



Psychology and Religion: Freud, Jung, and Frankl's enduring insights


Se-Ho Jang
Kwangshin University, South Korea
ORCID:0009-0006-5358-7425

Mesuk Cho
Mokpo National University, South Korea
ORCID:0009-0005-1124-0661

Seon-Ok Jang
Honam Theological University, South Korea
ORCID:0009-0002-3124-5652

Mi-Kyeong Jung
Kwanshin University, South Korea
ORCID: 0009-0004-3979-0027

Jun-Ki Chung*
Kwangshin University, South Korea
ORCID: 0000-0003-2243-4849
*Email: junkichung@gmail.com

 <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.107.237>

Abstract

The paper discusses some controversial religious ideas brought forth by Freud, Jung, and Frankl respectively in their works. By presenting their writings in their entirety, this study elucidates the historical conditions under which their views and arguments acquired interpretive weight, particularly during a period in which they perceived contemporary society as bereft of relevance or significance. Freud claimed that religion was a doll dream which was satisfied by desire of the unconscious and psychological economy. However, Jung viewed religion as a symbolic embodiment of the collective unconscious and argued religious traditions give archetypal patterns to facilitate psychological absorption and individuation. Frankl's humanistic perspective on the context of religion and the meaning-seeking process of humanity surpassed Freud and Jung in asserting that existential orientation and a sense of transcendence are critical to the psychological well-being and human prosperity. The paper uses a comparative hermeneutic approach to analyze the three authors' views in relation to mental health crises, educational change, intercultural dialogue, and the search for existential meaning in an increasingly rapid world. The study's interdisciplinary reach, spanning psychology, religion, philosophy, and education, makes it relevant to both theoretical inquiry and practical implementation. The authors of this writing observe the restraints imposed by methodological, cultural, and historical factors on Western existential and psychoanalytic philosophy, with due respect that there is not always the space in this thought for the richness of religious experience. The enduring interpretations of Freud, Jung, and Frankl reveal religion as an existential, psychological, and cultural phenomenon in postmodern society.

Keywords: religion, Freud, Jung, Frankl, contemporary relevance



Definition of key terms as employed in the study

Illusion: it refers to a belief shaped by unconscious desire and psychological need rather than empirical verification. Following Freud, religion is understood as an illusion insofar as it functions as a means of coping with anxiety, helplessness, and suffering, while also carrying the risk of dependency and regression.

Symbol: It denotes an expression of the collective unconscious, as theorised by Jung. Religious symbols mediate archetypal realities and enable psychological integration, serving as vehicles for meaning, healing, and the process of individuation.

Transcendence: It refers to the human capacity to move beyond the self and immediate circumstances towards ultimate meaning. Drawing on Frankl, it describes an existential openness that sustains dignity, responsibility, and resilience, especially in the face of suffering.

Meaning: It denotes the value-oriented purpose that individuals discover and respond to in their lives. Following Frankl, meaning is understood as the primary human motivation and a central source of psychological well-being, closely connected to religion and transcendence.

Introduction

The twenty-first century can be characterized by a paradoxical situation: on one hand, it brings about constant changes in terms of scientific, technological, and medical innovations that promote human life; on the other hand, it imparts stability and continuity at the same time, remaining both universal and rooted (Kim & Chung, 2025). The forms of religious and cultural life are not and have not been erased by globalization, pluralism, and secularization. Religion has ceased as an institutional commitment or dogmatic orthodoxy except in the most hostile of environments, and has been transformed into a psychological and existential resource specifying identity, resilience, and values (Chung, 1988; Lee & Chung, 2024; Pargament, 2001). Parallel to rationalist conceptions of the world and ordinary religious practice is one indication that modern societies cannot be characterized by the collapse of religion, but rather through its reorganization. The conflict demands a sensitive reconsideration of the role of religion in human life, especially how the scholars' work makes substantial contributions to psychology, philosophy, and theology debates. Three of the named thinkers can be singled out as being of particular importance as signposts, among them being Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), and Viktor Emil Frankl (1905-1997). Their works encompass psychoanalysis, analytic psychology, and logotherapy, presenting three contrasting perspectives on religion. The position of each philosopher is strongly based on his historical background, addressing the tendencies on the intellectual level, political crises, and contradictions of his epoch. Collectively, their writings are still applicable to the discussion of the contemporary world among psychologists, theologians, educators, and intercultural scholars, and therefore, they constitute the indispensable interlocutors of the twenty-first century.

