

DARIUSZ KROK

Uniwersytet Opolski, Instytut Psychologii

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1034-0944>

The religious meaning system as a conceptual construct of interdenominational approach: A psychological analysis

Abstract

The concept of religiosity as a system of meanings represents an interesting attempt to study the phenomenon of religion from the perspective of cognitive psychology, which considers the way in which individuals think and perceive reality. The religious meaning system can be conceptualised as an idiosyncratic system of beliefs concerning oneself, others, and relationships with the world, the essential feature of which is an inherent connection to the sacred sphere. Careful structural and functional analysis of the religious meaning system leads to the conclusion that it offers significant potential for application in interdenominational research within various Christian denominations. Justifications for this include the presence of the concept of a personal God, an inclusive nature in terms of doctrines and principles of faith, the absence of specific reference to particular cultural or historical traditions, and a holistic, global perspective on religious practices. The validity of using the religious meaning system in interdenominational research is confirmed by empirical research results, which have been conducted not only among Catholic groups, but also among Protestant denominations. This confirms that religiosity, expressed through the prism of the system of meanings, has a broader scope of application, unrestricted to any single Christian denomination. In practical terms, the concept of the religious meaning system and the questionnaire based on it provide methods for the empirical measurement of the psychological determinants of religious beliefs and convictions across different denominations. Furthermore, they offer the possibility of utilizing the meaning system to assess the structure and function of religiosity within religious groups, as well as to understand the psychological consequences of religion for well-being and mental health.

Keywords: the religious meaning system, interdenominational studies, religious beliefs, religious orientation and sense, transcendent dimensions.

Religijny system znaczeń jako konceptualny konstrukt podejścia międzywyznaniowego: analiza psychologiczna

Abstrakt

Koncepcja religijności jako systemu znaczeń stanowi interesującą próbę badania fenomenu religii z punktu widzenia psychologii poznawczej, która uwzględni sposób, w jaki człowiek myśli i pojmuje rzeczywistość. Religijny system znaczeń można określić jako idiosynkratyczny system przekonań dotyczących własnej osoby, innych ludzi i relacji ze światem, którego istotną cechą jest nieodłączny związek ze sferą *sacrum*. Uważna analiza strukturalna i funkcjonalna religijnego systemu znaczeń prowadzi do wniosku, że oferuje on dużą szansę zastosowania w badaniach międzywyznaniowych, w ramach różnych denominacji chrześcijańskich. Jako uzasadnienie można podać: obecność koncepcji osobowego Boga, inkluzyjny charakter w kontekście dogmatów i zasad wiary, brak specyficznego odniesienia do konkretnych tradycji kulturowych lub historycznych, a także spojrzenie na praktyki religijne w holistycznym, globalnym kontekście. Zasadność użycia religijnego systemu znaczeń w badaniach międzywyznaniowych znajduje swoje potwierdzenie w wynikach badań empirycznych, które zostały wykonane nie tylko w grupach katolików, ale i także wyznań protestanckich. Potwierdza to, że religijność, wyrażana przez pryzmat systemu znaczeń, posiada szerszy zakres zastosowania, nieograniczony do żadnego pojedynczego wyznania chrześcijańskiego. W wymiarze praktycznym koncepcja religijnego systemu znaczeń i bazujący na niej kwestionariusz dostarczają sposobów dla empirycznego pomiaru psychologicznych uwarunkowań wierzeń i przekonań religijnych w różnych wyznaniach. Ponadto oferują możliwość wykorzystania systemu znaczeń w oszacowaniu struktury i funkcji religijności w grupach religijnych, a także zrozumienia psychologicznych konsekwencji religii dla dobrostanu i zdrowia psychicznego.

Słowa kluczowe: religijny system znaczeń, badania międzywyznaniowe, przekonania religijne, orientacja i sens religijny, wymiary transcendentne.

The study of the phenomenon of religiosity in interdenominational (ecumenical) terms is a complex and multifaceted reality, as it should take into account not only the substantive aspects but also the specific nature of religiosity relevant to a particular denomination. Different Christian denominations have their own distinctive beliefs, dogmas, liturgical rituals, and moral rules. In addition, such forms of religiosity as religious beliefs, prayer, religious experience, or religious worship function in specific social and cultural spheres that are characteristic of a given denomination. If we want to objectively and accurately examine religiosity within different denominations, the need arises to take into account its nature in interdenominational terms. This article aims to analyse the religious meaning system as an approach that can be useful for studying religiosity from an interdenominational perspective within the Christian religion.

