the first part there is a seven-grade scale comprised of 20 statements. In the present study the first part of the questionnaire was used. All the statements were grouped in three sets. These are: a sense of meaning in life (SZ) – this factor describes the intensity of a sense of meaning in life (inner satisfaction); attainment of life goals (CZ) – it describes a sign of accomplishment of the need of meaning in life; and the last factor relates to affirmation of life (DZ), and it also describes the sign of accomplishment of the need of meaning in life. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency for consecutive sub-scales ranges from .88 to .92. The reliability indicator calculated

using the  $r$  Pearson for the revised, currently used list of statements is .81, and .90 after verification with the Spearman-Brown formula [45].

The Scale of Conscience Sensitivity (SCS) by Buksik [49] was applied in the study of conscience sensitivity. It has a seven-point continuum of answer categories to each of the 31 statements. The scale also includes four buffer questions. It consists of two sub-scales. The version of the scale comprises statements meant to examine conscience sensitivity to oneself and others (WSI), and conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings (WSWM). Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency for consecutive sub-scales ranges from .87 to .91. The reliability indicator calculated using the test-retest method is .72.

### 2.3 Statistical Analysis

Taking into consideration the above mentioned methodological assumptions, a further study strategy was outlined. The variable related to religious experience: God's presence – was dichotomized. The values obtained in the Scale of Religious Experience (SRE) provided the criterion for the dichotomy. Two groups of people were formed: with low (L) and high (H) results of experience of God's presence. Low scores among the respondents – both males and females – in terms of the experience of God's presence equal or are below 3.5, whereas the high ones equal or are above 5.0. The group of respondents with low scores comprises 71 persons, the mean score (M) for this group being 3.02 (SD = 8.110). The group of respondents with high scores comprises 82 persons, the mean score (M) for this group being 5.8 (SD = 11.210). There is a statistically significant difference between the results achieved by both groups of students, where  $F(1,151) = 26.61$ ,  $p < .001$ . The distribution was unimodal, thus the cutting points were defined to maximize the differences in scores between the high (H) and low (L) groups. The middle (between 3.5 and 5.0) was excluded in the analysis but it contains 82 persons.

The results obtained on the basis of the Purpose in Life Test (PLT) and the Scale of Conscience Sensitivity (SCS) conducted among students with a high and low level of experience of God's presence, were discussed. The results were interpreted on the basis of the mean values (M) and standard deviations (SD). The analysis of

variance (ANOVA) was carried out. Also the analysis of multiple stepwise regression was applied. This type of method serves several functions: it aims at showing independent variables – so-called 'significant', it defines the relationship between an independent variable and a dependent variable (stepwise regression coefficient – R), it establishes the percentage value of the explained variance of the dependent variable ( $R^2$ ), and, finally, it indicates in which order independent variables are entered into the regression equation.

## 3. RESULTS

The analysis of the obtained results allowed a verification of the study problem, which concerns the relation between meaning in life and conscience sensitivity in groups of university students characterised by a high and a low level of experience of God's presence.

### 3.1 Correlation between Meaning in Life and Conscience Sensitivity in Groups of Students Characterised by a High and a Low Level of Experience of God's Presence

The results demonstrate (Table 1) that in the group of subjects with a high level of experience of God's presence the strongest relation is noted between a sense of meaning in life (SZ), attainment of goals (CZ) and affirmation of life (DZ), whereas the weakest one between attainment of goals (CZ) and conscience sensitivity to oneself and others (WSI). In the group of students with a low level of experience of God's presence, however, the strongest relation takes place between a sense of meaning in life (SZ), attainment of goals (CZ), affirmation of life (DZ), as well as between conscience sensitivity to oneself and others (WSI) and conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings (WSWM), and the weakest one between conscience sensitivity to oneself and others (WSI) a affirmation of life (DZ).