Born in Freiberg in 1856, and later working in Vienna, Sigmund Freud influenced psychoanalysis in a late nineteenth-century intellectual field, defined by positivism, rationalism, and the failure of classical religious authority. Vienna at the time was a hub of intellectual ferment, marked by both scientific optimism and cultural existential despair. Liberal and secular forces ultimately destroyed the Catholic Church's supremacy, and the advances in medicine and biology discredited very fundamental questions about human nature. Freud defined religion in general as an illusion based on infantile dependence and wish-fulfilment (Freud, 1930, 1939, 1961). To Freud, religious belief was a manifestation of human struggle



in coping with helplessness and projecting parental power onto supernatural forces. Religion, in his view, was a form of “collective neurosis” because it rendered people dependent rather than autonomous. Freud’s criticism is both theoretical and autobiographical as it reflects his life, where he was born in a catholic-based community under the Jewish culture, where he experienced the bad blood between the dominant religion and marginalized cultures. His psychoanalytic explanation tried to reveal the hidden emotional forces behind religious faith, placing religion within a broader framework of repression, guilt, and what Freud called the Oedipal complex — the childhood desire for the opposite-sex parent and rivalry with the same-sex parent. As part of modernity’s rationalization project, Freud’s suspicion of religion was a continuation of a larger cultural movement: the demystification of transcendence. Religion, to Freud, was stifling the task of enlightenment and maturity and withholding mankind from the requirements of reality. His work remains a pertinent part of modern criticism of religion, especially in the discussion of the causality of dogma and authoritarianism. Nevertheless, it is also a question as to whether the experience of sexualizing religion as neurosis ignores the affirmative, symbolic, and ethical roles of religion.

Carl Gustav Jung was born in 1875 in Kesswil. Though a close associate of Freud, he later broke away to establish a school of thought independent of Freud, analytical psychology. The Freudian Theory was oriented to repression and wish-fulfilment, and Jung thought that religion is a symbolic expression of the collective unconscious that is an agent of the realities of archetypes that influences the individuation process (Jung, 1938, 1954, 1956). Switzerland’s intellectual and cultural environment, wherein Protestant tradition and philosophical openness coexisted, strongly shaped Jung’s work. His interests in alchemy, comparative religion, and myth were a challenge to place religious phenomena into a broader symbolic plane of the psyche. Jung was of the opinion that the archetypes, which he described as universal patterns located in the unconscious, are created through religious rituals and myths. They were not fantasies, although they were necessary to the psychological wholeness of the individual and opened doors for him to touch the deeper things of his own humanity. From Jung’s (1954) perspective, it reveals the characteristics of religion, which can be a symbol of united hope and restoration. Freud and Jung had variations in perception of religion because Jung viewed religion as the source of healing, where individuals could be made complete.

On the contrary, Freud perceived religion as a pathology. To Jung, disregard of the religious aspect of life was threatening with dangers of alienation, disintegration, and emptiness. His stance was both evocative in the atmosphere of disillusionment that characterized the twentieth century, following the two global wars, when people turned to symbolic orders to rebuild their identity and meaning. Jung’s symbolic approach remains persuasive in the twenty-first century in fields such as pastoral psychology, interfaith dialogue, and depth therapy. By making one sensitive to the universality of archetypes, Jung opened the door to the perspective that religious pluralism was not a contradiction but a variation on shared symbolic themes, thereby opening doors to cultural resources for interpretation.

Viktor Emil Frankl, born in Vienna in 1905, established logotherapy as a response to the meaning crises of European twentieth-century living. Whereas Freud and Jung, without direct personal experience of suffering, developed their philosophy in freedom from it, Frankl’s philosophy was always shaped by his own experience of suffering in the Nazi concentration camps, where he survived the death of his parents, brothers, and wife’s lives. In his seminal *Man’s Search for Meaning* (MSM, 1959), Frankl answered that the universal human drive is not pleasure (as Freud theorized) or power (as was assumed by Adler), but meaning (Kim et al., 2022). For Frankl, religion represented the vulnerability of humanity to the transcendent, which he referred to as the “unconscious God” (Frankl, 1975, 1997). With this perception,



spirituality was placed at the forefront of human existence, not as a fantasy or symbolic intercession, but as an integral part of survival, adaptation, and hope. In the midst of immense suffering, Frankl observed that those who could find meaning most commonly in terms of faith, hope, or transcendence had a greater chance of survival. This observation should be understood as a phenomenological inference rather than a deterministic claim, highlighting the role of meaning as a mediating psychological resource in extreme suffering. His religious philosophy of existence then turned it back into a part of human flourishing, and not simply in times of crisis, but also in the warfare of everyday struggle. Frankl's MSM is also an example of the confrontation between post-war Europe and nihilism, despair, and moral collapse. His existential criticism, propagated in the context of totalitarian thinking in which human dignity was negated, propagated the absolute freedom and responsibility of a human personality. In this paradigm, religion is not suffocating but expanding one's life with meanings beyond immediate situations, grounding them (Seok & Chung, 2022; Seo et al., 2024). Freud, Jung, and Frankl are put in a conversation with one another: Freud is distrustful, Jung, that is, symbolically integrated, and Frankl, that is, existential transcendence.

All these visions are showing us the threats and possibilities of religion. Freud cautions us against regression and authoritarianism, Jung emphasizes symbolic imagination, and Frankl gives us the idea of the importance of transcendence to lead a fulfilling life. The comparative hermeneutic analysis offered here is the tool for the discussion of problems of the modern world. In psychology, their critiques surface in concerns about coercive religious movements. However, Jung's concepts are innovative work in the areas of myth and symbol in therapy, and Frankl's logotherapy is an inspiration for meaning-oriented interventions in depression, trauma, and existential distress. In the field of education, these ideas become a point of departure to open a dialogue on how these religious and spiritual dimensions can be integrated to enable the creation of a whole-person formation.

