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RE-LOCATING RELIGION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract: Due to the fact that formal systems of religious thought have developed, throughout the ages, in response to the pressures of informal daily practices that the countless believers worldwide have tended to adopt, religion and technology have always been intertwined in a complex web of relationships. The aim of this article is to provide an insight into the nexus between religion and technology, to trace their intricate entanglement, and to identify the threats faced by religion in the Digital Age. Although the Internet facilitates the reinforcement of believers' religious identity and the formation of transnational religious communities, recent research on the wide cultural effects of Internet-use, robotics, and AI points to a notable decline in religiosity brought forth by this automated environment. As automation is increasingly diminishing the utilitarian significance of religion in various global regions, philosophical counselling can fill the spiritual void left in the lives of non-believers by helping them face existential quandaries that do not require the involvement of psychotherapists. Given the chequered history marking the relationship between religion and technology, it is indisputable that, as technology advances, religious institutions and practitioners, as well as individuals who renounce religious affiliation, will continue to grapple with both the difficulties and the opportunities it brings.

Key words: technology, digital media, Internet-use, Artificial Intelligence, religious disaffiliation, philosophical counselling.

1. The Nexus of Religion, Science and Technology

The interaction between religion, on the one hand, and science and technology on the other, in all their forms and manifestations, has always been nuanced, intricate and multifaceted, as formal systems of religious thought have evolved under the pressure of informal daily practices among the numerous practitioners of world religions. Given the wide range of approaches and attitudes towards technological developments, it is not surprising that various technologies have, directly or indirectly, exerted complex influences on the religious impulse (Cheek 2018, 51), but the trend has not been entirely unidirectional. Depending on the religious traditions and the specific technological advancements in question, different perspectives and interactions have emerged. Since many representatives of major world religions have been adamant that life, in its entirety, must remain “under the explanatory power and influence of the religion in question” (Cheek 2018, 54), resistance to technological development in certain areas, such as genetic engineering, stem cell research, organ transplants, reproductive technologies, sustainable environmentally friendly technologies and Artificial Intelligence technologies has been extremely strong. Due to religious critiques, scientific research and technological progress have, at times, been limited or hindered. During the twentieth and the twenty-first century, however, technology has inexorably asserted a powerful influence “over the realm of religion and spirituality just as it has seemingly done across commerce and economies, institutions (cultural, educational, social), social life, politics, sports, and other realms of human endeavors and activities” (Cheek 2018, 52).

Historically, scientists have been strongly discouraged from using investigation techniques, pursuing research and publicly sharing data that contradicted religious dogmas, especially during periods of increased tensions between religious orthodoxy and scientific inquiry. Cases of relentless persecution and severe condemnation, such as Galileo Galilei’s and Giordano Bruno’s, inevitably led to a temporary suppression of scientific inquiry, delaying technological development. The Catholic Church’s aversion to dissection in the Middle Ages regrettably hindered medical advancements, a situation mirrored by today’s opposition to stem cell research, vaccine development, organ transplant, contraceptive methods and assisted reproductive techniques. Religious groups, especially those who took religious texts literally when interpreting creation, fiercely opposed Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection and the notion of evolution in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Some religious circles still dispute this today, engaging in “public battles in school boards, legislatures and courts” (Pew Research Center 2019) in an

effort to change school curricula, by replacing the teaching of evolution with that of creationism – under the misnomer intelligent design. From the Scopes Trial of 1925 and the *Kitzmiller v Dover Area School District* 2005 case in Pennsylvania, relentless efforts have been made to exclude evolutionary theory from the science curricula in Kansas, Tennessee, Texas, and in other states, such as South Dakota in 2017 and Arizona in 2018 (Frings, Harris, and Smallwood 2023). More recently, religious resistance to AI development has been making itself heard, on the grounds that creating things which replicate human intelligence or consciousness undermines human beings' uniqueness, distinctiveness and value. Moreover, since creation is a divine prerogative, the making of artificially intelligent beings is tantamount to invading the divine sphere and, therefore, religious authorities insist that humans must refrain from creating entities which can mirror and might even eventually surpass the powers of the divine.

