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From Nihilism to Meaning

“Bridging Viktor Frankl’s Existential Work with Christianity and Sufi Mysticism for Intercultural Dialogue and Geopolitical Peacebuilding.”

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Abstract

Existential nihilism, marked by a profound crisis of meaning, increasingly characterises contemporary many Western societies. This can manifest as individual despair, social fragmentation, and geopolitical tension. This essay integrates Viktor Frankl’s existential psychology (Logotherapy) with insights from Christianity and Islamic Sufi mysticism, to address nihilism effectively.

I build upon Carl Jung’s symbolic spirituality, Alfred Adler’s community-focused psychology to Frankl’s existential work. I aim to demonstrate how Frankl’s framework uniquely integrates psychological rigour with spiritual meaning. Mystical traditions

from Christian and Sufi practices—particularly contemplative prayer and *dhikr*—can add to Frankl’s existential approach, viewing suffering as transformative rather than meaningless.

The essay centres on a dialogue between Frankl’s existential therapy and the teachings of Sufi thinkers like Rumi and Al-Ghazali. Drawing on my background, I suggest that such existential-spiritual engagement offers vital tools for fostering understanding, social cohesion, and peacebuilding.

Abraham Kuyper’s helpful concept of sphere sovereignty and recent findings on rising Church attendance among young adults in the UK, highlight possible responses to nihilism. I suggest practical pathways for contemporary psychotherapy, interfaith understanding, diplomatic engagement, and community resilience - advocating for talks grounded in shared human experiences of meaning, transcendence, compassion, and unity.

Keywords: Existential Nihilism, Viktor Frankl, Logotherapy, Christian Mysticism, Sufi Spirituality, Intercultural Dialogue, Geopolitical Peacebuilding

Introduction

I once sat with a young man who told me, 'I don't want therapy—I just want to know if my life matters.' That question, raw and simple, has stayed with me ever since.

Existential nihilism is no longer merely a philosophical concept—it has become a defining feature of contemporary life in the West. It shapes personal identities, social cohesion, and for some - geopolitical tensions. The speed of technological developments, declining traditional institutions, and cultural fragmentation have amplified feelings of purposelessness, disconnection, and despair. I have witnessed how existential questions transcend cultural, religious, and geopolitical divides.

I propose an integration, aligning Viktor Frankl's existential work with mystical insights from Christian and Sufi spiritual traditions.

My argument follows a path from Carl Jung's symbolic spirituality and Adler's community-focused approach to Frankl's work, creating a foundation for meaningful intercultural dialogue. Drawing on Abraham Kuyper's concept of sphere sovereignty, I propose a respectful framework for understanding and engaging diverse cultural, spiritual, and geopolitical contexts – and that facilitates meetings and peacebuilding.

I touch upon recent research from the Bible Society (2024), demonstrating increased Church attendance among younger people in the UK, potentially reflecting a response to nihilism.

Is there a connection between personal existential concerns with broader societal and geopolitical challenges?

Ultimately, my aim is to provide practical insights into how integrating existential psychology and spiritual traditions can foster these meaningful encounters. This could enhance community resilience and contribute to geopolitical peacebuilding. After all, we are living in an increasingly uncertain global landscape.

1. Existential Nihilism as a Contemporary Crisis

The nihilism that I mentioned earlier is not simply a theoretical concern or an abstract philosophical position—it is an urgent, lived reality that shapes the lives of individuals, families, communities, and nations (Bauman, 2000; Taylor, 2007). At its core, nihilism describes the widespread contemporary experience of emptiness, disconnection, and a profound absence of meaning in life (Nietzsche, 1968). I have witnessed the destructive impact this can have, contributing directly to psychological suffering and societal

fragmentation. For some this is heightened further due to geopolitical tensions and the rolling news cycle.

I believe a number of contemporary developments amplify the impact and prevalence of nihilism. Rapid technological advancement, despite its many benefits, often isolates rather than connects individuals, creating an environment of superficial digital interaction that can deepen feelings of loneliness and meaninglessness (Bauman, 2000). Alongside technological shifts, changing demographics, institutional erosion—including decreasing trust in political structures, educational establishments, and religious leaders—has further unsettled established sources of communal identity and security. This breakdown leaves individuals particularly vulnerable to existential distress. Many feel unable to anchor themselves into a coherent framework of values or meaning.

