

**Re-Thinking the Spiritual Formation of an Anxious Generation:
Christian Theology and the Existential Psychology of Viktor Frankl**

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ABSTRACT

The paradoxical loneliness and anxiety in young people, stemming from constant digital contact and the absence of limitation, were cemented into public consciousness with Jonathan Haidt's landmark book "The Anxious Generation" in 2024. While acknowledging that spiritual practice might answer the crisis of Generation Z, Haidt ultimately focuses his attention on institutional reforms in his calls to action. Without denying the significance of these societal systems, both the collective and personal spirituality of young people (particularly in the context of the anxiety of meaninglessness) transcends institutional framework and lands squarely within the relational dimension. While much progress has been made in the fields of medicine and psychology treating the acute symptoms of what Viktor Frankl called the "spiritual disease" of meaninglessness (and rightly so), attempts to address the spiritual vacuum itself are often, as with Haidt, only functional and therapeutic. In this vein, the formidable potential for pastoral caregivers within the Christian tradition to provision true medicine for the soul of the anxious generation is largely unachieved due to the default orientation of youth ministries and their models of spiritual formation toward the same broken anthropologies may be the source of the problem. Reflecting on the work of Viktor Frankl (and, to a lesser extent, Jacques Ellul), this paper will respond theologically to the premises of a particular approach to existential psychology and propose a basic model of meaning-centered spiritual formation for Christian clergy who are engaging the call to pastor the anxious generation.

INTRODUCTION

Four years prior to the 2024 publication of Jonathan Haidt's landmark book "The Anxious Generation,"¹ a foreshadowing of his findings were speculated by Tracy Briggs in a newspaper article by the same name.² Notably, both Briggs (a journalist) and the Haidt (a psychologist) shared the same concern: namely that despite being demonstrably "less hedonistic" and "better behaved", the youth of Generation Z were experiencing unprecedented, perhaps even epidemic, anxiety.³ Their conclusions were likewise complimentary; the impact of constant digital contact (made possible by the smart phone and wireless infrastructure) was a paradoxical increase in loneliness and isolation; the sudden absence of limitations (whether, time, proximity, or content) provided unlimited individualization, but at the expense of community. The present state of this generation (anxious and disconnected, a condition that Haidt describes as "spiritual degradation"⁴) is presented in the literature as the natural consequence a technologically-fragmented environment.⁵

¹ Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024).

² Tracy Briggs, "The Anxious Generation: Why Young People Are Lonely and Stressed," *Lifestyle, West Central Tribune* (Wilmar, Minnesota), January 7, 2020, <https://www.wctrib.com/lifestyle/the-anxious-generation-why-young-people-are-lonely-and-stressed>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, 199.

⁵ Zygmunt Bauman describes this as a "liquid-modern world... characterised by existential bleakness" and a loss of value seen in expressions of "human disposability," (Garrett 2012, 639). It is also prudent to note that the phenomenon Haidt describes in "The Anxious Generation", was also independently identified by Edwin Friedman in the posthumously published *A Failure of Nerve* (2007), noting "[as] our technologically-advanced society constantly keeps us in often-simultaneous touch with one another it may be more difficult today not to become caught up in the surrounding systemic anxiety," (Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal 2007, 58). These descriptions, which highlight a

Contemporary philosophers such as Charles Taylor have repeatedly warned that experiences of exponential choice-freedom (as Haidt and Briggs both highlight) will always yield this very outcome; an environment of anti-structure which, “opens up unprecedented possibilities for untrammelled creation, and at the same time hitherto unexperienced dangers of isolation and loss of meaning.”⁶ As such, it is no great surprise that the realization of this forecast is precisely the conclusion of Haidt comes to:

As the sociologist Émile Durkheim showed, anomie breeds despair and suicide. This may be why boys and girls, who followed different paths through the Great Rewiring, ended up in the same place, with a sudden and rapid increase in the feeling that their lives were **meaningless**.⁷

Yet these types of reports (e.g.: youth mental health crisis, rises in adolescent anxiety, etc.) have hardly been news for those tasked with the pastoral care of young people; more than a decade before the moniker “Anxious Generation” came into public vocabulary the reality of heightened anxiety and shortened attention were openly being written about and discussed by Christian youth workers.⁸ Nonetheless, attempts at answering the question of exactly *how* pastors to young people,⁹ in light of this crisis, might be faithfully to their calling, continue to be relevant as the phenomenon has continued to evolve. As the abstract for an upcoming youth ministry book

societal source of anxiety (as opposed to a psychic or somatic pathology) strengthen the position that at least some forms of anxiety must be understood as inherently “spiritual” in their etiology.

⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 52, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674044289>.

⁷ Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, 197–98. Emphasis added.

⁸ See Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers*, Youth, Family, and Culture Series (Baker Publishing Group, 2011), p. 136.