Yet, new and old technologies, from the printing press, the radio and television, to the Internet and AI bots, have been widely employed to promote and spread religious ideas. Johannes Gutenberg's printing press enabled the mass production and the long-desired standardization of religious texts in a more accurate and consistent form, which contributed to the formation and consolidation of religious communities united by common beliefs and interpretations of scripture. The way that religious organizations have been interacting with their members and disseminating their teachings has been profoundly changed by other advances in technology as well. For instance, on January 2, 1921, Pittsburgh Calvary Episcopal Church broadcast the first religious radio program. Some religious speakers and pastors regarded the radio as ridiculous or pointless, if not downright dangerous, a spawn of evil. Nevertheless, the number of religious radio stations increased, rising from 29 in 1924 to 71 in 1925. Radio broadcasting has been used, ever since 1953, by various churches in the United States of America, to offer "alternate religious experiences to those who are uncomfortable with the traditional, formal church setting, by hosting car-based worship sessions" (Preda 2019, 131). Although Evangelical Christians were the first to embrace the new media opportunities, religious radio stations and television networks have long been making available church services for nearly every denomination, as both constitute important means of reaching out to and engaging with an ever larger and more diverse audience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, broadcasting technologies enabled religious groups to attend mass from a distance, to connect and share ideas, despite being unable to meet face-to-face.

In addition, it has become much easier to target a global audience thanks to the Internet, via websites, social media and mobile apps, so, nowadays, many religious services are streamed live on the Internet, and religious texts and materials are available in digital formats. By using

information technology to its full potential and seizing media opportunities, Evangelists have been actively providing and promoting faith-based goods, events, and services, such as colouring books (Miracles of Jesus, The Old Testament, etc.), Bible-themed books (Noah's Ark, The Nativity, etc.), figurines and stuffed toys (Talking Jesus – Scripture complete with a colouring book, the Prayer Bear with Book and Backpack, etc.), play-sets (Noah's Ark, David and Goliath, etc.), and games (Bibleopoly, Redemption, and Dragonraid: building warriors for spiritual battle – copycats of Monopoly, Magic: The Gathering and, respectively, Dungeons and Dragons). Other examples include exercise programs on Cardio Gospel Praise Music such as the one entitled The Firm Believer, on-demand Christian Wrestling events, as well as frequently organized Faith in Film festivals and Christian Music festivals, and even over-the-top streaming platforms, such as Netflix's Christian counterpart dubbed Great American Pure Flix. Moreover, it only takes a few mouse clicks to access especially created social networking sites and online video sharing platforms, like Christian Faithbook and GodTube - Broadcast Him, which work as de-secularized prayer-filled alternatives to the still popular Facebook and YouTube (Preda 2019, 132). Additionally, immersive religious experiences have been created using virtual reality technologies (VR) – Immersive Bible Experiences and Ministry to Shut Ins – and augmented reality technologies (AR) – Interactive Bible Studies and Interactive Holy Land Tours (Passini 2017). Furthermore, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have, for instance, been employed to offer visitors a unique religious, cultural and historical experience, as the case study conducted on Notre-Dame de Paris, Church of Saint Peter in Exeter, and Cathedral de Santa María de la Sede in Seville clearly shows (Allal-Chérif 2022). VR technology has also facilitated interfaith dialogues and cooperation, promoting empathetic understanding by enabling people to get immersed in, to experience and to appreciate various religious practices, from Judaism, Christianity and Islam, to Sikhism, Hinduism and Buddhism.

2. The Threats Faced by Religion in the Digital Age

Digital media technologies triggered a process of dynamic secularization, causing religion to evolve into novel forms. This great transition has been under way for at least twelve decades: it started with the invention of the radio in the 1890s, it was accelerated by the advent of the television in the 1920s and, especially, by that of the Internet and of Artificial Intelligence. Thus came into being a new technological worldview, whose communicative forms have been gaining widespread acceptance, therefore posing a three-fold threat to religion, as William F. Fore pointed out as early as 1987. First, many people have been rejecting alliances with institutional religion, as their “interests, motivations,

satisfactions and energies” are becoming devoid of their religious core, so churches are increasingly being seen as “empty shells” and visited solely for their architectural appeal (Fore 1987, 26). Second, people are no longer moved by religious references, rituals, symbols or pictures, so the power of true religious vocabulary has slowly been fading. No longer perceived as uplifting, stirring and inspiring, many “historical religious images” are now considered relics or charming curiosities which, rather than taken seriously, are merely treated with caution, as remnants of a bygone era (Fore 1987, 27). Third, the new technology environment has been fostering the emergence of religious expression unrelated to organized religion and manifested outside of the structured church, as people have been finding new ways to express their fundamental religious concerns in literature, film and the arts, rather than in the context of the organized church. Moreover, “Alcoholics Anonymous, drug rehabilitation centers, coalitions for social and political reforms, therapy clusters, the adult education movement”, as well as other similar activities, give people the opportunity “to ‘get involved’ without the benefit of clergy” (Fore 1987, 28).