In intercultural dialogue, Jung's archetypal perspective and Frankl's emphasis on transcendence provide conceptual resources for engagement across religious and cultural differences, while Freud's hermeneutic of suspicion functions as a critical safeguard against unreflective or coercive forms of belief. Taken together, their contributions form a spectrum of interpretive approaches to religion—illusion, symbol, and existential orientation—that continue to inform psychological, pastoral, and educational engagement with religion. By articulating alternative responses to the religious question through reduction, re-symbolisation, and transcendence, their work offers a hermeneutic toolbox for addressing the enduring tension between scientific reason and spiritual desire in modern contexts. Yet scholarship has too often examined Freud, Jung, and Frankl in isolation, situating each within his own intellectual context without bringing these perspectives into sustained and fruitful comparative dialogue.

When comparisons are attempted, they are usually reduced to summary descriptive outlines and do not offer fruitful interpretive frameworks (Palmer, 2015). This trend has limited the scholarly ability to investigate how suspicion, symbolic integration, and transcendence may work together as a continuum of interpretative resources in the comprehension of religion. In addition, the literature falls victim to implicit Eurocentric bias, and the question remains about how such categories would be appeased in non-Western religious systems such as Asian, African, or Indigenous religious systems, where spirituality is communal, not individualized (Go et al., 2021; Kim & Chung, 2023; Kim & Chung, 2024). With the global dimension of religious pluralism of the present world situation, the models based on European intellectual history run the risk of diluting the diversity of spiritual endeavors. Combined with these forms of cultural restrictions are the methodological inadequacies.



Although Jungian and Franklian paradigms continue to be used in the context of pastoral counseling, psychotherapy, and meaning-based therapies, their underlying assumptions are not adequately testable by large empirical research studies. This limitation arises because key constructs such as archetypes, ultimate meaning, and transcendence are largely phenomenological and existential in nature, making them difficult to define in measurable terms, standardise, and assess within large-scale quantitative research designs. Experience has sustained the cross-cultural correctness of Jungian archetypal patterns and the treatment effectiveness of Franklian logotherapy; nonetheless, they are troublesome conjectural constructs and not well-established psychological advancements (Samuels, 1986; Marshall & Marshall, 2012). While their ideas continue to be used in various settings, the absence of robust empirical testing highlights the need for studies that not only interpret their legacies but also explore how well they function within different cultural and therapeutic realities.

Methodology

This study is conceptual, interpretive, and comparative in nature, rather than empirical. It does not aim to produce statistically generalisable results, but to generate hermeneutic findings, understood as theoretically grounded interpretive insights derived from systematic textual analysis and conceptual comparison. In this context, a finding refers to the identification of coherent patterns, contrasts, and convergences in how Freud, Jung, and Frankl conceptualise religion, human motivation, and psychological well-being, rather than to outcomes derived from data collection or experimental measurement. At the centre of this inquiry lies a close textual analysis of key primary sources, including Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* (1961), *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Jung's *Psychology and Religion* (1938), *Symbols of Transformation* (1956), and *Answer to Job* (1954), as well as Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959) and *The Unconscious God* (1975). These texts are examined not merely as isolated philosophical or psychological writings but as expressions of broader intellectual, cultural, and historical contexts that shaped their respective perspectives on religion and the human condition. To these foundational works, secondary scholarship is incorporated to enrich interpretation and provide critical perspective. Drawing on Paloutzian and Park (2014), Palmer (2015), Hood, Hill, and Spilka (2018), Wong (2020), and Park and Chung (2024), the study situates each thinker within the contemporary intellectual landscape while avoiding anachronistic interpretation and strengthening analytical coherence.

The methodological framework consists of three interconnected analytical movements. First, textual–historical interpretationsituates the ideas of Freud, Jung, and Frankl within their intellectual, cultural, and biographical contexts, identifying the historical conditions that shaped their respective theories of religion. Second, phenomenological–hermeneutic analysis examines how religion functions existentially within each thinker's framework, attending to the symbolic, experiential, and meaning-oriented dimensions of religious life. Third, comparative synthesis brings the three perspectives into dialogue through explicit interpretive principles: (1) their view of human motivation (pleasure, individuation, meaning), (2) the function of religion (illusion, symbol, transcendence), and (3) the implications of their theories for mental health and human flourishing. Through this process, similarities and differences are analytically identified and critically evaluated rather than merely described.

While these methodological steps are descriptive in form, they are analytical in intent and function. Analysis proceeds through the systematic identification of conceptual tensions, theoretical limits, and explanatory strengths within and across the three thinkers' works.



Interpretation, comparison, and evaluation therefore constitute the primary analytical operations of this hermeneutic study, rather than variable manipulation or statistical testing. However, this approach is not without limitations. Reliance on a selected corpus of texts necessarily excludes the full range of each thinker's writings and their reception. Moreover, the study reflects a predominantly Western intellectual framework and may not fully account for non-Western religious traditions. Finally, the interpretive focus limits empirical validation, requiring that the findings be read as conceptual and theoretical contributions rather than definitive empirical conclusions. These limitations do not undermine the study's validity but instead indicate directions for future comparative, intercultural, and empirical research.