1. The religious meaning system: its structure and functions

Religiosity is not a standalone construct, detached from the entirety of a person's psychosocial life. Instead, it constitutes a framework of concepts and beliefs deeply embedded within all aspects of an individual's existence, intricately

intertwined with their surrounding environment.¹ On one hand, religiosity is tethered to a transcendent realm beyond the individual, while on the other hand, it maintains a profound and symbiotic relationship with psychosocial characteristics. Consequently, each individual's connection to the supernatural is unique, reflecting their personal attributes, and the role and impact of religiosity on their mental life vary significantly. For instance, the experience of religious rituals or the emotional engagement during Mass or religious services can differ greatly from person to person.

Observing religious practices reveals that the symbols and rituals used to apprehend the Transcendent are drawn from social, familial, and cultural contexts. In essence, they are socially and culturally conditioned, influenced by prevailing socio-cultural norms and standards.² Considering these factors, it becomes evident that religiosity is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, with individuals exhibiting wide variances in personal beliefs, cultural backgrounds, and religious affiliations.

One promising approach to understanding religiosity, which offers a unified theory and facilitates interdenominational analysis, is the religious meaning system. This framework, successfully applied in religious research, views religion as a structured set of ideas, assumptions, and interpretative methods.³ According to C. Park, religiosity provides individuals with meaning and a general sense of the events occurring in their lives, so that they can more effectively understand daily occurrences and build a coherent and logical interpretation of the events.⁴ Due to its clear reference to the sacred realm, religiosity forms a unique system of meaning centred on individuals' conceptions of the sacred, encompassing a broad spectrum of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. In this sense, religion often serves as an individual's cognitive schema, providing beliefs about the self, the world, and interactions between them, as well as an understanding of natural and supernatural events.

¹ Ephraim Shapiro. 2022. "A protective canopy: religious and social capital as elements of a theory of religion and health." *Journal of Religion and Health* 61 (6): 4467; Ralph W. Hood Ralph. 2019. The psychology of religion and spirituality. In *The Routledge International Handbook of Spirituality in Society and the Professions Routledge*. Eds. Laszlo Zsolnai, Bernadette Flanagan, 7. London: Routledge.

² Joshua Conrad Jackson et al. 2021. "Tight cultures and vengeful gods: How culture shapes religious belief." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 150 (10): 2058.

³ Israella Silberman. 2005. "Religion as a meaning system: Implications for the new millennium." *Journal of Social Issues* 61 (4): 643–644; Crystal L. Park. 2013. Religion and meaning. In *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality*. Eds. Ralph F. Paloutzian, Crystal L. Park, 358. New York: Guilford Press.

⁴ Crystal L. Park. 2020. Religiosity and meaning making following stressful life events. In *The science of religion, spirituality, and existentialism*. Eds. Kenneth E. Vail, Clay Routledge, 274–275. New York: Academic Press.

In this context, religious individuals may cultivate a profound sense of meaning and purpose in life derived from their faith, offering them guidance and direction in decision-making and goal-setting activities. This perspective consequently permeates every aspect of individuals' lives, impacting both individual and social spheres.

A notable characteristic of the religious meaning system is its emphasis on transcendence, wherein reality is perceived through the lens of the sacred. This notion stems from a renowned and widely accepted definition of religion formulated by K. I. Pargament, who described religion as a quest for the sacred.⁵ The pursuit of the sacred characterizes the religious meaning system as an endeavour to explore an extra-empirical reality beyond sensory perception, inferred through observations and rational deductions drawn from personal experiences. At the core of religiosity lies the dimension of meaning (purpose), which organizes all other aspects.⁶ This meaningful aspect is evident across various dimensions of human existence: (a) mentally, religion offers a comprehensive worldview facilitating the interpretation of daily experiences; (b) socially, it fosters a sense of community, belonging, and connection among individuals who share similar beliefs and values; and (c) existentially, religion addresses fundamental questions about life, suffering, death, and morality. The religious content internalized by individuals significantly influences their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, shaping their attitudes towards themselves and others.

From a structural standpoint, religion as a meaning system exhibits two distinct characteristics: (a) comprehensiveness – the breadth of issues to which the system assigns significance, and (b) quality – the nature of the meaning it imparts.⁷ These characteristics are interconnected based on purpose, values, and goals, influencing their psychological functions in both individual and social contexts.