The beginnings of the secularization of religion were traced by William Sims Bainbridge to the 1960s and 1970s, given that, ever since, “conventional measures of religiosity, like frequency of attendance at religious services, seem to indicate a decline in the significance of religion” (2017, 1): in 1972, according to the General Social Survey, 41.2% of participants had reported attending religious services weekly or more frequently, and 29.1% once a year or less but, by 2014, the former percentage had decreased to 28.5% and the latter had increased to 47.1% (Bainbridge 2017, 4). With the advent of the Internet, which broke what Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974, 43) had named “the spiral of silence”, this decline has been accelerating, since the principle of “pluralistic ignorance” no longer applies (Taylor 1982, 311). Before the Internet became widely available, non-believers had lived under the misconception that theirs was a tiny minority, and had viewed concealing their lack of belief as essential, lest they might face rejection, humiliation and punishment (Bainbridge 2007, 154). Once the real numbers of agnostics and atheists started to be revealed, however, the reality emerged that many of their friends, neighbours and acquaintances were non-believers as well, so the incentive to hide started to gradually wear off (Bainbridge 2017, 4).

Based on data from the University of Chicago’s General Social Survey, Allen B. Downey’s 2014 quantitative research linked Internet-use to the decline in religious affiliation, showing it to be one of the most impactful factors, along with others, previously identified, such as political beliefs and attitudes, shifts in immigration, life stressors, socio-demographic and economic characteristics, generational replacement, attitudes towards premarital sex and contraception, delayed marriage and parenthood, college graduation, religious scepticism and an increase in the number of

people raised without a strong religious affiliation (Hout and Fischer 2002, Smith and Kim 2005, Schwadel 2010 and 2011, Vargas 2011, and Wilcox et al. 2012). While earlier research had identified some of the elements linked to non-religiosity, no quantification of the proportion of the observed shift attributable to each component had been done, making Downey's study the first to demonstrate that education and Internet-use strongly influence religious disaffiliation and to actually quantify their impact. The data shows that, between 1990 and 2010, the proportion of the population that graduated from college climbed from 17% to 27%, the prevalence of Internet-use rose from almost zero to about 80%, and the number of Americans without a religious preference increased from 8% to 18% (Downey 2014, 1). Additionally, according to the statistics, about 25% of "the observed decrease in affiliation" is attributed to lack of religious upbringing, roughly 5% to college education, approximately 20% to Internet-use, whilst the remaining 50% can be accounted for by generational effects (Downey 2014, 9-10). Aware of the fact that mere correlation does not necessarily translate into causation, Downey points out that the former does, however, provide evidence for the latter, so, as long as no other novel factor of similar rising prevalence during the same time span is identified, it is not unreasonable to conclude that Internet-use brings a significant contribution to the drop in religiosity: "it is easy to imagine at least two ways Internet use could contribute to disaffiliation. For people living in homogeneous communities, the Internet provides opportunities to find information about people of other religions (and none), and to interact with them personally. Also, for people with religious doubt, the Internet provides access to people in similar circumstances all over the world" (Downey 2014, 9).

Whilst Downey's work is a multigenerational study of Americans, the 2023 investigation into the cultural ramifications of robotics and Artificial Intelligence carried out by Jackson et al. on more than three million individuals, demonstrates how exposure to robots and AI accounts for the drop in religious practice among people across various countries around the globe, within national cultures, and at workplaces. Their first study used data gathered by the International Federation of Robotics and by the Gallup World poll, and examined global reductions in religious practice based on information from 68 countries for the years 2006 to 2019, establishing a correlation between exposure to robotics and mean importance of religion, across all time points. The second study used data from the Brookings Institute and the Gallup "U.S. Dailies" poll for 2008 to 2016 and provided a more conservative test of the hypothesis by examining the connection between exposure to robotics and religious disaffiliation in a single country, the United States of America, whose areas are more technologically advanced and religiously homogeneous than those of the previously assessed 68 countries. The third study involved an 11-wave longitudinal investigation of a New Zealander

community-sample and examined the relationship between religious behaviour and occupational AI exposure from 2009 to 2020. The fourth study showed that exposure to AI can explain religious decrease within an organization and was conducted in three survey-waves on a smaller and more homogeneous sample: 238 employees – both workers and managers – of an Indonesian manufacturing plant that had been integrating AI technology. Whereas studies one and two indicated that exposure to robots explained the drop in religiosity both internationally and inside a country, studies three and four found that occupational exposure to AI was associated with lower levels of religiosity across individuals (Jackson et al. 2023).