### 3.2 The Level of Meaning in Life and Conscience Sensitivity in the Lives of Students with a High and Low Level of Experience of God's Presence

The values obtained in the Purpose in Life Test (PLT) suggest noticeable, statistically significant differences between students with a high level of God's presence and those with a low level of it (Table 2). Students with a high level of God's

presence reveal a higher level of a sense of meaning in life (SZ) ( $F(1,151) = 11.01, p < .001$ ), awareness of attainment of goals in life (CZ) ( $F(1,151) = 5.51, p < .01$ ) and affirmation of one's own life (DZ) ( $F(1,151) = 5.27, p < .01$ ) than students with a low level of such experience. In addition, the values obtained in the Scale of Conscience Sensitivity (SCS) reveal that a statistically significant difference between students with a high level of experience of God's presence and those with a low level thereof occurs only in one factor (Table 2). Students with a high level of experience of God's presence appear to have a higher level of conscience sensitivity to oneself and others (WSI) ( $F(1,151) = 8.01, p < .01$ ) than those with a low level of it.

### 3.3 The Relation between Meaning in Life and Conscience Sensitivity amongst Students with a High and Low Level of Experience of God's Presence

The three independent variables relating to meaning in life: a sense of meaning in life (SZ), goals in life (CZ) and affirmation of one's own life (DZ) explain the variance of conscience

sensitivity to oneself and others (WSI) in a group of people with a high (H) level of experience of God's presence (Table 3).

The first independent variable (SZ) relating to a sense of meaning in life accounts for 20% of the variance of conscience sensitivity to oneself and others (WSI) ( $R = .45$ ), and all of them together account for 25% of the variance of the dependent variable WSI ( $R = .50$ ). The goodness of fit of the stepwise regression equation defines the F-test value  $F(3,78) = 4.21, p < .01$ . The two independent variables relating to meaning in life: a sense of meaning in life (SZ) and affirmation of one's own life (DZ) explain the variance of conscience sensitivity to oneself and others (WSI) in a group of people with a low (L) level of experience of God's presence (Table 3). The first independent variable – SZ accounts for 18% of the variance of the dependent variable – conscience sensitivity to oneself and others (WSI) ( $R = .42$ ), and together they account for 20% of the variance of the dependent variable WSI ( $R = .45$ ). The goodness of fit of the stepwise regression equation defines the F-test value  $F(2,68) = 4.17, p < .01$ .

**Table 1. Correlation matrix. The variables relating to meaning in life: a sense of meaning in life (SZ), attainment of goals (CZ), affirmation of life (DZ) and conscience sensitivity: to oneself and others (WSI), to moral values and the surroundings (WSWM). The group of experience of God's presence (OB) high level is above the diagonal and the group of experience of God's presence (OB) low level is under the diagonal**

Factors	SZ	CZ	DZ	WSI	WSWM
SZ	1.00	0.64***	0.67***	-0.16	-0.29*
CZ	0.76***	1.00	0.65***	-.07	-.08
DZ	0.59***	0.72***	1.00	-.08	-0.29*
WSI	0.16	0.22*	-.03	1.00	0.57***
WSWM	0.19*	0.14	0.18	0.34**	1.00

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

**Table 2. The analysis of variance (ANOVA), value of the F-test and the level of significance p for the variables in the groups with a high (H) and low (L) level of experience of God's presence relating to meaning in life: a sense of meaning in life (SZ), attainment of goals (CZ), affirmation of life (DZ) and conscience sensitivity: to oneself and others (WSI), to moral values and the surroundings (WSWM)**

Factors	Students with a high level of experience of God's presence (H)		Students with a low level of experience of God's presence (L)		F	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
SZ	5.10	.832	4.01	.921	11.01	1	<.001
CZ	5.18	.908	4.41	1.011	5.51	1	<.01
DZ	5.12	.711	4.62	.742	5.27	1	<.01
WSI	6.21	1.031	5.08	.881	8.01	1	<.01
WSWM	5.05	.977	4.82	1.202	.81	1	<.62

**Table 3. Independent variables relating to a sense of meaning in life (SZ), attainment of goals (CZ) and affirmation of life (DZ) explaining the variance of conscience sensitivity to oneself and others (WSI) in groups of students with a high (H) and a low (L) level of experience of God's presence. Results of the analysis of multiple stepwise regression**

Groups	Independent variables explaining the variance of WSI	B	R	Percentage value of the explained variance (R <sup>2</sup> x 100%)
H	SZ	.36	.45	20
	CZ	.23	.48	23
	DZ	.18	.50	25
L	SZ	.30	.42	18
	DZ	.28	.45	20