⁹ I use this term, “pastors” merely as the noun derived from the term “pastoral” to denote the functional role of those engaged in spiritual care, and not as a reference to ministerial title. As such, the reader should recognize that this use of “pastor” is intended to recognize a diversity of titles and offices which hold this sacred responsibility, including formal roles such as “minister”, “reverend”, or “priest” and informal roles such as “youth worker”, “small group leader”, or “mentor” along with many others. The use of “pastor” is thus not an implied reference to spiritual caregivers in denominational traditions which favour “pastor” as a title associated with ordination, but an intentional emphasis of the pastoral role.

summarizes, the conversation around the spiritual formation of an “anxious generation” is all but over:

Youth ministers were once missionaries, meeting teenagers where they gathered in schools, malls, and parking lots. But over the past decade, something changed. Youth workers have struggled to connect with anxious kids glued to their phones and have found themselves filling the role of therapist for adolescents coming of age on the internet. We need a new approach.¹⁰

The problem this book jacket alludes to is two-fold; first, that the wellbeing of young people has been severely compromised in the age of the smart-phone (and this, in itself, constitutes a spiritual crisis regardless of faith background) and, second, that *Christian* spiritual formation is pre-eminently obstructed by this underlying spiritual crisis insomuch that the church’s methods of spiritual formation have historically presumed the capacities associated with a pre-smart phone human being. Bridging these two gulfs is thus exceedingly complex and generates interrelated questions around both therapeutic best-practices and theological orthodoxy. Further, as the call to spiritual formation is always located within the respondent’s context, both the anxiety crisis and the digital revolution also impose a new burden of reflexivity upon the pastors engaged in this work.

While the present circumstances are certainly unique, they do not constitute a situation without any historical comparative. Approximately a century ago, Viktor Frankl’s firsthand experience in youth-work yielded alarming observations of serious anxiety and despair among Viennese young people.¹¹ Although smaller in scale, his account bears a striking resemblance to

¹⁰ Baker Academic, prepublication description of *Does Youth Ministry Have a Future?* by Andrew Root. Accessed September 4, 2026, https://bakeracademic.com/products/9781540971265_does-youth-ministry-have-a-future.

¹¹ Frankl was instrumental in the founding of Youth Counselling Centres in Vienna and, in particular, Frankl scholars note the importance of such centers around the time when academic reports were being released. See Frankl, *Recollections*, 68, alongside the discussion on Frankl’s approach to suicidality among youth in Yael Aviad-Wilchek, Vered Ne’eman-Haviv, and Michal Malka, “Connection between Suicidal Ideation, Life Meaning, and Leisure Time Activities,” *Deviant Behavior* 38, no. 6 (June 2017): 621–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2016.1197590>.

Haidt's description of "the anxious generation", noting with great sobriety that at least 20% of the over 900 adolescents he saw in his counselling practice exhibited "weariness of life and thoughts of suicide."¹² Likewise Frankl's contemporaries (and in particular, the renowned Alfred Adler, who personally expelled Frankl from his school of psychology),¹³ sought to explain such mental health phenomena via reductionistic theories in much the same way that straight-forward and simple explanations for complex problems are preferred today. In contrast, Frankl unapologetically challenged both Adler and Freud (the giants of psychology), insisting that underlying the phenomenon there was a spiritual problem that required a spiritual solution.¹⁴ For all these reasons, this paper will consider one school of existential psychotherapy, Viktor Frankl's *logotherapy*, in an examination of the present situation in order to determine whether a

¹² Alexander Batthyany, "Viktor E. Frankl & the Development of Logotherapy & Existential Analysis," in *The Feeling of Meaninglessness: A Challenge to Psychotherapy and Philosophy*, by Viktor E. Frankl and Andrew Tallon, Marquette Studies in Philosophy ; No. 60 (Marquette University Press, 2010), 14-16.

¹³ Alfried Längle, "The History of Logotherapy and Existential Analysis," in *The Wiley World Handbook of Existential Therapy*, with Erik Craig et al. (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2019), 310.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119167198.ch19>.

¹⁴ To be more precise, Frankl's *logotherapy* transcends several philosophical planes in this regard. Without over-engaging the subject, it is prudent to note that while Adler and his contemporaries identified Freud as a "reductionistic natural scientist," (Ansbacher and Ansbacher 1956, 60), Adler himself identified with idealistic positivism (Ibid., 142). As such, it would be fair to say that Freud was intentionally reductionistic, but Adler's reductionism was the downstream effect of his epistemic priority, namely that "ideational constructs, even when in contradiction to reality, are of great practical value and indispensable for human life", (Ibid., 87), a conviction that was influenced by Vaihinger (Angioli and Kruger 2015). As such, while neither Freud nor Adler are particularly amicable toward metaphysics in any traditional sense, the theoretical worlds which both demonstrably regard as the truest reality (dichotomized analyses and ideational constructs) ironically parallel Plato's elevation of the *forms* in a functional sense. To continue this metaphor, Frankl's dimensional ontology (a three-dimensional harmonizing of the somatic, psychic, and noetic) is akin to the Aristotelian rejection of Plato's dualism: an insistence that experienced phenomena be taken seriously in its own right, and not merely as an access point for an ultimate reality. While the intangible spiritual dimensionality of the *noetic* categorically resists such a comparison, functionally speaking Frankl is tethering his *ontology* (that which is concerned with the nature of being itself) to the *ontic* (that is, a person's real and concrete experiences of reality, located in place and history) thus endowing the *ontic* with *ontological* significance.

meaning-centered model of Christian spiritual formation might present a path forward for contemporary pastors.