Jackson et al. explain that, in addition to deriving existential justifications and obtaining moral values from religion, people often employ supernatural beliefs for practical purposes. Shamans rely on divination rites to forecast weather patterns, the sex of a fetus, and the most effective remedies for ailments (Hong and Henrich 2021, and Hong 2022), whereas followers of the Abrahamic religions report praying more frequently and experiencing a stronger subjective faith in God when they, or a loved one, become sick or face financial difficulties (Black 1999, Jackson and Gray 2019, and Bentzen 2021). Yet, nowadays, in many parts of the world, automation is undermining religion's instrumental value, since it can be used, not only effectively but also efficiently, to forecast the weather, identify fetal sex, diagnose diseases, treat afflictions, cure illnesses, and provide easier access to resources, so people are becoming less inclined to rely on supernatural beliefs or engage in religious practices (Hong and Henrich 2021).

Additionally, AI and robots seem to be more commonly associated with gods than with people (Spatola and Urbanska 2020) and, although humans frequently outperform algorithms in predictive ability, the latter are often regarded as more trustworthy than human specialists in many disciplines, a phenomenon known as “algorithm appreciation” (Logg, Minson and Moore 2019). Moreover, it is a widespread belief that “AI allows people to ‘play god’ in a way that previous scientific and technological advances have not, with some commentators suggesting these perceptions will persist as AI becomes increasingly sophisticated” (Jackson et al. 2023). Whilst, in the past, people would normally look to supernatural beings and religious authorities when confronted with instrumental difficulties seemingly beyond the reach of human competence, nowadays such issues may appear to be more manageable, especially for those working in highly automated environments. And it is “this perception of human exceptionalism” that consistently leads to a decrease in religious affiliation (Jackson et al. 2023).

It is undeniably true that far-reaching industrialization did not lead to the demise of religion, despite earlier predictions made through theories of secularization such as those advanced by Max Weber in 1904,

Émile Durkheim in 1912, Sigmund Freud in 1927, or Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1955. Yet, nowadays, explain Jackson et al., given that “the rise of AI and robotics has been a crucial and overlooked mechanism for explaining religious declines”, automation, in developed nations at least, might provide these theories with belated validation: “Our data do not imply that religion is facing worldwide extinction – if anything, religion is polarizing across world regions. But our studies do suggest that current trends in automation may foreshadow religiosity trends in the near and distant future” (Jackson et al. 2023). Thus, upon completion of their research, informed by convergent literature that suggests automation could lessen religion’s instrumental utility, Jackson et al. conclude that secularization may pick up speed in many parts of the world during the 21st century due to the rise of automation.

3. The Future of Religion in the Digital Age

The concept of technological determinism, which holds that technical advancements are ultimately guiding society and, by extension, humankind, is a fundamental philosophical concern, prompted by the serious challenge of employing technology in a manner that avoids detrimental consequences. As far as religion is concerned, the concept of ‘community’ is enhanced by virtual connection, as technology facilitates interaction and participation. It also enables individuals to actively engage with religion in a manner that surpasses the limitations of traditional institutionalized religious practices (George 2006, vii). Yet technology’s engagement with religion raises a thought-provoking predicament due to the quandary as to how one can embody religious principles and maintain a sense of ‘faith’ in the contemporary societal and cultural context, different from the rigid, unwavering, traditional one, where adherence to doctrine and specific ritualistic practices used to be not only commonly accepted, but also regarded as the standard and boundary of faith. Contrary to claims that the internet realm is a human-generated, technological entity devoid of any spiritual significance, and notwithstanding theologians’ disagreements over the details of virtual religious experience’s legitimacy, religious activity seems to be thriving in the digital environment (Helland 2015). Despite taking place in a simulated reality setting, it is commonly perceived as genuine and authentic. As Christopher Helland points out, similar to the experience of a shamanic vision, wherein a ritual-expert transcends the boundaries of the physical world to enter an alternate realm, numerous individuals perceive cyberspace as a neoteric setting that enables the encounter with the sacred in innovative and vibrant manners (2015). With the emergence of virtual religion, and its manifestation through the Internet, we have been witnessing a diversity of ways in which various cultures are utilizing technology as a means of expressing their religious beliefs. According to

Susan George, “the mediation of physical presence through technology is currently far removed from face-to-face interaction” but “the simple sheer availability and presence of information, contacts, and other resources that ICT mediates is stimulating a spiritual quest among all religions, which is surprising, considering the suggestion of some that technology will quell the “spiritual”” (2006, vii-viii). Nevertheless, these statements made by Susan George more than fifteen years ago have increasingly been losing their breadth and strength.