**Table 4. Independent variables relating to a sense of meaning in life (SZ), attainment of goals (CZ) and affirmation of life (DZ) explaining the variance of conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings (WSWM) in groups of students with a high (H) and a low (L) level of experience of God's presence. Results of the analysis of multiple stepwise regression**

Groups	Independent variables explaining the variance of WSWM	B	R	Percentage value of the explained variance (R <sup>2</sup> x 100%)
H	SZ	.21	.46	21
	CZ	.34	.54	29
	DZ	.24	.56	31
L	SZ	.31	.39	15
	DZ	.19	.43	19
	CZ	.27	.46	22

The same independent variables relating to meaning in life: a sense of meaning in life (SZ), goals in life (CZ) and affirmation of one's own life (DZ) account for the variance of the dependent variable – sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings (WSWM) – in a group of people with a high (H) and a low (L) level of experience of God's presence (Table 4 above). In a group of people with a high (H) level of experience of God's presence the first variable – SZ (a sense of meaning in life) – accounts for 21% of the variance of the dependent variable WSWM – conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings (R = .46), and all of them together account for 31% of the variance of the variable WSWM (R = .56). The goodness of fit of the obtained stepwise regression equation defines the F-test value  $F(3,78) = 4.92, p < .01$ . In a group of people with a low (L) level of experience of God's presence the first variable SZ – (a sense of meaning in life) – accounts for 15% of the variance of the dependent variable – conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings (WSWM) (R = .39), and all of them together account for 22% of the variance of the dependent variable WSWM (R = .46) (Table 4). The goodness of fit of the stepwise regression equation defines the F-test value  $F(3,77) = 3.91, p < .05$ .

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analysis of the research problem concerning the relationship between experience of God's presence, meaning in life, conscience sensitivity and shows that there exists a self-reported connection between those dimensions in students' lives in a Catholic country. Each of them is important and significant and each of them performs an appropriate function within the entire human existence of university students.

The first hypothesis, concerning the relationship between the level of religious experience of God's presence, and the level of meaning in life – i.e. a sense of meaning in life (as a state of meaning in life), goals in life and affirmation of one's own life (as a sign of accomplishment of the need of meaning in life) – and conscience sensitivity to oneself and others, and conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings, was confirmed to a large extent. Students with a high level of religious experience of God's presence reveal a higher level of a sense of meaning in life, a higher level of attainment of goals in life and affirmation of one's own life, as well as higher conscience sensitivity to oneself and others than students with a low level of it. This means that the level of experience of God's



presence, in this case, does differentiate the approach to life amongst young people living in Catholic country. The obtained results concerning this issue comply with the theoretical literature by Frankl [43] and Popielski [40]. Moreover, both groups of students – those with a high level of experience of God's presence and those with a low level – have the same conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings. In accordance with other research [36], it was expected that students with a high level of experience of God's presence, who are considerably more open and sensitive to moral-spiritual values [19,36], also reveal greater conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings.

The second hypothesis, indicating the contribution of a sense of meaning in life – as a state of meaning in life – to explaining the variance of conscience sensitivity to oneself and others in the groups of students tested, was not fully supported. A sense of meaning in life accounts for the same percentage of the variance (18–20%) of conscience sensitivity to oneself and others, both in a group of students with a high and a low level of experience of God's presence. In accordance with Popielski's [40,66] and Buksik's [49] assumptions, it was expected that a sense of meaning in life – due to its high emotional intensity – was a stronger predictor of conscience sensitivity to oneself and others together with its evaluative-assessment dimension in a group of students with a high level of experience of God's presence than in a group with a low level of the experience. It would suggest that the relation between meaning in life and conscience sensitivity to oneself and others is not dependent on the level of experience of God's presence amongst young people. This fact indicates the need for further studies in order to explain the relation between experience of God's presence and a sense of meaning in life and conscience sensitivity to oneself and others. It seems particularly important to study the directional hypothesis concerning the problem to what extent conscience sensitivity to oneself and others can determine the intensity of the sense of meaning in life amongst young people with varied levels of experience of God's presence.