AN OVERVIEW OF FRANKL'S "LOGOTHERAPY"

Trained as a psychiatrist and neurologist at the University of Vienna, Viktor E. Frankl practiced as a physician prior to the 1938 Nazi annexation of Austria.¹⁵ While logotherapy is frequently introduced alongside Viktor Frankl's profound personal experiences as a Holocaust survivor, the circumstances of logotherapy's origin's meaningfully pre-date those experiences. In 1926 Frankl first used the term during "logotherapy" in a lecture at the University of Vienna to describe a meaning-centered framework for psychological healing that he was actively developing.¹⁶

Surprisingly, the core of Frankl's *logotherapy* was not presented as a careful description of techniques, but rather as a robust philosophy. It is precisely for this reason that a distinction must therefore be made between logotherapy as an *operational philosophy* (that is, the unlimited application of logotherapy) versus as a specific *methodology of therapeutic intervention* (the conditional application of logotherapy).¹⁷ While a systematic overview of the latter cannot be

¹⁵ Viktor Frankl Institut, "Viktor Frankl - Biography."

¹⁶ Frankl, Viktor E. *Viktor Frankl Recollections: An Autobiography*. Perseus Pub., 2000, 64. Notwithstanding the introduction of the term in 1926, Frankl would later reflect that the distillation of logotherapy into a complete therapeutic approach would take the better part of the next decade (Längle 2019, 311), culminating in the publishing of his paper "Philosophy and Psychotherapy" in 1939 (Viktor Frankl Institut, n.d.). While more comprehensive material wasn't published until after the second world war (*The Doctor and the Soul*, for example was published in 1955), the germinal inception of the term "logotherapy" in 1926 nonetheless marks a significant milestone.

¹⁷ Frankl models this duality more clearly than he articulates it; while noting specific conditions in which logotherapy as a treatment modality is contraindicated (for example, in the case of psychotic depression; see Frankl,

summarized within the scope of a short paper such as this (recent volumes by Elisabeth Lukas¹⁸ and Alexander Batthyány,¹⁹ both formidable in depth and scope, are potent evidence of this reality), in light of the subject at hand, a brief summary of the former is both achievable and worthwhile.

THE REALITY OF THE SPIRITUAL

Frankl's psychiatric training introduced him to a staunch duality that was intended to fully inform his view of patient pathology: sickness was either biological or psychic. Without denying the reality or significance of these dimensions and their associated diseases, logotherapy insisted on the reality of a third dimension, that which Frankl called the *noölogical*.²⁰ This term, coined by Frankl, was meant to evoking the concept of the *noëtic*, that is, the phenomenological reality of a rich human experience,²¹ that which, we might commonly refer to as "the spiritual".²² He asserted that the existential questions of freedom, responsibility, suffering, and especially meaning, were the chief concerns of human beings, and that such existential concerns were fixed

The Will to Meaning, 85–86) he does not cease to be a logotherapist when he treats a patient by means of other medicine, per the established standard of care for such a condition.

¹⁸ Lukas, Elisabeth. *Logotherapy: Principles and Methods*. Translated by David Nolland. Living Logotherapy, v. 2., Bamberg: Elisabeth Lukas Archiv, 2020.

¹⁹ Batthyány, Alexander, ed. *Logotherapy and Existential Analysis: Proceedings of the Viktor Frankl Institute Vienna, Volume 1*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-29424-7>.

²⁰ It ought to be noted that the reader may benefit from a review of Frankl's dimensional ontology, something difficult to grasp without the diagrams and illustrations in the original publications. See *The Will to Meaning*, 3–16 for this material.

²¹ Viktor E. Frankl, *The Will to Meaning: Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy*, Expanded edition (New York, New York: Plume, 2014), 61; Längle, "The History of Logotherapy and Existential Analysis," 362.