Regarding comprehensiveness, religion furnishes meaning for social and historical events at both global (e.g., the creation of the universe) and individual levels (e.g., personal events like birth or illness). Consequently, religious beliefs and norms imbue various situations with unique meanings, impacting individuals' appraisals and causal attributions. The religious meaning system functions akin to a specific "interpretive key," enabling individuals to comprehend a wide array of phenomena in the world.

⁵ Kenneth I. Pargament. 1997. *The psychology of religion and coping*. New York: Guilford Press. 32.

⁶ Raymond F. Paloutzian, Crystal L. Park. 2021. "The psychology of religion and spirituality: How big the tent?" *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 13 (1): 4–5.

⁷ Silberman. 2005. "Religion as a meaning system: Implications for the new millennium", 647.

In terms of quality, religion possesses a distinctive capacity to address profound existential inquiries concerning the ultimate purpose of life, the nature of suffering, or the concept of mortality.⁸ By incorporating beliefs in transcendent or ultimate realities beyond the material realm, the religious meaning system offers individuals a broader perspective on daily existence and provides solace in times of adversity. However, this does not guarantee that religion will always provide satisfactory answers to all daily doubts and queries. Certain aspects of life, such as death and suffering, may perpetually remain mysterious from a human perspective. Nevertheless, research indicates that the religious meaning system can effectively offer interpretations of challenging existential questions and assist individuals in coping with stressful situations.⁹ The final outcomes often result from individual factors (e.g., a form of religiosity, personal resources), external factors (social support, situational contexts), and interactions between them.

Conceptualizing religion within a system of meanings entails both a subject-oriented (substantive) and functional (pragmatic) understanding of religious beliefs and behaviour. This viewpoint is strongly underscored in the philosophy of religion, particularly by K.E. Yandell,¹⁰ who argues that religion can be regarded as a conceptual system offering individuals a framework for interpreting the world, defining their place in it, determining how they should live, and upholding specific beliefs and religious practices. This approach highlights religion's unique role as a system of meaning – a structured set of ideas, assumptions, and interpretative methods used to elucidate and interpret information within a religious context.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the significant importance of religion, understood in terms of meaning systems, across various religions at both individual and social levels. Examples of research in this area include investigations into subjective well-being and happiness,¹¹ coping mechanisms for stress related

⁸ Crystal L. Park, Roshi Joan Halifax. 2021. Religion and spirituality in adjusting to bereavement: Grief as burden, grief as gift. In *Grief and Bereavement in contemporary society*. Eds. Robert A. Neimeyer, Darcy L. Harris, Howard R. Winokuer, Gordon Thornton, 355–356. New York: Routledge.

⁹ Judith E. Appel et al. 2020. "Meaning violations, religious/spiritual struggles, and meaning in life in the face of stressful life events." *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 30 (1): 14–15; Dariusz Krok, Beata Zarzycka, Ewa Telka. 2021. "The interplay of religious and nonreligious meaning-making on psychological well-being in gastrointestinal cancer patients." *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 31 (4): 285–286.

¹⁰ Keith E. Yandell. 2016. *Philosophy of religion: A contemporary introduction*. London: Routledge, 16.

¹¹ Patty Van Cappellen et al. 2016. "Religion and well-being: The mediating role of positive emotions." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 17: 501–503; Min Min Tan et al. 2021. "Religion and mental health among older adults: ethnic differences in Malaysia." *Aging and Mental Health* 25 (11): 2121–2122.

to physical and mental health,¹² attitudes toward death among older adults in relation to the religious meaning system,¹³ the interplay between religious beliefs and behaviour and social networks,¹⁴ and the role of religion in prejudice.¹⁵ It is crucial to note that research conducted within the framework of meaning systems encompasses adherents of diverse religions and is conducted within different cultural-religious contexts.

The aforementioned studies illustrate that the religious meaning system serves as a valuable “research tool” for analysing the phenomenon of religiosity within the context of individual and social factors, as it provides a methodological framework for understanding the intricate interplay between the religious sphere and its psychosocial determinants and consequences.

2. The universal Christian dimension of the religious meaning system: an ecumenical perspective

Given that religion serves as a meaningful system applicable to research within many of the world’s major religions, it is important to note that certain forms of the religious meaning system appear suitable for research specifically within Christianity, which could benefit an interdenominational approach. One such form may be the concept of the religious meaning system proposed within the framework of the psychology of religion by D. Krok.¹⁶ This approach, referring generally to Christianity as a whole, appears adequate and relevant to interdenominational (ecumenical) studies, as it does not differentiate forms of religiosity based solely on dogmatic or liturgical content specific to one denomination. This assertion is supported by studies that encompass not only Catholic samples but also various Protestant denominations.¹⁷

¹² Dariusz Krok, Paweł Brudek, Stanisława Steuden. 2019. “When meaning matters: Coping mediates the relationship of religiosity and illness appraisal with well-being in older cancer patients.” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 29 (1): 57–58.