The third hypothesis, indicating the contribution of attainment of goals in life and affirmation of one's own life – as a state of accomplishment of the need of meaning in life – to explaining the variance of conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings in groups of students, was supported. Comparing the contribution of two

variables – attainment of goals and affirmation of life – as predictors of the variance of conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings, one has to admit that in a group of students with a high level of experience of God's presence they have a stronger influence on conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings than in a group with a low level of the experience. It would suggest that great intensity of experience of God's presence and His personal dimension are related to the sign of accomplishment of the need of meaning in life, i.e. attainment of goals and affirmation of one's own life in the lives of young people from the country with a Catholic tradition. It has a creative relation to conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings as well as its cognitive-aspiring dimension, which has been verified by the author's other research.

The analysis of the present research indicates that all three variables relating to meaning in life: a sense of meaning in life – which describes a state of meaning in life and inner satisfaction with one's life; as well as attainment of life goals and affirmation of one's own life – which are a sign of accomplishment of the need of meaning in life, almost to the same extent significantly contribute to explaining the variance of conscience sensitivity to oneself and others, and conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings, in groups of students with a high and low level of experience of God's presence living in a Catholic country. It seems to suggest that all the three elements of human life, considering their cognitive, striving and evaluative dimensions, add to creating young people's attitude which supports self-realisation as a person.

A sense of meaning in life (as a state of meaning in life) is the strongest predictor of the variance of conscience sensitivity – conscience sensitivity to oneself and others and to moral values and the surroundings, both in a group of students with a high and a low level of experience of God's presence (15–21%). It would suggest that a sense of meaning in life (as a state of meaning in life) is strongly related to conscience sensitivity to oneself and others, and to conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings, both in a group of students with a high and a low level of experience of God's presence. It suggests, in accordance with Frankl's theory [39], that young people, regardless of the level of experience of God's presence, affirm their own lives and attain life goals, which can be seen in the level of satisfaction with their lives.

It was expected, according to Frankl's [39] and Popielski's theory [40], that all three variables relating to meaning in life: a sense of meaning in life, attainment of life goals and affirmation of one's own life, contribute more to explaining the variance of conscience sensitivity to oneself and others and conscience sensitivity to moral values and the surroundings in groups of students with a high and low level of experience of God's presence coming from the country with a Catholic tradition. It suggests that, in this case, the lack of a strong relation between meaning in life and conscience sensitivity can be attributed to the age of the respondents [49], their willingness to gain knowledge, and a value crisis [67,68].

The analysis of the subject concerning showing the relation between meaning in life, i.e. a sense of meaning in life, attainment of goals and affirmation of one's own life, and conscience sensitivity to oneself and others and to moral values and the surroundings, as well as investigating the relation between these variables in groups of students with a high and low level of religious experience, i.e. God's presence, implies the following conclusions:

Young university students living in a Catholic country are characterised by varied levels of experience of God's presence. This difference reveals a different, which means more divergent, structure of meaning in life: a sense of meaning in life, attainment of goals and affirmation of one's own life, as well as conscience sensitivity to oneself and others and to moral values and the surroundings.

The correlational relationships between the level of experience of God's presence, meaning in life, i.e. a sense of meaning in life, attainment of goals and affirmation of one's own life, as well as conscience sensitivity to oneself and others and to moral values and the surroundings indicate that a higher level of experience of God's presence among young people statistically significantly corresponds with a higher level of the above mentioned aspects of human life.

The analysis of the subject matter indicates that, although all dimensions taken into consideration in this paper are autonomous in their cognitive, emotional, evaluative and aspiring relations, they, nevertheless, create a oneness of human reality. They decide about the students' spiritual and psychological development as well as about the way they experience existence.

The present study was conducted among Roman-Catholic university students in a country where the majority of the inhabitants belong to the Christian religion. This denomination adopts the concepts of the existence of God personified as well as the existence of a personal relation between man and God and between God and man. This analysis, on the one hand, limits the interpretation possibilities of the obtained results to the Roman-Catholic denomination, but, on the other hand, it encourages to conduct further studies among other religious denominations (Greek Orthodox, Orthodox).

The present analysis of the subject matter can make a contribution to more detailed empirical studies. Many questions are still left with no answer, e.g. the one concerning the relation of conscience sensitivity with other, so far not studied aspects of personality; the function of experience of God's presence in a human life; or the role of one's own activity in accomplishment of meaning in life.

## **COMPETING INTERESTS**

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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