According to recent research from the Bible Society (2024), there has been a notable increase in spiritual seeking and church attendance among young people (Gen Z) in the UK. I think their analysis points not simply to a revival of religious traditions, but also to a deeper existential yearning arising from dissatisfaction with modern secular narratives. This observation aligns closely with my own experiences in coaching and intercultural contexts, where I often encounter individuals grappling with profound uncertainty. These are people for whom modernity's promise—material success, technological progress, individual freedom—has failed to deliver genuine meaning or fulfilment.

Importantly, nihilism is not an exclusively Western or isolated phenomenon. Are there signs that existential despair transcends cultural and national borders? Although it may present itself differently according to cultural contexts, the core experience of emptiness, disconnection, and the search for deeper meaning remains universally human. Could acknowledging shared existential anxieties prove essential in establishing common ground and promoting mutual understanding and cooperation?

The shared struggle to find meaning amidst change provides the rationale for my exploration into how psychological insights and spiritual traditions can offer practical responses. Recognising nihilism as a universal rather than purely Western phenomenon invites us to consider broader strategies. But we need to tread carefully, addressing such a matters requires not only psychological clarity but spiritual depth and sensitivity.

To effectively respond to this, we first need to understand its psychological foundations. By considering figures such as Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, and ultimately Viktor Frankl, we begin to understand how psychological theories and practices have sought to address questions of meaning, providing a solid foundation from which to build an integrated response.

2. Psychological Foundations: From Jung and Adler to Frankl

If we are to address nihilism, I think it is helpful to understand how psychologists/psychoanalysts have sought to confront this it. As I have argued, the experiences of existential emptiness and the search for meaning transcend cultural and geographical boundaries. Consequently, psychological approaches that address these existential questions hold widespread significance and can form the foundation for constructive exchanges.

Carl Gustav Jung's (1969) work on symbolic spirituality helped to shape the psychological understandings of human meaning-making. He introduced the concept of the collective unconscious. Jung argued that humanity shares deep, symbolic archetypes that shape our psychological and spiritual experiences. His idea of individuation—the journey toward wholeness and self-realisation—integrated conscious and unconscious dimensions of life. He recognised that spirituality and symbolic narratives are fundamental components of psychological health. Jung's psychology offers us the language capable of bridging psychological insight with spiritual traditions. It

is my belief that this can provide common ground across cultures, including between Western and Middle Eastern contexts.

Alfred Adler (1931) added to our understanding of existential meaning-making by highlighting important social and community dimensions of human life. Adler introduced the idea of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, or ‘community feeling.’ He proposed that psychological health and existential fulfilment arise not just from individual introspection, but through active, purposeful engagement within community life. His emphasis on social connectedness appears particularly relevant in modern contexts, where increased isolation and fragmentation often intensify feelings of existential despair. It seems that community involvement often alleviates existential distress, creating a sense of meaning and belonging crucial for both individual and societal wellbeing.

These contributions from Jung and Adler (and others from different cultures not covered here) set the stage for Viktor Frankl’s existential work. This work is known widely today as Logotherapy (Frankl, 1959). While not directly synthesising their theories, it is my opinion that Frankl’s psychology echoes Jung’s stress on spiritual depth and Adler’s focus on social connectedness. It is a practical and meaning-oriented approach to suffering and human purpose. Central to Frankl is the concept of the existential vacuum accompanied by his belief that the primary human drive is the pursuit of meaning. According to Frankl, meaning is found not merely through self-analysis alone, but through concrete, responsible action in response to life’s inevitable suffering and challenges.

Frankl’s approach speaks to nihilism by transforming the experience of suffering into opportunities for growth, resilience, and purposeful living. This capacity to translate psychological insight into actionable strategies makes Frankl’s work especially valuable in all manner of cross-cultural contexts, where existential anxieties (along with many others!) frequently underpin deeper misunderstandings and conflicts.