¹³ Paweł Brudek, Marcin Sekowski. 2020. “Wisdom as the mediator in the relationships between religious meaning system and attitude toward death among older adults.” *Death Studies* 44 (12): 755–756.

¹⁴ Chaeyoon Lim, Robert D. Putnam. 2010. “Religion, social networks, and life satisfaction.” *American Sociological Review* 75 (6): 918–920.

¹⁵ Mark J. Brandt, Christine Reyna. 2010. “The role of prejudice and the need for closure in religious fundamentalism.” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36 (5): 722–723; Onurcan Yilmaz, Dilay Z. Karadöller, Gamze Sofuoğlu. 2016. “Analytic thinking, religion, and prejudice: An experimental test of the dual-process model of mind.” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 26 (4): 367–368.

¹⁶ Dariusz Krok. 2009. *Religijność a jakość życia w perspektywie mediatorów psychospołecznych*. Opole: Redakcja Wydawnictw Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 186–189.

¹⁷ Dariusz Krok, Zarzycka Beata, Telka Ewa. 2021. “The religious meaning system and resilience in spouse caregivers of cancer patients: A moderated mediation model of hope and affect.”

Within this approach, the religious meaning system can be conceptualized as “an idiosyncratic system of beliefs concerning one’s person, other people, and one’s relationship with the world, the essential feature of which is an inherent connection to the sphere of the sacred (*sacrum*)”.¹⁸ What sets the religious meaning system apart from non-religious meaning systems is its association with the sacred realm and its strong reference to transcendent realities, establishing it as a distinct conceptual category. Below, the primary features of the religious meaning system will be outlined alongside its potential applications in interdenominational studies within Christianity.

The religious meaning system encompasses two primary dimensions: religious orientation and religious sense, which constitute its conceptual foundation and represent its characteristic features in terms of religious thought and behaviour.

- (1) Religious orientation – this dimension embodies the idea that the religious meaning system empowers individuals to orient themselves and comprehend the world, as well as their own lives. The environment in which people reside is replete with ambiguity and diversity across intellectual, cultural, and social realms. This may engender a sense of uncertainty and existential perplexity, leading to the emergence of conflicting ideas and perspectives. As an exceedingly rich source of meaning, religion can furnish a meticulously organized “cognitive map”, allowing individuals to orient themselves concerning both internal experiences (such as reflections on existential dilemmas, spiritual preoccupations, significant goals, and plans) and external information (such as the origins of the universe, ultimate explanations of natural disasters, and inexplicable supernatural phenomena).¹⁹ Religious notions and beliefs, provided they possess a sufficient degree of rationality, can evolve into a driving force behind daily endeavours and an internal, spiritual catalyst for achieving objectives and aspirations. This dimension delineates the degree to which an individual regards religion as a system capable of elucidating personal life and the surrounding world, while also facilitating comprehension of existing individual and social norms.²⁰

Journal of Religion and Health 60 (4): 2966; Paweł J. Brudek. 2022. “Religious meaning system and sense of self-dignity in the second half of life: The mediating role of wisdom.” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 16 (1): 74–75.

¹⁸ Krok. 2009. *Religijność a jakość życia w perspektywie mediatorów psychospołecznych*, 187.

¹⁹ Jordan W. Moon et al. 2023. “Is religion special?” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 18 (2): 341–343.

²⁰ Dariusz Krok. 2013. Skala Religijnego Systemu Znaczeń (RSZ). In *Psychologiczny pomiar religijności*. Ed. Marek Jarosz, 157. Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL.

- (2) Religious sense – this dimension reflects the capacity of the religious meaning system to interpret life in terms of meaning and purpose. Individuals tend to construct frameworks of meaning around specific events and phenomena, aiding in the identification of appropriate beliefs, expectations, and goals, as well as contextualizing individual life within a broader framework. What is distinctive in these efforts is the pursuit of a deeper meaning that would validate the actions undertaken. Through activities focused on religious meaning-making, individuals can internalize beliefs and convictions into coherent, comprehensive structures, forming one’s transcendent narrative identity.²¹ Religion offers a consistent worldview, within which various challenging events (such as suffering and death) are seen to signify deeper meaning and purpose. The mature internalization of religious content assists individuals in finding existential meaning and addressing persistent or challenging questions. The religious sense dimension denotes the extent to which an individual perceives their religiosity as instrumental in discovering the meaning of life, achieving significant goals, and recognizing the inherent value of life.²² It also embodies a distinctive quest for meaning inherent in human endeavours and reflective of human nature.