²² While acknowledging that *noëtic* could reasonably be equated to "spiritual", Frankl used the former term specifically to avoid overt religious connotations that were unhelpful in his context.

squarely in the *noëtic* (or spiritual) dimension.²³ It is this dimension, Frankl noted, to which *logotherapy* or “meaning therapy” is attuned.²⁴

It remains important to note that these conclusions took place within Frankl’s experience of medical training and practice, and in particular, in his care for psychiatric patients. Significantly, Frankl did not, as the director of Vienna Neurological Policlinic, cease to provide conventional psychic therapies or prescribe medicine; nor did he suggest that such approaches were somehow inferior in any respect;²⁵ rather, he noted that they were regularly engaged (and insufficiently at that) in matters beyond their dimensional scope, namely, toward the care of a patient’s existential needs, including the patient’s need for a reason (or meaning) to live. As such, Frankl determined that he would continue in the practice of conventional psychiatry, but he would now do so *also as a logotherapist*,²⁶ proceeding with his medical duties under the

²³ Moving forward, I will use the term “spiritual” rather than *noëtic*, for much the same reason Frankl took the opposite approach, namely clarity of meaning.

²⁴ While “meaning therapy” is the direct translation of the meaning of *logotherapy*, the term “logotherapy” is used throughout this paper due to the risk of misinterpretation in the light of the existence of Meaning-Centered Therapy (MCT) as a distinct therapeutic modality in its own right. While a derivative of logotherapy (and focused toward the same goal), in general MCT de-centers anthropology (and Frankl’s dimensional ontology) and makes use of constructive language rather than discovery language around meaning (see Joel Vos, *Meaning in Life: An Evidence-Based Handbook for Practitioners* (London: Macmillan Education UK, 2018). Needless to say, Meaning-Centered Therapy (MCT) is not merely a synonym for the application of logotherapy, nor is it viewed as such.

²⁵ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 63. Despite this careful distinction, early critics of logotherapy advanced serious claims that Frankl’s focus on the *noëtic* (or spiritual) dimension was effectually the abandonment of science and evidence-based treatment, a claim that Frankl robustly rebutted. For example, see Max Gruenthal, review of *Review of “Theory and Therapy of Neuroses,”* by Viktor E. Frankl, *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 13, no. 1 (1959): 226–30.

²⁶ For Frankl, the noetic, psychic and somatic dimensions are all valuable and inextricably connected; distinct, but not independent. Thus, to the same extent that Frankl critiques reductionism in the “psychologism” of Freud and Adler, he likewise refuses to reduce human beings a singular dimension. See Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 78, 99.

conviction that in addition to medication and psychotherapy, *meaning* must also be considered as a fundamental patient need.²⁷

THE REALITY OF FREEDOM

Logotherapy further develops its base anthropological stance (that the spiritual dimension is as real and significant as the psychic and somatic) with three ontological premises: that “freedom of will” exists, that “the will to meaning” is primal, and that “the meaning of life” is accessible.²⁸ Unsurprisingly, Frankl’s insistence that a true “freedom of will” exists stood staunchly at odds with the dominant theories of conditioning and development of his era; views he denounced openly:

One may conceive of conscience merely in terms of the result of conditioning processes... Reducing conscience to the mere result of conditioning processes is but one instance of reductionism. I would define reductionism as a pseudoscientific approach which disregards and ignores the humanness of phenomena by making them into mere epiphenomena, more specifically, by reducing them to subhuman phenomena. In fact, one could define reductionism as *sub-humanism*.²⁹

The significance of Frankl’s claim, that *freedom of will* is fundamental to any real concept of personhood, cannot be understated; he argued that to assume any less is not merely to reduce one’s understanding of human beings, it is a functional reduction of a person to that of a less-than-human being.³⁰ Despite such a grand anthropological stance, Frankl also held that this *freedom of will* is realistic; that is, human freedom is limited in the real world, and often constrained or thwarted. As a result, human beings live within (and must accept) real limitations

²⁷ Lukas, *Logotherapy*, 74.

²⁸ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 89–90.

²⁹ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 6.

³⁰ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 51.

as part of their humanity.³¹ Notwithstanding, perhaps the hallmark of logotherapy is Frankl's assertion that when freedom *is* thwarted, at the very least a person remains free to choose their attitude and response to all of that which is outside their control: the *freedom of will* is persistent.³²

FREEDOM AND MEANING

With such a high view of freedom, the natural question of “to what end is human freedom directed” emerges. Freud had long held that the *will to pleasure* was the fundamental driver of human behaviour, and Adler had expanded on Freud's theory with the assertion that *the will to power* (or *the will to social success*) could explain the behaviour and pathology of the human psyche. Here, Frankl crafted the maxim of *logotherapy* quite deliberately, stating the *will to meaning* as the primal need of the human being.³³

As an Austrian Jew in 1938, a horrific test of Frankl's theory accompanied the Nazi occupation; while Frankl himself would narrowly survive four concentration camps before the war's end, his wife, his brother, and his parents would not. Suffice it to say that the toll the Holocaust took on the doctor was significant.³⁴ Yet upon his liberation, Frankl openly attributed

³¹ Ibid.