The journey from Jung to Adler and Frankl can provide a foundation for tackling current nihilism. I believe their combined insights offer a robust, relevant psychological framework capable of bridging diverse cultures and providing language for meaningful conversations. However, I would argue that in many settings, psychological insights alone, while powerful, remain incomplete without engaging deeper spiritual dimensions of human existence. Recognising this limitation, I propose that enriching Frankl's insights by engaging with mystical spiritual traditions—specifically Christian and Islamic Sufi mysticism—will offer further excellent resources for addressing existential woes and contribute to greater understanding, and possibly comprehension. It's to this deeper, spiritual undercurrent that I want to turn to.

3. Mystical Traditions as Responses to Nihilism

Psychology offers us insights into the structure of human meaning-making. However, it is often the mystical traditions that people often turn to provide the depth, imagination, and language necessary to encounter the sacred within suffering. I believe that psychological understandings alone—however necessary—are not always sufficient to meet the existential hunger I witness in both individuals and communities. Complementing them with the wisdom of spiritual traditions, we can speak to the soul's longing for transcendence. This is where both Christian and Islamic Sufi mysticism offer something deeper, or higher, depending on our image of choice. Each of these traditions has pushed into the very existential void that today's society often pathologises, offering spiritual pathways not to escape suffering, but to be transformed within it.

In the Christian tradition, mystics have consistently interpreted existential darkness not as a meaningless abyss, but as the threshold to union with the divine. Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross tell of a “dark night of the soul,” a spiritual desolation that paradoxically opens the heart to a deeper awareness of God's

presence (Underhill, 1999). In my own Christian formation, this tradition of transforming suffering through contemplative openness has had a lasting impact! It's not an avoidance of pain but a radical receptivity to its redemptive potential. Contemplative prayer, silence, and surrender become acts of deep existential courage—spiritual equivalents of Frankl's invitation to say "yes" to life in spite of everything.

This perspective does not negate the psychological dimension of suffering—in my experience, it expands it. Richard Rohr (2013) refers to this process as “falling upward,” where descent into suffering leads not to despair but to resurrection. It does not offer easy answers but instead situates existential pain within a larger spiritual narrative. This is one that affirms that meaning is possible even when it is not immediately visible. Easier said than done...

Similarly, in the Islamic tradition, Sufi mysticism addresses the core concerns of nihilism with depth and beauty. Like their Christian counterparts, Sufi mystics do not avoid suffering but see it as the fire that purifies the heart. For Rumi, longing itself is *proof* of divine love, and spiritual pain is the soul's way of remembering its source (Rumi, trans. Barks, 2004). Sufi practices such as dhikr (remembrance of God), poetic recitation, spiritual companionship, and disciplined inner work all serve as ways of reorienting the self toward meaning and presence.

What strikes me about Sufism is its profound relationality. It's not enough to find meaning in isolation—we need to be in community and fully present. In order for the human heart to be transformed we need a spiritual guide (murshid), the fellowship of seekers (tariqa), and the rhythmic rituals of remembrance. The emphasis on a shared spiritual life has some similarity with Adler's vision of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*. It also complements Frankl's call for meaning through responsible action in relationship to others.

Both Christian and Sufi traditions affirm that suffering can lead to transformation. This is not prescribed in some moralistic or punitive

sense, but as a refining fire that reveals what is real. They each speak of a sacred intimacy that can be encountered not despite suffering, but within it. This vision directly confronts the modern assumption that pain is something to be avoided or medicated. Instead, it becomes a holy teacher.

I would suggest that both traditions offer powerful and practical responses to the existential vacuum. They include experiential resources—through prayer, poetry, community, remembrance, and silence. They promise to awaken meaning where none seemed possible. In my view, these practices do not oppose psychological methods; they enhance them. They offer a vertical dimension of meaning that positions the horizontal struggles of life within a transcendent frame. This is precisely why I believe a dialogue between Frankl’s Logotherapy, and these traditions is not only possible but urgently needed.

How can the existential language of Frankl and the spiritual grammar of the mystics speak to each other, and together, speak to us?