A deeper comprehension of the role that the religious meaning system can play in interdenominational research is facilitated by a thorough analysis of the Religious Meaning System Questionnaire and its individual items²³ (see Table 1). Analysing its contents, the following features relevant to interdenominational research can be noted.

Table. 1. The Religious Meaning System Questionnaire used to assess religiosity in terms of religious meaning systems (Krok, 2009).

Instruction: Below there is a list of your religious beliefs. Read each statement carefully, paying extra attention to its meaning. Then decide to what extent you agree with the statements, choosing the correct number.

1 – Definitely no,

²¹ Crystal L. Park et al. 2024. “When suffering contradicts belief: measuring theodical struggling.” *Current Psychology* 43 (6): 4962–4963; Pamela Ebstyn King, Susan Mangan, Rodrigo Riveros. 2023. Religion, spirituality, and youth thriving: Investigating the roles of the developing mind and meaning-making. In *Handbook of positive psychology, religion, and spirituality*. Eds. Edward B. Davis, Everett L. Worthington Jr., Sarah A. Schnitker, 267–268. Cham: Springer.

²² Krok. 2009. *Religijność a jakość życia w perspektywie mediatorów psychospołecznych*, 188.

²³ Krok. 2013. *Skala Religijnego Systemu Znaczeń (RSZ)*, 163.

- 2 – No,
- 3 – Probably no,
- 4 – I don’t have any opinion on that,
- 5 – Probably yes,
- 6 – Yes,
- 7 – Definitely yes.

As science and technology develop, religion becomes useless in life.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My religious beliefs help me to find purpose in difficult and complicated events.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I rarely think about religion.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Thanks to my faith I am an optimist when it comes to dealing with difficult situations.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The way I behave is a result of my faith.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I think that religion helps me in finding purpose in life.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am able to subordinate various life matters to what is the most important – God.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Religion gives answers to the question what is good and what is bad.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The question whether God exists does not matter for me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I search for information on religion on TV, in the Internet and on the radio.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I help people in need because of my religious beliefs.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I think that the world has more sense thanks to religion.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Thinking about my life, I take into account religious norms.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I try to reconcile my life choices with religious norms.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Religion does not influence the way I think and act in everyday life.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I like watching or listening to programs concerning religion.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Religious practices are an integral part of my life.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
A scientific understanding of life and the world made religion redundant.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am constantly trying to deepen my knowledge concerning religion.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
In my opinion, religion is an essential part of human life.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

First, the religious meaning system and its method of measurement refer to the concept of a personal God, which is characteristic of Christianity (though not

exclusively). This can be observed in items such as “I am able to prioritize various life matters according to what is most important to God” or “The question of whether God exists is irrelevant to me.” The belief in a personal God, understood as a supreme being with self-consciousness and will, capable of emotions akin to a person, and establishing relationships with people, is integral and widespread in Christianity.²⁴ Examining God from a personal perspective, the religious meaning system offers possibilities for studying religiosity within various Christian denominations. Although different Christian traditions may vary somewhat in their understanding of the essence and nature of God (e.g., the emphasis on God’s mercy in Catholicism), the religious meaning system enables the perception of God without significant distinction. Thus, it becomes possible to identify, for instance, the relationship between religion and existential attitudes towards life and death.²⁵

Secondly, Christianity, despite its numerous denominations, possesses its own distinct system of beliefs and dogmatic principles that define the religion. These include the belief in only one God, acceptance of the Holy Trinity, faith in the resurrection of Jesus, and acceptance of the Holy Bible, among others.²⁶ The religious meaning system does not directly allude to any particular dogmas and therefore does not differentiate between various denominations. In the realm of religion, it relies on general statements that do not explicitly reference specific Christian denominations but rather treat religious content in a comprehensive manner. This is evident in items such as “My religious beliefs assist me in finding purpose in difficult and complex events” or “I believe that religion adds meaning to the world.” This approach offers an inclusive perspective on religious matters pertaining to Christianity as a whole and allows researchers to utilize the Religious Meaning System Questionnaire to explore various Christian denominations.