Discussions

Freud's concept of religion

Freud's criticism of religion is best understood as a hermeneutic of suspicion, a method of interpreting religious belief as an expression of unconscious psychological needs rather than transcendent truth (Freud, 1927; Palmer, 2015). Across *Totem and Taboo* (1919), *The Future of an Illusion* (1961), *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud argued consistently that religion functions as a response to human helplessness in the face of suffering, death, and nature. Within this framework, the idea of God emerges as a projection of parental authority, providing both protection and moral regulation. Religion is therefore not a deliberate falsehood but an illusion: a belief sustained by wish-fulfilment and emotional necessity rather than by empirical verification.

This interpretation is reinforced by Freud's cultural anthropology and metapsychology. Religious rituals and taboos are understood as symbolic expressions of primal guilt and ambivalence rooted in early social formations (Freud, 1913), while the superego internalises religious authority as a mechanism of moral control within civilisation (Freud, 1930). Religion thus operates as a social technology that restrains instinctual drive through guilt and moral discipline, contributing to social order while also limiting psychological autonomy. Although Freud acknowledged the stabilising function of religion, he ultimately regarded its psychological cost—dependence, repression, and inhibited maturity—as too high, a judgement that continues to inform contemporary critical approaches to religion (Gay, 1998; Hood et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, he judged its psychic costs to be too high. By encouraging childlike dependence and deepening guilt, religion perpetuates what he called "chronic infantilism." His alternative was not nihilism but education in reality-testing: training people to face life without illusions, replacing theological consolations with the maturity of science and sublimation, that is, redirecting instinctual energy into constructive cultural activity (Freud, 1919, 1930). Freud's case continues to inform secularization debates insofar as it offers a parsimonious explanatory model for the ongoing existence of religious belief in the contemporary world (Gay, 1998). It instructs critics to diagnose manipulative sectarianism and authoritarian theologies, to translate ecstatic or apocalyptic events into falls back to infantile omnipotence, and to observe the transference dynamics that can keep followers in the charismatic leader's thrall. Furthermore, as a hermeneutic of suspicion, Freudian suspicion can thus safeguard pastoral and therapeutic spaces from spiritualization of illness and theocratic incursion into conscience. It encourages clinicians to ask whether religious language is being used as a defence (e.g., to mask anxiety, guilt, or trauma) or as a vehicle for control, thereby protecting care from coercive, doctrinal intrusion into personal moral agency.



However, where Freud is most brilliant diagnostically, his theory risks explanatory overreach. Four limits emerge. (1) Reductionism and explanatory monism. Freud reduces master-keyed wish-fulfilment and thus reduces multivalent religion (cognitive, communal, ethical, aesthetic) to one single psychogenic plane. Contemporary psychology of religion measures robust, contextual correlations between religiosity, meaning-making, coping, and pro-sociality, which are unexplained in a mass pathology model (Paloutzian & Park, 2014). Empirical confirmation of the roles of religion in building resilience makes Freud's pessimism less plausible, but still allows for his warning messages about authoritarianism and obsession. (2) Historical and cultural narrowness. Freud's theory is directed to Western, largely monotheistic, patriarchal iconography. It will not apply to cultures in which the divine is immanent, plural, or impersonal. Subsequent cross-cultural and comparative studies detail the broad variability in religious representation and practice not accounted for within a single paternal-projection hypothesis (Hood et al., 2018). This in no way diminishes Freud's observations but circumscribes their generality. (3) Problematic anthropological and historical support pillars. The primitive-horde theory and conjectural reconstruction of Mosaic origins have been wholesale condemned as evidence-free (Gay, 1998). So long as Freud utilizes conjectural prehistory in an attempt to render his diagnosis universal, the argument is rhetorically ingenious but historically suspect. (4) Conceptualizing moralities in the negative. Freud acknowledged civilization's need to domesticate instinct, but overestimated religion's tendency to internalize moral values through pathological shame and to motivate sacrificial altruism. Recent studies of the meaning, forgiveness, and altruism show how religious practice can make people psychologically well and socially cohesive, especially when based on healthy communities and appropriate theological doctrines (Wong, 2020).

These boundaries help to clarify how Freudian critique can be applied in contemporary contexts. The complexity lies in applying Freudian suspicion without reducing all religious expression to pathology, as religion may function both as a defence mechanism and as a genuine source of meaning, resilience, and moral agency depending on context. Clinically, the Freudian position is still relevant wherever religious discourse serves as immunization against loss, shame or deprivation or wherever transference binds the believer to coercive god-images and impositions of authoritative authorities. Educationally, Freud, in his critique, is arguing against dogmatic catechesis, which closes off questions and promotes pedagogies that increase reality-testing and reflective thinking. Publicly, his agnosticism is also used to mark off mature faith from ideology by making it clear when religion is being invoked as a defense, as opposed to a practice which means something. Meanwhile, using shared research in psychology of religion, researchers in the field can integrate on the basis of the shared research in psychology of religion, meaning-based and virtue-based, that have been empirically proven to be beneficial in coping, purpose, and moral development, not going through the waste of critiquing Freud's criticism, but more rectifying Freud's pessimism (Wong, 2020).