On the one hand, the rise of video chat on mobile devices, fostered by the advent of apps like FaceTime in 2010, Snapchat in 2013, and Zoom in 2018, the integration of video calling features on social networking sites such as Facebook in 2011, Whatsapp in 2016, and Instagram in 2018, the continuous development of cutting-edge technologies, such as augmented reality, in an effort to improve video-conversation experiences, have been bringing virtual communication much closer to face-to-face interaction by providing more immersive and engaging experiences. Many religious organizations now employ social media platforms as a means to disseminate their doctrines and interact with a more extensive demographic, especially since online evangelism can reach even individuals who may not have been exposed to particular religious views in traditional settings. The ability to participate in religious discussions, rituals, and virtual ceremonies online provides a greater flexibility of religious engagement. Moreover, the exploration of robot or AI-assisted religious practices has been undertaken by several prominent international religions and some are beginning to use this technology for the execution of specific religious rituals or ceremonies. For instance, ever since 2010, apps that aid Muslim prayer have been available for download and are being used by over 150 million people (Birruntha 2023); in 2018, Alexa, the voice assistant, was integrated by The Church of England to provide information and insights on religious subjects, and a digital rosary bracelet that tracks prayers, named Click to Pray eRosary, was released by the Vatican in 2019. Launched in February 2022, the Robo Rabbi app utilizes AI to devise attainable objectives based on the weekly Torah chapter recited in synagogues worldwide during Saturday services. Released in July 2023, the web-based app called Magisterium AI is accessible online in English, German, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Chinese, and Korean. Touted as the Catholic counterpart of the AI chatbot ChatGPT, the application has been “trained on over 400 Church documents” and serves not only as a means for users to inquire and obtain information regarding the Church’s stance on several subjects, but also as a tool for clergy members to enhance their homiletic endeavours (Nonate 2023). Even more surprisingly, examples of robotic clergy members are not hard to find: Xian’er is a robot monk in use at Longquan Buddhist temple from Beijing, China since 2015; BlessU-2, located, as of 2017, in the German town of Wittenberg, is a robotic priest that emits light from its

hands and bestows blessings in either a male or a female voice, at the user's request, in five different languages, namely English, French, German, Polish, and Spanish; in 2018, a Catholic humanoid robot named SanTo, resembling a saintly statue, was developed and equipped with interactive capabilities, and, one year later, Mindar was created, a Buddhist robot to be found at a 400-year-old Buddhist temple from Kyoto, Japan. So far, robotic priests have clearly demonstrated the ability to recite religious invocations, to conduct funeral ceremonies, and there are even claims that they can also provide solace to individuals undergoing spiritual turmoil.

On the other hand, as the research conducted by Downey (2014), Bainbridge (2017), and Jackson et al. (2023) discernibly shows, the pervasiveness of computers, the widespread use of the Internet and the growing exposure to robots and artificial intelligence are ever stronger predictors of religious disaffiliation. This trend will definitely not spell the downfall of religion in the foreseeable future, but it is likely to hasten the secularization of many global regions throughout the twenty-first century, due to the dwindling number of believers in the supernatural. The secularization process is, indeed, uneven across world regions, some areas experiencing a precipitous decline and others maintaining or even increasing their religious devotion, so this complex phenomenon cannot be attributed to a singular cause (Jackson et al. 2023), yet there are overarching variables, such as modernization, automation, and religious freedom, which potentially contribute to this trend. Individuals who are residing and operating in modern, technologically advanced, secular countries, where they enjoy both freedom of religion and freedom from religion, discernibly exhibit a continuous decline in religious adherence. Individuals who are residing in non-secular regions, however, may maintain a high level of religiosity or even experience an increase in religious adherence. But any attempts to quantify belief in the supernatural is further complicated by the fact that those living in countries where the act of renouncing religious affiliation is met with severe consequences, such as capital punishment, are bound to exhibit a reluctance to openly acknowledge their departure from religious beliefs and even a tendency to inflate their religiosity. Such limitations to statistical analysis notwithstanding, even in non-secular regions techno-religious intersections seem unavoidable and are already leading to religious decline, albeit at a much slower rate than that encountered in secular countries.

4. Instead of Conclusions: From Pastoral Ministry to Philosophical Counselling

The use of technologies has profoundly influenced religious worship and rituals, ever since the invention of the printing press, the radio, the

television, and, more forcefully, since the advent of the Internet and of Artificial Intelligence. Whilst the phenomenon of online religious activity is clearly multifaceted and subject to diverse interpretations, the religious will, undoubtedly, continue to take full advantage of digital media's potential in order to spread their beliefs for conversion purposes and to establish connections with those who share similar values, regardless of geographical boundaries. Regrettably, the Internet also has the potential to serve as a platform for the dissemination of extreme views, playing a role in the process of radicalizing individuals, leading them to adopt more fundamentalist or extremist religious perspectives. But the Internet can do more than facilitate the reinforcement of believers' religious identity and the formation of transnational religious communities. It also provides access to a diverse range of non-religious views, lifestyles, or beliefs, and such exposure is bound to gradually diminish the impact of religion even in countries that are not characterized by secularism. Moreover, the Internet enables users to examine, question and assess their personal convictions, as the popularity of platforms like Facebook, Quora, Reddit, Discord, or Meetup with atheist communities – from secular and non-secular regions alike – clearly demonstrates. Thus, even within non-secular societies, where social conventions frequently dictate adherence to a specific faith, the Internet may serve as a forum where individuals can discreetly pore over or distance themselves from conventional religious convictions. As a result, despite the proliferation of religious engagement within the digital realm, religious disaffiliation will continue unabated.

Automation is eroding the utilitarian value of religion in numerous regions of the globe, leading to individuals exhibiting a declining propensity to place their trust in supernatural convictions or to participate in religious rituals. Yet, it is from religious sources as well that many people attempt to draw moral principles and existential reasoning. Encompassing a range of activities, such as outreach, counselling, and other forms of care provided to the members of a religious community, pastoral ministry can offer consolation to believers undergoing a spiritual crisis. Thus, an essential question arises: wherefrom might non-believers, who are not exempt from such crises, derive encouragement and support? Indeed, besides various other existential anxieties, “issues regarding human identity, authenticity, and developmental dynamics”, which used to be “associated with religion or spirituality”, invite reflection, nowadays, so as to counter fears regarding the “lack of control over the dynamics of new entity development” in this neoteric age of Artificial Intelligence (Frunză 2023, 81). The answer comes in the form of philosophical counselling, a perfectly suitable choice, given that both philosophy and theology are fields focused on the cultivation of spiritual enlightenment. After all, spirituality is not “the exclusive property of the theologian” (Tomuleț 2017, 209), so existential dilemmas that can be resolved without the assistance of psychotherapists or psychologists can be addressed

through philosophical counselling due to “the diversity of its approaches” (Hagiú et al. 2023, 4).

The philosophical counselling relationship “is oriented towards covering the entire existential horizon” because those who seek it are not necessarily individuals in an acute crisis, but rather people in need of “inner peace and outer harmony” (Frunzã 2022, 101). They are “characterized by a high level of desire to solve the problems they face, to develop personally and to participate in the creation of a better world” (Frunzã 2022, 100). Such aims can successfully be achieved through philosophical counselling, as it not only facilitates dialogues with oneself and others, but also promotes “cultural harmony in relational constructions” (Frunzã 2023, 89). This will enable individuals to fully engage with their social environment and actively pursue their personal growth, “whilst generating a social climate characterised by openness, empathy and equity” (Preda 2021, 124).

Philosophical counselling relies on dialogue aimed at “solving existential problems, ethical dilemmas, metaphysical crises”; it encompasses the pursuit of truth and authenticity, the exploration of strategies for personal growth, and the establishment of a comprehensive philosophy for achieving both personal and professional success (Frunzã 2023, 97). Within the context of the counselling relationship, individuals can seek help for a diverse range of concerns, spanning personal contemplations on topics such as life, mortality, and well-being (Frunzã 2023, 97). The human inclination towards equilibrium and concord is perpetually challenged by conflicting engagements with the external environment, an unpredictable realm that presents a multitude of unsettling challenges, alluring enticements, and unforeseeable consequences (Preda 2021, 110). Whereas believers attempt to find solace in pastoral care, non-believers, with the support offered by philosophical counselling, can refrain from succumbing to feelings of discouragement, engage in productive reflection, and convert the existential anguish arising from the uniquely human recognition of impending mortality not into a religiously-induced fervent state of mind, but rather into a constructive and innovative mindset, capable of improving the conditions of the world in which they reside.

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