Thirdly, every Christian denomination has its own historical and cultural traditions. This stems from the fact that throughout history, Christians have encountered specific historical events and lived within distinct cultural contexts, which have influenced their religious beliefs and behaviours. For instance, due to the Reformation, there exists a different understanding of tradition in Catholicism compared to Protestant denominations.²⁷ The religious meaning system attempts

²⁴ Edward D. Andrews. 2023. *Evangelical theology – God: Essential Christian beliefs about God*. New York: Christian Publishing House, 16; Daniel J. McKaughan, Daniel Howard-Snyder. 2023. “Theorizing about Christian faith in God with John Bishop.” *Religious Studies* 59 (3): 411.

²⁵ Brudek, Sekowski. 2020. “Wisdom as the mediator in the relationships between religious meaning system and attitude toward death among older adults”, 755.

²⁶ <https://www.history.com/topics/religion/history-of-christianity> (8.04.2024).

²⁷ Arne Rasmusson. 2021. “Radical Orthodoxy on Catholicism, Protestantism and Liberalism/Liberality: On the use of historical narratives and quantitative methods in political theology.” *Modern Theology* 37 (1): 45–46.

to address this issue in a general and comprehensive manner, without specific reference to concrete cultural or historical traditions. By analysing the role of religious beliefs and convictions, it emphasizes its all-encompassing and inclusive aspects without prioritizing any particular denomination. For example, statements like “I seek religious information through various media sources such as TV, the Internet, and radio” or “I constantly strive to deepen my understanding of religion” illustrate this approach, which is founded on an overarching view of Christianity as a whole.

Fourthly, religiosity is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon encompassing various forms of religious behaviour, including participation in worship services, attending Masses, adhering to liturgical norms, personal and communal worship, and religious experiences, all of which manifest in various spheres of personal and social life.²⁸ Throughout history, different denominations have developed and adopted specific forms of religious worship and rituals, influenced by both professed truths of faith and cultural conditions. For example, there are differences in the form of Mass between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, as well as liturgical distinctions between religious services in Catholicism and Protestantism. In examining a broad spectrum of religious behaviour, the religious meaning system aims not to focus on any specific rites or liturgical regulations but rather to capture religious practices within a holistic, global context.²⁹ Statements such as “My behaviour is a reflection of my faith” or “Religious practices are an integral aspect of my life” embody this approach, which underscores the significance of inclusive religious symbols and signs through which individuals perceive transcendent reality, drawing from nature, social life, and cultural context.

Fifthly, many religious systems establish a set of moral and ethical standards, the adherence to which requires certain values.³⁰ Religion, based on these values, can serve to assess the proper functioning of social systems and groups, such as by advocating for basic human rights or protesting against unethical social structures. Various Christian denominations exhibit differences in specific ethical and moral values; for instance, there may be contrasting approaches to sexual ethics between the Catholic and Protestant Churches, or differing attitudes toward divorce in Orthodoxy compared to Catholicism. To address this complexity, the religious meaning system focuses on general moral norms and principles rather

²⁸ Peter C. Hill et al. 2023. Measurement at the intersection of positive psychology and the psychology of religion/spirituality. In *Handbook of positive psychology, religion, and spirituality*, 100.

²⁹ Krok. 2013. Skala Religijnego Systemu Znaczeń (RSZ), 164.

³⁰ Doug Oman. 2013. Defining religion and spirituality. In *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality*. Red. Ralph F. Paloutzian, Crystal L. Park, 26–27. New York: Guilford Press.

than delving into specific regulations. For instance, statements like “I try to reconcile my life choices with religious norms” or “Thinking about my life, I take into account religious norms” reflect this approach. This ensures that the exploration of moral and ethical content is comprehensive while respecting the specific regulations of individual denominations.³¹

In summary, the religious meaning system and its questionnaire, serving as a psychological tool for measuring religious orientation and sense, appear to be an appropriate and valuable approach for conducting research across various Christian denominations. Its inclusive and comprehensive nature allows for the examination of different denominations while acknowledging their distinct characteristics. A thorough analysis of the items comprising the Religious Meaning System Questionnaire demonstrates its potential for successful application in interdenominational research.³² Its primary advantage lies in its ability to assess the extent to which Christian-focused religiosity serves as a guiding and meaning-making force in human psychosocial functioning.

3. The use of the religious meaning system in interdenominational research

Having outlined the usefulness and appropriateness of the religious meaning system and its questionnaire in the interdenominational approach, there will be now showcased a selection of the main examples of research conducted within this framework. While these studies have been conducted within the Polish cultural context, which is predominantly Catholic, they also encompass non-Catholic groups, such as Protestants or Orthodox Christians. Six studies will be presented to underscore the practical significance of the religious meaning system for interdenominational research.