³² Frankl takes great pains to ground logotherapy within this realism while simultaneously emphasizing that, at minimum, the autonomy of mind and attitude remain. Beyond the therapeutic context, this must also be read as a counterpoint to the kind of psychological determinism that Frankl perceived to be present in the reductionism of both Freud and Adler's analytical systems. Frankl offers a comprehensive exploration of this concept in *The Will to Meaning*, part two, “Medical Ministry”.

³³ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 71, 78. Without oversimplifying Frankl's argument, it is sufficient to say that as far as he deliberately challenges Freudian and Adlerian theories, Frankl nonetheless seeks to integrate their observations, which he holds as formidable and valuable.

³⁴ Viktor Frankl Institut, “Viktor Frankl - Biography.”

his survival to the very philosophy he had espoused prior to the war, noting that he had discovered, while in the camps no less, the *meaning of his life*.

While logotherapy does not espouse that a person must somehow suffer in order to find meaning (in fact, it expects that suffering should be avoided, if possible), it does claim that there is a *meaning of life*, always, even in the midst of suffering, and it is precisely under the weight of this premise that Frankl returned to the practice of psychiatry in post-war Vienna. Even by 1946, it was clear that whatever sense of relief had come at the end of such a devastating war, it had widely given way to broad existential crisis: all had encountered the immensity of loss, the reality of suffering, and the collapse of ideology in some very personal way. Yet as horrific as the war years had been, Frankl felt that attributing the causality of existential despair, nihilistic angst, and demoralized meaninglessness to the war would be dishonest; it was, at least from Frankl's perspective, merely a revelatory catalyst.³⁵ European existential philosophers had, for some time already, been arguing that existential anxiety and despair were universal in their scope;³⁶ and as Frankl's own pre-war work attested, such particular issues were his concern well before 1938. He would note that even as European quality of life improved in the years following the war, and even in the absence of obvious psychiatric or bodily illness, his growing list of patients continued to present with a despair (going as far as suicidality at times) that could

³⁵ Frankl uses the analogy of the waterline and a reef to explain this concept; noting that a reef is always present, but changes in the tides expose the reef at various times (Lukas 2020, 115).

³⁶ Kierkegaard's contemplation of anxiety and meaninglessness as a broad human issue is documented early as 1844 (Van Deurzen 2010, 11–14).

simply not be correlated to anything else except an *absence of meaning*: the spiritual crisis of his generation.

THE MEANING OF LIFE

Logotherapy thus presents meaning as something which is never inherent but rather must be discovered, yet also remains accessible within the normal bounds of human experience. Frankl began observed that meaning was discovered by his patients within one of three self-transcendent categories: generativity (what one creates or gives), awareness (what one experiences, and how they experience it), and character (the “stand” that one takes in the face of suffering; the *haltung*³⁷ that one chooses).³⁸ It is the last category which is, perhaps, logotherapy’s greatest contribution to existential psychotherapy, not solely due to the normativity of suffering in the human experience, but particularly because it is the *haltung* of a person’s life which opens it to the possibility of truly meaningful transformation.³⁹ Suffering, whether externally imposed (as Frankl had experienced in the Nazi camps) or internally emergent (as Frankl saw firsthand in his neurotic and psychotic patients), is the opportunity for one to choose their *way of being*, despite the circumstances.

³⁷ The limitations of the English language are apparent in the concept of “taking a stand” (Frankl 2014, 51); the German word *haltung* (translated as one’s posture or manner, their attitude, or even “composure”) better captures the weight of Frankl’s meaning, which must also encompass the broad idea of a person’s intentional way of being within the world (*Pocket Oxford German Dictionary: German - English* 2009, s.v. “Haltung”).

³⁸ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 49. Crucially, the *haltung* is not a superficial commitment to platitudes or the embrace of stoicism; Frankl describes it as the slow human evolution from *homo sapiens* to *homo patiens* (the “suffering man”), who takes a stand in spite of his unchangeable fate (Batthyany 2021, 16–17).

³⁹ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 51–53.

LOGOTHERAPY AS A CATALYSTIC PERSPECTIVE

Haidt's presentation of the current existential vacuum experienced by today's youth (the self-descriptions of life as *meaningless*, *lonely*, and *anxious* are sobering)⁴⁰ within the present era is enough reason in itself to explore whether logotherapy's meaning-centered philosophy might serve as a catalyst for a shift in the pastoral approach to the spiritual formation of young people, perhaps a helpful *anamnesis*.⁴¹

First, logotherapy's reactionary opposition to the presumptions of its own context (notably somatic-psychic duality and deterministic reductionism) present a compelling invitation for pastors of young people to consider a similar paradigmatic rebellion. There is little question that Haidt, Briggs, and countless others have correctly identified a genuine generational crisis; in Haidt's case in particular, peer-reviewed data corresponds entirely with the observed phenomenology of the pastors themselves.⁴² What remains is an evaluation of how these conclusions fare in the light of a theological reflexivity catalyzed by logotherapy. For example, to what end does Haidt's research assume a particular anthropology; and is such a view biblically faithful? Or to what end do contemporary approaches to Christian spiritual formation rely upon the same "sub-human" presuppositions that Frankl criticized decades ago? It is an analysis of the latter which makes the strongest case for a meaning-centered shift in the approach to the spiritual formation of young people (and not merely because, per Frankl, *meaning* is the only

⁴⁰ Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, 169, 180, 195.