4. A Constructive Dialogue: Frankl and Sufi Mysticism

For me, this is not merely an intellectual exercise. It's born out of lived experience—my own formation and my growing understanding of the wisdom found in Sufi Islam. What emerges from this convergence is the possibility of a conversation that is neither syncretistic nor superficial. It can be one that respects the integrity of each tradition while seeking a common language of meaning, resilience, and hope.

Central to Viktor Frankl’s existential psychology lies the belief that human beings are not primarily driven by pleasure or power, but by a “*will to meaning*” (Frankl, 1959). This capacity to seek and respond to meaning, even in the face of unavoidable suffering, is what defines our humanity. This core insight was not forged in the abstract but in

the crucible of Auschwitz, where meaning could not be found by avoiding pain, but by confronting it with responsibility and dignity. This aligns with the Sufi view that suffering, far from being meaningless, is a divine invitation to transformation.

In the writings of Rumi and Al-Ghazali, suffering is often understood not as punishment but as a transformative path. Understood as a form of *tazkiyah al-nafs* (purification of the soul), through which the ego (*nafs*) is refined, and the heart is reoriented toward remembrance of the Divine (*dhikr*) (Chittick, 2005; Nasr, 2007). Rumi's uses lots of images throughout his writings. The image of the reed flute, cut from the reed bed and made hollow to sing, captures this idea beautifully. If Frankl emphasised the idea of saying "yes" to life despite everything, then the Sufi path embraces loss, the wound, and separation as the very places through which divine intimacy is disclosed.

This coming together is not just theoretical—it has practical implications. Frankl and the Sufis offer disciplined practices for navigating existential suffering. In Logotherapy, techniques such as dereflection, paradoxical intention, and Socratic questioning help individuals reframe their suffering and discover meaning through action. Of course, relationship or transcendence are not missing from Frankl's work either. In the Sufi path, remembrance (*dhikr*), spiritual companionship, and poetic engagement serve a parallel function—transforming despair into devotion, and loss into longing.

One particularly significant area of overlap is the concept of self-transcendence. Frankl insisted that true meaning always lies beyond the self. This can be found in the form of love, moral duty, or spiritual calling. He wrote that "the more one forgets himself... the more human he is" (Frankl, 1959, p. 110). There are echoes of this in the teachings of Jesus (Matthew 16:25), and with the Sufi goal of *fana* (the annihilation of the ego), so that one may be united with the Real. Ultimately meaning is not found in self-aggrandisement, but in

surrender. It's the surrender that liberates from so much, including nihilism.

What makes this discourse even more compelling is that they all emerge from profound historical trauma in one way or another. Logotherapy was born out of the Holocaust, and there is much of classical Sufi Islam developed in response to political persecution, exile, and cultural loss. They are forged in fire—and both respond with a vision not of despair, but of hope, endurance, and transformation. It gives a vocabulary to suffering that honours its depth, without letting it have the final word!

Of course, important distinctions remain. Logotherapy is often framed in secular or interfaith terms, whereas Sufi mysticism is rooted in explicitly Islamic theology and metaphysics. But I would argue that this difference is not a barrier—it is an invitation. It's precisely through respectful difference that exchange becomes meaningful. I am not suggesting that we collapse these traditions into one, but to allow them to speak alongside each other—finding echoes, contrasts, and shared questions that enrich rather than dilute.

I suggest we can derive a richer vocabulary—one that speaks to both the head and the heart, that integrates responsibility, devotion, resilience and spiritual longing. This shared language of meaning is not only therapeutic in individual lives but potentially transformative in bigger contexts as well. This existential-spiritual understanding has powerful implications for how we communicate, build peace, and navigate the moral challenges of our time.

5. Existential-Spiritual Dialogues in Geopolitical Peacebuilding

I have become increasingly convinced that this coming together holds relevance far beyond therapeutic or personal transformation. In my own work, I have seen how shared spiritual-existential narratives can become instruments of reconciliation. The frameworks that help individuals traverse suffering and uncover meaning can, I believe,

also help cultures understand one another, resolve tensions, and build sustainable peace.