The first study aimed to explore the relationships between the religious meaning system, meaning in life, and subjective well-being. It hypothesized that meaning in life would mediate the relationship between the religious meaning system and subjective well-being.³³ The participants consisted of two hundred and fifty-three individuals (133 women and 120 men) aged between 19 and 61, with a mean age of 32 years ($SD = 12.76$). The majority of participants identified as Christians (93.3%), predominantly Catholics, while 6.7% described themselves as non-believers. The findings indicated that a higher intensity of the reli-

³¹ Andrews. 2023. *Evangelical theology – God: Essential Christian beliefs about God*, 50.

³² Krok, Zarzycka, Telka. 2021. “The religious meaning system and resilience in spouse caregivers of cancer patients: A moderated mediation model of hope and affect”, 2966.

³³ Dariusz Krok. 2014. “The religious meaning system and subjective well-being: The mediational perspective of meaning in life.” *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 36 (2): 258.

religious meaning system, particularly in the spheres of orientation and sense, was associated with elevated levels of meaning in life and life satisfaction. However, no significant association was observed between the religious meaning system and either positive or negative affect. The key finding of the study revealed that the presence of meaning in life mediated the relationship between the religious meaning system and life satisfaction, suggesting that Christians who perceive the religious sphere as instrumental in finding life orientation and meaningful goals tend to experience life more positively.³⁴

Another study focused on the associations between religiousness and coping within the mediational context of sense of coherence among older adults in Poland. The study examined two hundred and twelve older adults (118 women and 94 men) aged between 65 and 79 years ($M = 71.04$; $SD = 2.26$). The majority identified as Christians (94.4%), with only 5.6% describing themselves as non-believers.³⁵ The total religious meaning system, along with its two dimensions – religious orientation and religious sense – were positively correlated with sense of coherence, as well as with several coping styles: emotion-oriented coping, avoidance-oriented coping, and social diversion. Mediational analysis revealed that sense of coherence mediated the relationship between the religious meaning system and three coping styles: emotion-oriented, avoidance-oriented, and social diversion.³⁶ This suggests that a strong sense of coherence provides a functional foundation for older Christian adults to utilize meaning-oriented religious resources effectively in coping with anxiety and stress.

In another interesting study, the relationship between the religious meaning system and attitude toward death among older adults was examined, with wisdom playing a mediating role. This study included three hundred and fifteen participants (156 women and 159 men) aged between 60 and 75 years ($M = 66.71$; $SD = 5.07$), all of whom identified as Roman Catholics.³⁷ Correlational analyses revealed that the religious meaning system was positively associated with various dimensions of attitude toward death, including neutral acceptance, escape acceptance, and approach acceptance, while negatively correlated with death avoidance and fear of death. Additionally, it was positively related to three dimensions of wisdom: cognitive, reflective, and affective. The main finding indicated that the association between the religious meaning system and fear of death, death

³⁴ Krok. 2014. "The religious meaning system and subjective well-being: The mediational perspective of meaning in life", 266.

³⁵ Dariusz Krok. 2016. "Sense of coherence mediates the relationship between the religious meaning system and coping styles in Polish older adults." *Aging and Mental Health* 20 (10): 1004.

³⁶ Krok. 2016. "Sense of coherence mediates the relationship between the religious meaning system and coping styles in Polish older adults", 1007.

³⁷ Brudek, Sekowski. 2020. "Wisdom as the mediator in the relationships between religious meaning system and attitude toward death among older adults", 752.

avoidance, neutral acceptance, escape acceptance, and approach acceptance was mediated by at least one dimension of wisdom (cognitive, reflective, and/or affective).³⁸ This implies that a higher level of acceptance, interest, detachment, openness, and tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty resulting from wisdom assists religiosity in late adulthood in reducing despair when confronted with death.

The subsequent study investigated interpersonal forgiveness and meaning in life among older adults, considering the mediating and moderating role of the religious meaning system. The research sample comprised two hundred and five older adults (112 women and 93 men) aged between 60 and 92 ($M = 72.59$; $SD = 6.85$). Regarding religious affiliation, 85.4% identified as Catholic, 8.3% as Protestant, and 6.3% as non-believers.³⁹ Interpersonal forgiveness was conceptualized as a prosocial transformation of relationships with potential transgressors.⁴⁰ Results indicated that the religious meaning system was negatively associated with two dimensions of interpersonal forgiveness – revenge and avoidance motivations – and positively correlated with benevolence motivation, presence of meaning, and search for meaning. Additionally, the religious meaning system mediated the relationships between forgiveness (revenge, avoidance, and benevolence) and both presence and search for meaning. Moreover, the religious meaning system moderated these relationships; a higher level of the religious meaning system strengthened the negative relationship between revenge and both presence and search for meaning, while also enhancing the positive relationship between benevolence and presence of meaning. These findings are consistent with previous research establishing meaning-oriented religiosity as a predictor of forgiveness-focused activities.⁴¹