Briefly, the metaphor that Freud offers of religion as a mass neurosis of infantile need and sustenance to mass neurosis (Freud, 1919, 1930) is a powerful diagnosis of the polyvalent uses of religion as a defense and authoritarian appeal. It is a useful essential tool for critique today (Gay, 1998). At the same time, however, its reductionism, boundedness, scaffolding on speculation, and exclusion of positive functions require it today to function as a bounded critique within a plural methodological ecology rather than a global explanation. Interpreted in this narrow manner, Freud's legacy continues to sharpen clinical insight, pedagogical care, and public self-understanding regarding religion, whereas interdisciplinary research is expanding the narrative of how religious devotion can also foster resilience, meaning, and moral growth (Hood et al., 2018; Wong, 2020).



Jung's concept of religion

Jung constructed a fundamentally different understanding of religion from Freud by locating its origin not in wish-fulfilment but in the symbolic structure of the psyche. For Jung, religion is the symbolic language of the collective unconscious, the shared psychic substratum in which archetypes are expressed across cultures (Jung, 1938, 1954, 1956). Religious myths, rituals, and images give form to archetypal patterns such as the Self, Shadow, and Great Mother, enabling individuals to encounter existential questions that cannot be resolved through rational cognition alone. Religion, therefore, is not an illusion or a projection of infantile needs, but a mediating system of symbol through which unconscious realities are integrated into conscious life, guiding the process of individuation and psychological wholeness (Jung, 1954, 1956).

From an analytical perspective, Jung's theory redefines religion as a psychological function essential to mental health. Symbols operate as containers of meaning that allow inner conflict, anxiety, and contradiction to be held without disintegration. In this sense, religious symbolism performs a stabilising role by mediating tensions between opposites—conscious and unconscious, reason and emotion, individuality and collectivity. Jung's concept of individuation, understood as the lifelong integration of these opposites, is inseparable from symbolic and often religious imagery, which he regarded as the most powerful expressions of psychic energy (Jung, 1954). The loss of symbolic frameworks, Jung warned, risks alienation, fragmentation, and meaninglessness in modern life, particularly in secularised societies where traditional symbols have eroded.

Jung's theory also has therapeutic implications that extend beyond descriptive symbolism. In clinical practice, dreams, myths, and religious images are treated as diagnostic and transformative materials that reveal unconscious conflicts and guide psychological integration. Jungian therapy thus uses symbolic interpretation not only to interpret meaning but to facilitate transformation, enabling patients to reorient their lives toward coherence and purpose. This symbolic approach continues to influence contemporary depth psychology and spiritually integrative psychotherapy, where imagination, narrative, and meaning are recognised as central therapeutic resources (Seok et al., 2021; Seon & Chung, 2025).

In addition, Jung's model offers a comparative and intercultural framework for understanding religion. By interpreting diverse religious traditions as culturally distinct expressions of shared archetypal patterns, Jung opened a methodological pathway for comparative religion and interfaith psychology. This approach allows for the recognition of common human structures without collapsing doctrinal differences, making it particularly relevant in pluralistic and multicultural contexts (Seok, 2024). Religion, from this perspective, becomes a symbolic bridge between cultures rather than a source of irreducible conflict.

Nevertheless, Jung's approach is not without limitations. Critics have argued that his archetypal framework rests on speculative assumptions that resist empirical validation and risk relativising doctrinal, ethical, and social dimensions of religion (Samuels, 1986). By emphasising symbolism and inner experience, Jung's theory may underplay the institutional, moral, and communal functions of religion. Despite these criticisms, his contribution remains analytically significant because it articulates how religion functions as a symbolic mediator of meaning, integration, and transformation. His emphasis on symbolism continues to inform psychotherapy, pastoral practice, and education by highlighting the indispensable role of imagination and meaning in psychological and spiritual development (Paloutzian & Park, 2014).



Frankl's concept of religion

Frankl, a physician, psychiatrist, and Holocaust survivor, developed a conception of religion that differs fundamentally from both Freud's reductionism and Jung's symbolic psychology. Profoundly shaped by his experience of imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps, Frankl understood religion as an existential orientation towards transcendence and as an integral dimension of the human search for meaning. In *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959), he observed that prisoners who were able to orient themselves towards meaning—often expressed through faith, love, or commitment to values beyond immediate suffering—were more likely to preserve psychological resilience and the will to survive. Religion, in this framework, is not a wish-fulfilment or symbolic construction but a stance of existential responsibility that enables human beings to endure suffering without surrendering dignity.

This insight was further developed in *The Unconscious God* (1975), where Frankl proposed that the human person possesses an unconscious spiritual dimension—a latent openness to ultimate meaning that persists even when religious language is absent. Spirituality, for Frankl, is therefore not an optional addition to human life but an intrinsic dimension of existence. This conviction forms the foundation of logotherapy, which identifies the will to meaning as the primary motivational force of human life, surpassing both the Freudian will to pleasure and the Adlerian will to power. Religion represents one of the highest expressions of this will, because it opens a horizon of meaning that transcends immediate circumstances, suffering, and even death (Frankl, 1997).