⁴¹ Philosophically, *anamnesis* describes a re-remembering of past knowledge.

⁴² As previously noted, material on this subject matter has been widely published for at least the past 15 years.

cure for *anxious absence*), in no small part because some approaches to the spiritual formation of youth presume the same *spirit of the age* responsible for this generational crisis to begin with.

IMAGO INSTRUMENTI

While a detailed exploration of Jacques Ellul's concept of *technique* is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that, for Ellul, the spirit of the modern age is most visible in its attempt to recast human beings as mere means to an end rather than the *Imago Dei* of the Christian faith.⁴³ The emergence of the technological society is characterized by the growing perception of human beings as mere extensions of the technology they produce; the progress of technology becomes a presumptive inevitability, and human beings are increasingly described in technical (not sacral) terms.⁴⁴ Thus the chief human concern becomes *loss of function*; with this in mind, notice the underlying cause of alarm in *The Anxious Generation*:

... [engagement with technology] happens at the cost of reducing the kinds of experiences humans evolved for and that they must have in abundance to become socially **functional** adults.⁴⁵

Without dismissing the practical need for descriptive vocabulary (and the necessity of describing various functional impediments), it is nonetheless noteworthy that the discussion of spiritual practices, and their value, is also contextually derived via an exploration of *function*:

... seek out conditions and activities that have the opposite effect, as most spiritual practices do, including prayer, meditation, mindfulness, and for some people psychedelic drugs, which are increasingly found to be effective treatments for anxiety and depression.⁴⁶

⁴³ See, in particular, Chapter 3 of Jacques Ellul et al., *Presence in the Modern World* (Cascade Books, 2016).

⁴⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2021), 325.

⁴⁵ Haidt, 54.

⁴⁶ Haidt, 209.

To be clear, a reduction in the symptoms of anxiety and depression represent an unequivocal *good* in the lives of young people, and there is no criticism to be leveled at the careful engagement in prayer by an anxious person nor at Haidt for describing the findings which he is referencing. However, the conceptualization of spiritual practices in general warrant the attention of pastors: the argument for prayer (and, potentially, psychedelic drugs) is empirical evidence that they may be “effective treatment” for conditions that *impair function*. (Pointing this out is not a devaluation of “effective treatment” nor a denial of the need to treatment a psychological condition; it is, however, an insight into the anthropological framework that undergirds much of the contemporary world.)

To some extent, all human beings are pragmatic; we would certainly be foolish not to employ “what works” when a task is set before us. Nonetheless, function does not automatically imbue meaning. As Haidt himself points out, eating food can be purely functional, but a meal with others has the *capacity* for spiritual significance when undertaken at a slower pace, and as a meaningful communal activity.⁴⁷ While this acknowledgement leans in favour of the logotherapy perspective, the overarching context of the analysis nonetheless reflects an embedded technological anthropology: one in which the human has *malfunctioned* but can perhaps be fixed by way of the correct procedure. While it is exceedingly doubtful that Haidt would make so cold a remark himself, the underlying theme reflects precisely the view that a functionally impaired human being must be serviced in order to return to function; this is not the *Imago Dei*, divinely endowed with freedom of will and a will to meaning, but rather *imago instrumenti*, a creature of function. Haidt concludes *The Anxious Generation* with a multiplicity of “calls to action” for the

⁴⁷ Haidt, 205, 217.

large systems of society,⁴⁸ yet never invites (nor alludes the possibility) that young people might themselves be required to make a choice toward *meaning* within the crisis. In doing so, a reluctant acceptance of the social developmental model of conditioning tacitly endorses a power dynamic in which the *will to freedom* of a young person is no match for the systems of a society.

MEANING VERSUS FUNCTION

It is precisely in this context that meaning-centered spiritual formation represents an important challenge to *imago instrumenti* (one that stands parallel to logotherapy's challenge of the same). When pastors inherit a primarily *functional* view of human beings, spiritual formation becomes unavoidably performative. Nonetheless, as with Haidt's prescription for spiritual practice, true good can still spring about from this approach; a young person might experience less anxiety, contemplate the teachings of Christ, or partake in the eucharist (all three practices are good things and may simultaneously carry functional benefit). Yet functional benefit is a far cry from *spiritual formation*; here, the frustration of those who pastor young people is well known—the adolescent who attended small group, went to camp, and made a profession of faith but has since disconnected from the church and has seemingly “moved on” to other things... all in just a few short months.

Performative models of Christian spiritual formation reflect their secular counterparts; they are ultimately mechanistic (that is, they present the axiom that taking prescribed steps, or actions, will result in certain guaranteed outcomes), and activities are selected primarily for their utility. Exertion or “discipline” in spiritual practice is emphasized, and evaluation is simply a

⁴⁸ As noted, despite his suggestion that spiritual practices might answer the crisis of Generation Z, Haidt shifts gears in Part 4, “Collective Action for Healthier Childhood” and proposes that action for governments, technology companies, schools, and parents. Young people themselves are left out. Ironically, this may be an indicator that despite Haidt's lamentations, an underlying deterministic model presumes that institutional reform is the best hope for re-conditioning young people into health.

matter of measuring “results” at specified intervals. In practice, a young person’s invitation into a performative (function-oriented) spiritual formation model may sound more like a product launching event put on by a large technology company, (e.g.: “Welcome to our improved ten-week discipleship program. Would you like to focus on your prayer-life or your bible knowledge?”) than something classically religious. Sadly, within this performative model spiritual practices have the capacity to be engaged regularly while still remaining non-transformative, as it is the function (not the meaning) of the practice that is emphasized. To this end, *logotherapy* may provide a catalyst for *anamnesis* through an invitation to reflect theologically on logotherapy’s ways of meaning discovery: generativity, awareness, and *haltung*.

GENERATIVITY AND CHRISTIAN VOCATION

The sacred generativity of the human being, *Imago Dei*, is explored in profound depth by renowned Old Testament scholar Iain Provan in his reflection on Genesis 1-2:

How am I to relate to the rest of creation? I am to relate to it as one creature among many, refusing to regard myself as God in relation to it. Yet I am to recognize that I am unlike other creatures, in that I am made in the image of God. As such, I am to view myself as an earth keeper, working and taking care of God’s garden. I am also to view myself as a ruler, ruling on God’s behalf, looking after the welfare of my subjects, and ensuring justice for all... Indeed, part of what needs to be mended in us by the grace of God is what is broken in this respect—namely, our willingness and ability to commit to the task of cooperating with God in governing the cosmos well.⁴⁹

Provan explicitly notes that it is the active pursuit of the human vocation which is paramount to the practice of biblical faith. In other words, whatever else one thinks of human beings, it ought

⁴⁹ Iain William Provan, *Seriously Dangerous Religion: What the Old Testament Really Says and Why It Matters* (Baylor university press, 2014), 239.

to be clear from the start that there is great meaning to be discovered in one's devotion to *good work* in the *good world* of the *good God*. Thus, the first reflection of meaning-centered spiritual formation may be, **“What is the meaning of my work in God's good world?”**

AWARENESS AND HOLY COMMUNION

Holy communion, whether in reference to ritual participation in the eucharist or the regular participation in the life of the church community, represents the intentional act of “awareness” in Christian spiritual formation. It is helpful to think of awareness as the realized capacity for relationship; the transcendence of oneself and the beholding of another. Within this context, holy communion is the act of beholding both God and one's fellow human being.

Teaching his course on spiritual formation, Eugene Peterson once remarked,

Spiritual formation is really just learning to pay attention. You learn to pay attention to God. And you learn to pay attention to what he's doing in you and around you.⁵⁰

This Christian “awareness” of both the presence of God and others opens the door to a second reflection of meaning-centered spiritual formation: **“What is the meaning of my relationship with God? And what of his other children?”**

HALTUNG AND SANCTIFICATION

Frankl's *haltung*, or “posture”, in the face of unavoidable hardship is reflective of countless moments from the biblical narrative; ordinary men and women whose “way” or “posture” in the world, inclusive of hardship, demonstrate God's sanctification of their lives. In the New Testament in particular, a spiritual identification with Christ, inclusive of both his

⁵⁰ Eugene Peterson, *Spiritual Formation: Lectures*, Regent College Audio, June 2018, MP3.

cruciformity and resurrection,⁵¹ articulates a *posture* toward suffering that is integral to Christian spirituality. The paradoxical “glory” of suffering is boldly declared by Saint Peter:

12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. 16 However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.⁵²

Further, the *posture* of suffering described here is fundamentally contradictory to the view in the first century that experiences such as these represent shame and divine rejection;⁵³ the *posture* here can thus only represent a free choice of the will, and not merely a social convention. Saint Peter does not suggest that inevitable suffering ought to be sought, but when it comes, it must be met with the assurance that God’s love is transformative. Thus, the third reflection of meaning-centered spiritual formation may be, **“What is the meaning of my participation in Christ’s suffering?”**

MEANING-CENTERED SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The development of a meaning-centered approach to spiritual formation may provide an avenue for a therapeutically informed engagement with “the anxious generation” without

⁵¹ Ryan Morgan, *Power in Practice* (Pickwick Publications, 2025), 79.