Furthermore, relationships between the religious meaning system and resilience in spouse caregivers of cancer patients were examined within the mediational and moderation framework of hope and positive and negative affect. The study involved two hundred and fourteen spouses (96 men and 118 women) of gastrointestinal cancer patients. Given the specific context of Poland, a majority identified as Catholic (80.4%), with 9.8% Protestant, 5.1% Atheist, and 4.7% Agnostic.⁴² Results indicated a positive association between the religious

³⁸ Brudek, Sekowski. 2020. "Wisdom as the mediator in the relationships between religious meaning system and attitude toward death among older adults", 756.

³⁹ Dariusz Krok, Beata Zarzycka. 2021. "Interpersonal forgiveness and meaning in life in older adults: The mediating and moderating roles of the religious meaning system." *Religions* 12 (1): 5.

⁴⁰ Blake M. Riek, Eric W. Mania. 2012. "The antecedents and consequences of interpersonal forgiveness: A meta-analytic review." *Personal Relationships* 19 (2): 305–306.

⁴¹ Hisham Abu-Raiya, Ali Ayten. 2020. "Religious involvement, interpersonal forgiveness and mental health and well-being among a multinational sample of Muslims." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 21 (8): 3065.

⁴² Krok, Zarzycka, Telka. 2021. "The religious meaning system and resilience in spouse caregivers of cancer patients: A moderated mediation model of hope and affect", 2966.

meaning system and hope and resilience. Notably, hope mediated the relationship between the religious meaning system and resilience. Additionally, positive affect, but not negative affect, moderated the indirect effect of the religious meaning system on resilience through hope.⁴³ This study extends previous research on religion and resilience in family caregivers by demonstrating the contributions of hope and positive emotions to caregivers' perceived ability to draw upon their religious beliefs and convictions in fostering resilient attitudes.

Finally, a study by P. Brudek examined the religious meaning system and sense of self-dignity, with wisdom as a mediator among individuals in the second half of life (aged 50+). The final sample comprised one hundred and thirty-six individuals aged between 50 and 75 years ($M = 64.89$; $SD = 5.92$), all identifying as Catholics.⁴⁴ Correlational analyses revealed a positive relationship between the religious meaning system and wisdom and sense of self-dignity. Furthermore, wisdom mediated the relationship between the religious meaning system and sense of self-dignity. Specifically, the religious meaning system positively predicted wisdom, which in turn positively predicted sense of self-dignity.⁴⁵ This suggests that enhancements in religious meaning, spirituality, and wisdom may assist individuals aged 50+ in bolstering their sense of self-dignity.

In summary, the aforementioned studies demonstrate that the religious meaning system adeptly captures religious beliefs and convictions concerning oneself, one's relationship with others and the world, as well as the transcendent realm and factors related to orientation and meaning-making. Moreover, it proves effective in analysing the intricate relationships between religiosity and psychosocial factors, thereby firmly supporting the notion of religion as a meaning system within an interdenominational context.⁴⁶ Consequently, religiosity, as a system of meanings, can influence human life in terms of orientation and existential sense not only within Catholicism, but also across other Christian denominations. Religiosity, expressed through the lens of the meaning system, which reflects an individual's pursuit to comprehend the meaningfulness and purposefulness of life, thus assumes a broader scope, unrestricted to any single Christian denomination. The shared belief in God and adherence to fundamental Christian views inherent in the religious meaning system enable its tenets to be perceived from a meta-perspective, facilitating their successful application in interdenominational studies.

⁴³ Krok, Zarzycka, Telka. 2021. "The religious meaning system and resilience in spouse caregivers of cancer patients: A moderated mediation model of hope and affect", 2069.

⁴⁴ Brudek. 2022. "Religious meaning system and sense of self-dignity in the second half of life: The mediating role of wisdom", 75.

⁴⁵ Brudek. 2022. "Religious meaning system and sense of self-dignity in the second half of life: The mediating role of wisdom", 78.

⁴⁶ Krok. 2009. *Religijność a jakość życia w perspektywie mediatorów psychospołecznych*, 188.

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