Analytically, Frankl's theory reframes religion as a resource for resilience and moral agency rather than as a psychological defence or symbolic mediator. Meaning is not merely discovered but enacted through responsibility, choice, and commitment. Even in extreme conditions, Frankl argued, human beings retain the freedom to adopt an attitude towards suffering, and this freedom is sustained by transcendence. In this sense, religion functions as a framework that anchors hope, responsibility, and inner freedom when external freedom has been removed. Contemporary meaning-centred therapies and positive psychology continue to draw on these insights in work with trauma, depression, and existential distress (Wong, 2020).

Nevertheless, Frankl's approach has been subject to criticism. Scholars have noted the conceptual vagueness of his language of transcendence, particularly his use of terms such as ultimate meaning and the unconscious God, which can be interpreted theistically, metaphysically, or existentially (Marshall & Marshall, 2017). This openness, while inclusive, complicates the task of distinguishing between psychological and theological claims and makes empirical testing difficult. Moreover, Frankl's European existential framework may not fully account for the communal, ritual, and institutional dimensions of religion found in non-Western traditions (Paloutzian & Park, 2014; Yang & Chung, 2023).

Despite these limitations, Frankl's contribution remains theoretically significant because it resists both reductionism and relativism. By locating religion within the human capacity for meaning and responsibility, he articulates a model in which spirituality supports survival, dignity, and moral agency under conditions of extreme adversity. His interpretation continues to inform counselling, pastoral care, education, and trauma recovery by emphasising that meaning is not a luxury of stable life but a necessity of human existence.



Comparative Analysis

Side by side, the three thinkers place not just the variety of the psychological explanations of religion but also its rivalries into relief. Freud's uncertainty about religion as illusory wish fulfillment stands in sharp contrast to Jung's belief that religion expresses great symbolic realities. While Freud tried to explain the infantile origins of religion in terms of projection from the father and saw religious activity as the cause of repression and guilt, Jung saw myths, ritual, and symbolism as representing the forms of the collective unconscious and vehicles of psychic integration. Jung's approach, then, is one of redescription of religion from a pathological point of view to one of symbolic mediation and offers a more positive evaluation than the stark reductionism of Freud. Frankl, in turn, departed quite a way from both. Against Freud's position that religion is illusory, Frankl argued that religion is an existential imperative, a source of transcendence that makes possible survival and dignity in spite of affliction. He differed from Jung, too, in diverting attention from the archetypal symbolism to the concrete quest for meaning. For Jung, religion is mainly a system of symbols by which unconscious archetypes affect human imagination and individuation; for Frankl, it is the human tendency toward ultimate meaning, a horizon for which the symbolic archetypes are not necessarily needed in order to validate its presence. Whereas Jung held a subjective value in the symbolic imagination and Freud a skeptical use of psychoanalysis, Frankl placed religion in the space of the existential self, which is most apparent in the states of crisis and despair.

These distinctions are not spiritual, but of various therapeutic and cultural implications. Freud's model, in spite of its reductionism, is a necessary reminder to be sensitive to authoritarian religion and theocratic coercion. Jung's vision offers matter for interfaith discussion and spiritually integrative psychotherapy in regard to an affirmation of the universality of symbolic forms. Frankl's model of the human self, which is based on the principle of the will to meaning, offers a blueprint for strength and moral responsibility that has been found very useful in the recovery from trauma and in pastoral counselling.

Today, with the mood of pluralism and skepticism, we are better advised to read them as supplementary, not necessarily opposite, but mutually reinforcing, Freud pointing out the dangers of illusion, Jung extolling the abundance of symbolic consciousness, and Frankl reminding us of the inexorable call of meaning and transcendence. They together yield a spectrum of interpretations, ranging from religion as illusion to religion as symbol and as an existential orientation, the interplay between them which has gone on to influence psychological theory and actual working with religion up to the present. This is not a speculative assumption but a conceptual inference grounded in the documented and continued use of Freudian, Jungian, and Franklian frameworks in psychotherapy, pastoral counselling, and the psychology of religion, where these models are explicitly employed as interpretive and clinical resources (Palmer, 2015; Hood et al., 2018; Wong, 2020).

Research Findings

This study demonstrates how Freud, Jung, and Frankl, in conversation with one another, delineate a series of psychological positions regarding religion that continues to shape current thought about its promise and its risks. Freud is the pole of suspicion, with religion as illusion and neurosis, a projection of infantile dependence getting in the way of independence (Freud, 1927, 1930). On the contrary, Jung develops a symbolic integration method of religion, and that which he regards, based on and through the collective unconscious, as a symbolic language of archetypes, must be crucial to individuation and psychic integration (Jung, 1938, 1952). Frankl turns the emphasis to existential transcendence and puts religion in the



framework of human openness to ultimate meanings and transcendence, and demonstrates its origins in its value to survival and prosperity, especially in necessity conditions (Frankl, 1946/1959, 1948). Thus, the findings suggest that a combination of all three philosophers offers a theoretical continuum that throws light on the possibility of deconstructing, interpreting religion symbolically, or confirming it in existence.