⁵² 1 Peter 4:12-16 (NIV)

⁵³ R. Gordon, “Superstitio, Superstition and Religious Repression in the Late Roman Republic and Principate (100 Bce–300 Ce),” *Past & Present* (Oxford) 199, no. suppl-3 (2008): 89. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtm060>.

discarding the substance of Christian spiritual tradition (e.g.: practice and doctrine). In particular, the invitation to participate in meaning-centered spiritual formation through the initial reflections outlined in the previous section presents an important shift away from performative religiosity and mechanistic approaches that may reflect (even accidentally) a view of human beings defined by function (*imago instrumenti*) rather than sacrality (*Imago Dei*).

From a therapeutic standpoint, this approach is, in itself, an alignment with Frankl's own practice of *dereflection*, a particular technique for quelling anxiety by shifting the focus from one's own self toward the focus of meaning itself;⁵⁴ in practice this represents an invitation to the anxious to *de-reflect* on the tasks of spiritual practice (be they prayer, bible study, or something else) and instead focus on the meaning of their Christian faith through the lens of vocation, communion, or sanctification.

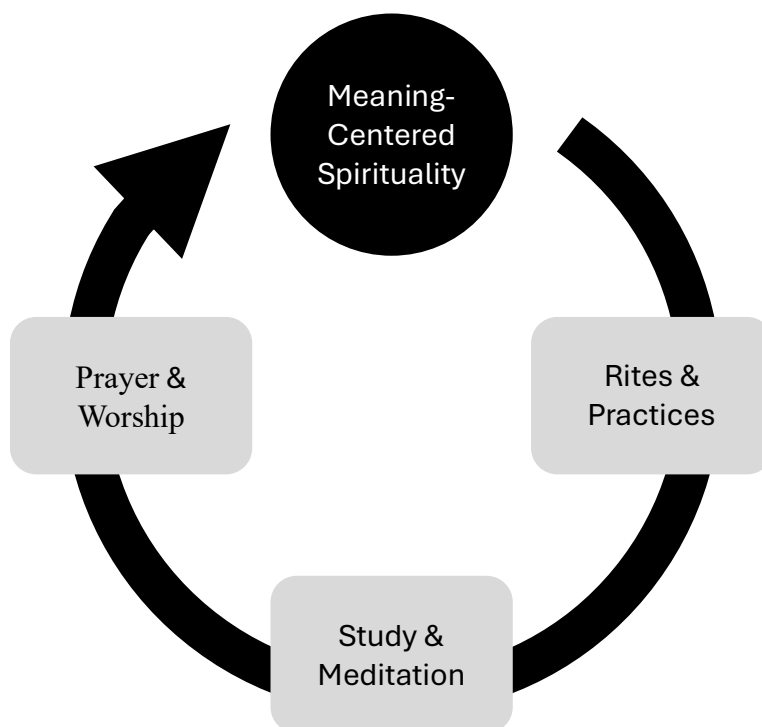


Figure A

⁵⁴ Batthyany, "Viktor E. Frankl & the Development of Logotherapy & Existential Analysis", 88.

As illustrated in **Figure A**, the focus on *meaning* subordinates the spiritual practices themselves being the means, not the ends, of spiritual formation. In other words, as a person contemplates “*What is the meaning of my participation in Christ’s suffering?*”, they might also, “*What sort of spiritual practice might be helpful in further revealing the answer to this question?*” Engaging in a particular form or prayer, the reading of particular Psalms, or attending a candle-light vigil become viable means, but not ends in themselves, toward the spiritual formation of the person.

CONCLUSION

The stream of statements from young people in Haidt's research presents a bleak view of contemporary adolescence: "A lot of times I feel lonely,"⁵⁵ "Life often feels meaningless,"⁵⁶ "My room is freedom. I can be alone. Going outside is a prison."⁵⁷ Haidt's analysis of the crisis, including the role that smart phones and other technology have played, is formidable. Nonetheless, the assumption that if the isolating and overstimulating effects of technology could somehow be undone, equilibrium and health would return must be resisted. The most obvious reason is in the logical assumption that the absence of pathology is not the presence of health; Frankl's observations (thousands of patients who had no signs of pathological disorder and yet still suffered deeply due to the unanswered question of *meaning*) must still be accounted for. While Frankl would readily acknowledge that not all anxiety and despair are rooted in the *noëtic*, the deep spiritual need for meaning exists nonetheless, and especially among young people; it is within this context that contemporary pastors engage their calling. Theologically speaking, the Christian tradition holds that mankind's deepest longing for meaning is answered most fully in the mystery of participation in the *perichoresis* of the Trinity, by the grace of God, through Christ: as such, an intentionally meaning-centered model of spiritual formation (an *anamnesis* catalyzed by Viktor Frankl's logotherapy) represents a therapeutically-informed and theologically-orthodox engagement of the call to for Christian spiritual formation among young people.

⁵⁵ Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, 169.

⁵⁶ Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, 195.

⁵⁷ Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, 180. (Abbreviated)

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