Perhaps today's geopolitical instability is driven not only by power dynamics or economic tensions, but by deeper, often unarticulated crises of identity, purpose, and meaning. These are evidenced in the breakdown of trust between nations, ideological extremism, cultural polarisation, and civilisational anxieties. As Charles Taylor (2007) notes, the modern age has left many societies suspended between disenchanted secularism and contested spiritual longings. In this context, the existential vacuum Frankl described is not just an individual pathology—it is also a global reality. Does the crisis of meaning at the level of culture and national narrative often precedes or underpins visible political unrest and/or reactionary leadership?

I think this is the case. I have found Abraham Kuyper's concept of sphere sovereignty to be a helpful framework. Kuyper proposed that society is composed of distinct yet interrelated "spheres"—religion, politics, education, economy, family—each with its own integrity and God-given authority (Kuyper, trans. Bratt, 1998). When one sphere overreaches into another, tension and breakdown often result. In my experience, recognising these distinct "zones of meaning" can foster respectful boundaries and facilitate honest, non-coercive discussions. When applied to diplomacy or conflict, this principle encourages us to respect the spiritual depth of others without instrumentalising them for political ends. It also acknowledges that political peace cannot be sustained without existential meaning.

In practice, acknowledging shared existential concerns can unlock stalled meetings. During one multi-faith engagement, the turning point came not through negotiation of political detail, but through a shared recognition of suffering. Once participants saw their pain reflected in one another, the dynamic shifted from confrontation to mutual regard. (If only all issues would resolve so quickly). This echoed Frankl's insistence that meaning often arises not in comfort but in courageously facing the wounds we carry. Likewise, the Sufi

emphasis on inner struggle aligns with the notion of responsibility and transformation.

Perhaps this approach between Frankl and Sufism offers a useful contribution to diplomacy: a shared existential language that is neither politically charged nor doctrinally imposed. We can allow space for suffering to be named without blame, for identity to be recognised without supremacy, and for transformation to emerge without force. This is particularly important in the context of potential differences between Western secular societies and Islamic cultures – and more besides! Too often I have seen interactions become defensive or reductionist—one side reducing religion to irrationalism, the other equating the West with moral collapse. Granted, this is a crude caricature, but one borne sadly from experience. What’s missed is the profound spiritual hunger that exists within each, and the possibility of meeting not in ideology, but in shared existential truth.

By incorporating practices from both traditions, diplomatic meetings can be reframed not only as transactional processes but as sacred encounters. I do not mean this in a sentimental sense. Rather, that when people from different cultures or beliefs come together to speak honestly about suffering, something profoundly human is reclaimed. These are the foundations not just of personal transformation, but of peace.

The implications for international policy and practice are significant. Training diplomats, peacebuilders, and mediators in track two (back-channel diplomacy) to understand and engage with existential frameworks equips them not merely to manage conflict but to address its root causes. Frankl challenged patients to take responsibility for their lives even under extreme conditions, so too must nations take responsibility for the narratives they tell, the wounds they carry, the rights and wrongs done, and the meaning they seek.

For many, this level peacebuilding may seem distant from everyday life. But I have come to believe that peace begins in the human

heart—and it is there, in the very place nihilism festers, that we must plant seeds of meaning, and transformation.

6. Practical Implications—Psychological and Community Applications

Geopolitical peacebuilding rightly concerns itself with diplomacy and cultural reconciliation. Such efforts are only sustainable when rooted in the everyday experiences of individuals, families, and communities. The existential-spiritual route I am exploring between Frankl and Sufi mysticism is not just a theoretical or diplomatic tool—it is practical.

At the heart of this application is the idea that meaning is not a luxury reserved for the elites or the religious—it is a universal human need. I have worked with clients from all walks of life, many of whom would never use the word “nihilism,” but who carry within them the same questions: Why am I here? What is this suffering for? Where do I belong? These are not abstract theological queries—they are visceral, urgent, and often unspoken. Frankl’s insistence that meaning can be discovered in creative acts, relationships, and attitudes toward unavoidable suffering (Frankl, 1959) gives people tangible paths forward, even when their circumstances seem immovable.

One of the most transformative ideas I use in practice is what Frankl called the “defiant power of the human spirit”—the capacity to choose one’s response, even when everything else is taken away. I have seen this principle awaken hope in survivors of all sorts of traumas, individuals recovering from addiction, business leaders grappling with complexity, and people navigating identity crises. It’s not about offering false reassurance or shallow optimism, but about helping people locate meaning within their own experience. For some, combined with spiritual frameworks a fuller, deeper integration becomes possible. People begin to reframe their suffering

not as something meaningless to be escaped, but as a place of encounter and transformation.

In my experience the spiritual dimension is often neglected in many settings, perhaps for a variety of valid reasons. However, if the recent research by the Bible Society (2024) - cited above - is the beginning of an emerging trend, if we ignore this longing, are we not risk pathologising what is, in essence, a healthy spiritual yearning?

These religious or mystical approaches can also be adapted into other interventions, especially when working across and between faith cultures within countries. Those trained in Logotherapy, for example, are uniquely equipped to engage people in framing suffering spiritually without imposing belief systems. Maybe educators, can introduce existential reflection into classrooms— to create a space where students can ask, ‘What kind of life is worth living?’ In a world increasingly fragmented by distraction and ideology, these are countercultural—and deeply healing—questions.

Ultimately, what I have found in all of these contexts is that people need to be accompanied in suffering – practically, emotionally and if wanted, spiritually. They need language, practices, and relational structures that help them encounter meaning precisely where they thought it could not be found. Whether through Frankl’s existential techniques, Sufi remembrance, or contemplative Christian prayer, this shared work of meaning-making forms the foundation for both personal resilience and communal regeneration.

So, what is the broader significance of this integrated approach for how existential-spiritual dialogue can shape a more compassionate and cohesive future?

Conclusion

As I conclude this essay, I return to the original concern that set this journey in motion: the widespread experience of nihilism in our time. This is not a theoretical abstraction. It's, in my coaching and diplomatic work, a pressing psychological, spiritual, and social issue—one that crosses cultural, generational, and geopolitical lines. It's a crisis that leaves many disoriented, rootless, and yearning for meaning in an age that too often dismisses or commodifies it.

Throughout this essay, I have drawn on the existential work of Viktor Frankl, whose Logotherapy continues to offer individuals and communities a practical framework for rediscovering meaning, especially in the face of suffering. I have compared elements of Christian and Sufi spirituality—traditions that have, across centuries, taught that suffering can be the very site of transformation, not its negation. My own life and practice have been shaped by this coming together: as a Christian influenced by contemplative prayer, as a trained Logotherapist, working in a variety of contexts, and as someone who has learned to listen deeply to the wisdom carried in Sufi teachings.

I have proposed that these traditions—psychological and spiritual, Western and Islamic—do not merely coexist; they speak to one another in meaningful, urgent ways. At their core, they recognise that human beings are not just thinkers or consumers or citizens—we are meaning-makers, and our wellbeing depends on being able to situate our suffering, our longing, and our actions within a narrative that transcends us. Frankl's insistence that meaning can be discovered in even the most unbearable situations finds deep resonance in the Sufi vision of divine love encountered through longing and surrender. Both offer ways to live with dignity, compassion, and purpose.

But beyond individual healing, I have argued that this existential-spiritual approach has implications for our shared public life. In a time of deep polarisation and mounting global uncertainty, there is a vital need for frameworks that foster empathy, deepen our

understanding, and equip us all. Kuyper's concept of sphere sovereignty reminds us that we do not need to collapse our differences to engage in shared purpose; we need only to respect each domain and enter with mutual respect.

The practical pathways I have outlined—are not merely programs, they welcome us to sit with suffering, to listen across boundaries, to recover rituals of remembrance and reflection, and to help others do the same. They remind us that transformation begins not in grand declarations, but in small acts of meaning-making—offered, shared, and lived.

In the face of nihilism, we are called not to retreat or despair, but to respond—to respond with language, practices, and relationships that reawaken the human spirit to its deepest possibilities. It's here, I believe, where Frankl's psychology, Christian and Sufi mysticism can meet: not in abstract agreement, but in a shared hope that life, even in its most broken places, still whispers of meaning...but are we listening?

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