Transferred to contemporary practice, such a range demonstrates its durability. Within the field of mental health, Freud's skepticism provides therapists with an analytical tool for detecting authoritarian or pathological forms of belief distortion, while Jung's symbolic interpretation and Frankl's logotherapy inform therapeutic methods that incorporate spirituality into healing and resilience processes (Palmer, 2015; Wong, 2020). Symbols and imagination attract Jung's attention in education, and he defends the idea of pedagogies of creativity, but Frankl is concerned with meaning and provokes the establishment of curricula that generate a sense of purpose, accountability, and moral responsibility.

The universals of the archetypes explained by Jung in the intercultural dialogue presuppose identification of the similar patterns of symbols between the various religious groups, whereas the language of meaning as interpreted by Frankl can be used to address the confessional problems. It is well worth heeding, though in these days it has been slandered by Freud, in order that the debate with religion spill not into blindness but be religiously balanced through vigilance against intellectual fraud, reversal, or ecclesiastical tyranny.

This work also provides theoretical cogency and a sense of interpretation through three paradigmatic positions, that is, suspicion, symbolic integration, and transcendence, which serve to guide the depth psychology approaches toward religion, which remains in use today (Palmer, 2015). It is also through the analysis that relevant considerations emerge as regards how these theories, despite being a creation of the European early twentieth century, nonetheless provide insights to date into practices of therapy, pedagogy, and intercultural dialogue (Wong, 2020).

In addition, the paper has also revealed an inter-disciplinary characteristic that has connected psychology with theology and even philosophy and education, thus crossing the boundary of borders that are typically sealed off (Rheem & Chung, 2024). This holistic vision also brings out the need to think from an interdisciplinary perspective to sufficiently tackle the complexity of human flourishing (Paloutzian & Park, 2013; Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2018).

In parallel, however, there are limitations. This concentration on three European thinkers necessarily constitutes a Eurocentric perspective and raises questions about the applicability of their models to non-Western religions and practices. The debate also reveals an empirical shortfall, as Jungian and Franklian philosophy is frequently cited in psychotherapy, yet their claims about archetypes or transcendence remain insufficiently tested in contemporary clinical psychology (Samuels, 1986; Marshall & Marshall, 2017).

Reductionism is also a danger, as every philosopher privileges one explanatory register over another, whether infantile desire, archetypal symbolism, or existential meaning, and so risks reducing the complexity of lived religious activities. Lastly, the dependence on hermeneutical and interpretative approaches, worthwhile as they are, cannot establish the truth-claims of the theology or metaphysics, which this study cannot see (Palmer, 2015).



Conclusion

The results of this study should be understood as interpretive and conceptual findings rather than empirical claims. They affirm that Freud, Jung, and Frankl together offer a range of psychological interpretations of religion that continue to shape intellectual, clinical, and pedagogical discourse. Within this interpretive framework, Freudian critique highlights the dangers of illusion, dependency, and distortion, reminding scholars and practitioners that religion must remain open to critical examination. Jung's symbolic hermeneutics, in turn, elucidate how archetypal resources within religious traditions may support individuation and psychological integration. Frankl's existential perspective interprets transcendence and meaning as indispensable horizons for resilience, dignity, and survival in conditions of suffering. Taken together, these perspectives represent not empirical generalisations but theoretical lenses through which contemporary crises of meaning can be understood.

At the same time, the limitations of this research point to important directions for future inquiry. Because this study is grounded in Western intellectual traditions, further engagement with Asian, African, and Indigenous religious contexts is needed to examine whether the categories of suspicion, symbol, and transcendence are universally applicable or culturally bounded. Moreover, empirical research in counselling and educational psychology is required to test the therapeutic and pedagogical implications suggested by Jungian and Franklian frameworks, clarifying both their potential and their limits. Dialogue with emerging fields such as the cognitive science of religion (Barrett, 2011), resilience studies, and intercultural education may provide methodological tools for extending and critically evaluating the conceptual insights developed here (Jang et al., 2025; Park et al., 2024; Park & Chung, 2024; Seok, 2024).

In this sense, the combined perspectives of Freud, Jung, and Frankl offer a heuristic framework rather than a verified model for understanding religion in human life. Their work demonstrates the limitations of dismissing religion, idealising it uncritically, or reducing it to a single explanatory dimension. Instead, religion is best approached as a complex, dynamic, and evolving phenomenon. Future research that empirically examines, revises, and tests these interpretive paradigms in diverse cultural and disciplinary contexts will determine their ongoing relevance for the challenges of the twenty-first century.

References

- Barrett, J. L. (2011). *Cognitive science, religion, and theology*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press.
- Chung, J. (1988). *Social criticism of Uchimura Kanzo and Kim Kyo-Shin*. Seoul: UBF Press.
- Frankl, V. E. (1959). *Man's search for meaning* (I. Lasch, Trans.). Boston, MA: Beacon Press. (Original work published 1946).
- Frankl, V. E. (1975). *The unconscious God: Psychotherapy and theology* (C. FitzGerald, Trans.). New York, NY: Simon & Schuster. (Original work published 1948).
- Frankl, V. E. (1997). *Man's search for ultimate meaning*. New York, NY: Perseus Books.



Freud, S. (1919). *Totem and taboo: Resemblances between the mental lives of savages and neurotics* (A. A. Brill, Trans.). London, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Original work published 1913).

Freud, S. (1930). *Civilisation and its discontents* (J. Riviere, Trans.). London, England: Hogarth Press.

Freud, S. (1939). *Moses and monotheism* (K. Jones, Trans.). London, England: Hogarth Press.

Freud, S. (1961). *The future of an illusion* (J. Strachey, Trans.). New York, NY: W. W. Norton. (Original work published 1927).

Gay, P. (1998). *Freud: A life for our time*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

Hood, R. W., Hill, P. C., & Spilka, B. (2018). *The psychology of religion: An empirical approach* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Jang, S., Jang, M., Jeong, S., Jung, M., & Jeong, M. (2025). Exploring the challenges faced by teachers in South Korea: Causes and potential solutions. *International Journal of Research in Education Humanities and Commerce*, 6(2), 65-82. <https://ijrehc.com/vol-6-issue-2/exploring-the-challenges-faced-by-teachers-in-south-korea-causes-and-potential-solutions/>

Jung, C. G. (1938). *Psychology and religion*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Jung, C. G. (1954). *Answer to job* (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1952).

Jung, C. G. (1956). *Symbols of transformation* (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1912).

Kim, K., & Chung, J. (2023). The public roles of early Korean Protestant Christianity and future prospects. *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 19(3), 57–72. Retrieved from https://www.ejst.tuiasi.ro/Files/100/5_Kim%20&%20Chung.pdf

Kim, K., & Chung, J. (2024). The educational ministry of early Korean colporteurs. *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 105(3), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.105.310>

Kim, K., & Chung, J. (2025). Contemporary application of the spirituality of the Desert Fathers. *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 106(5), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.106.57>

Kim, S., Han, K., Kim, H., Jeong, M., & Chung, J. (2022). John Milton’s view on the “true” church. *Astra Salvensis*, 10(19), 151–167. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1048120>

Lee, G., & Chung, J. (2024). The spiritual leadership of the founders of University Bible Fellowship. *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*, 15 (2), 23-40. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/CGP/v15i02/23-40>



Marshall, M., & Marshall, E. (2012). *Logotherapy revisited: Review of the tenets of Viktor E. Frankl's logotherapy*. Ottawa, ON: Ottawa Institute of Logotherapy.

Palmer, M. (2015). *Freud and the legacy of religion*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Paloutzian, R. F., & Park, C. L. (2014). *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Pargament, K. I. (2001). *Psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Park, J., Seok, J., & Chung, J. (2024). The spirituality fruits of Desert Fathers (2). *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Analysis*, 7(8), 4054-4065.
<https://ijmra.in/v7i8/48.php>

Park, Y., & Chung, J. (2024). The March First Independence Movement: Social, Political, and Religious Implications. *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, 49(1), 26-31.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/23969393241297028>

Rheem, S., & Chung, J. (2024). The spiritual fruits of the Desert Fathers (1). *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Analysis*, 7(3), 1360-1367.
<https://www.ijmra.ijpbms.com/v7i3/61.php>

Samuels, A. (1986). *Jung and the post-Jungians*. London: Routledge.

Seo, I., Rheem, S., Kim, K., Jeong, M., & Chung, J. (2024). The spirituality of David Brainerd. *Psychology and Education Journal*, 61(2), 948-960.
<https://psychologyandeducation.net/pae/index.php/pae/article/view/8440>

Seo, I., Jeong, S., Park, J., Jang, M., & Chung, J. (2025). The ideological-educational characteristics of Saemaul Undong songs. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Analysis*, 8(4), 2067-2077. <https://ijmra.in/v8i4/62.php>

Seok, J., Jeong, M., Seon, S. & Chung, J. (2024). Sarah Barry: A spiritual beacon in modern Korea. *Foundations of Science*, 29(4), 1171–1182. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10699-021-09805-1>

Seok, J., & Chung, J. (2022). A critical analysis on the Novel Pachinko from the perspective of Coaching Psychology. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 6(4), 429-438. Available at:<https://journalppw.com/index.php/jpsp/article/view/2394>

Seok, J. (2024). *Psychology of coaching and counseling*. Seoul: SPARK Press.

Seon, S. & Chung, J. (2025). *Legacy of Missionary Sarah Barry*. Chicago: UBF Press.

Wong, P. T. P. (2020). *The human quest for meaning: A handbook of psychological research and clinical applications* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.



Yang, M., & Chung, J. (2023). Jesus' teachings and their Implications in Postmodern World. *International Journal of Research in Academic World*, 2(3), 1-8.
<https://academicjournal.ijraw.com/archive/y2023/v2/i3/mMarch/Jesus%E2%80%99%20Teachings%20and%20Their%20Implications%20in%20Postmodern%20World>

Conflict of Interest Statement: *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



This article is open-access and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence CC BY: credit must be given to the creator, the title and the license the work is under. This license enables re-users to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator.