

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE MEANING OF LIFE IN PROTESTANTISM AND  
CATHOLICISM

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## **Introduction**

It would be reasonable to say that for religious believers, the meaning of life is deeply rooted in both doctrinal and vocational perceptions of reality. In fact, when it comes to Christianity, the life of every believer is tightly connected to God. However, though one particular religion can share universal doctrinal truths between different confessions within the organizational structure of such a religion, varying perceptions of the meaning of life may arise. Such a case is between Catholicism and Protestantism. At first, it seems contradictory that both approaches, originating from a shared source of knowledge, would have different attitudes toward life. However, one should argue that though both churches are a part of the Christian religion, there are several significant differences that constitute a distinct vision of life for a true believer. In such a sense, this paper offers a comparative analysis of the Catholic and Protestant perception of the meaning of life.

## **Methodology**

The methodological basis of this paper includes the exploration of various credible and relevant sources that offer valid information regarding the way Catholics and Protestants seek the meaning of life for a true believer. The author employs comparative analysis as a critical methodological instrument. As a result, this paper is constructed in a manner that the author explores both the Catholic and Protestant view of the meaning of life separately, with a further provision of comparison between the two perspectives.

## **Literature Review**

When it comes to Catholicism, one cannot avoid employing a primary source, namely *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*—perhaps one of the most significant doctrinal sources for the church. Moreover, speaking about monographies, *An introduction to Catholicism* written by Lawrence C. Cunningham proved to offer a direct and relevant answer to the question of the meaning of life as the Catholic church perceives it. Moreover, in the context

of Protestantism, the 4-volume set of *Encyclopedia of Protestantism* provides substantial evidence concerning the elements that lie at the root of understanding of the purpose of life for a true believer. Finally, the book titled *Catholicism, Protestantism, and Capitalism* presents foundational information essential for completing the comparative analysis.

### **Comparative Perspective on the Meaning of Life in Protestantism and Catholicism**

Before appealing to a comparative analysis of the meaning of life in Catholicism and Protestantism, one should explore the viewpoints of both churches separately to have sufficient information required for further comparison.

#### *Catholic Worship, Participation, and Service*

One of the central aspects of the meaning of life in Catholicism is about following the plan offered by God. One of the most relevant doctrines in the Catholic church, namely the *Catechism of Catholic Church*, suggests that "He [God] calls a man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength" (the Vatican, 1985). However, while interpreting such a viewpoint in elements of the life of a true Catholic, one should mention that every believer should follow three distinct principles. First and foremost, there is a proclamation, namely the part of life directed toward proclaiming truths one can find in the Bible. Another crucial aspect of Catholic life is about liturgy, which is worshiping God by participating in the prayer life of the church. Finally, the meaning of the life of a true Catholic is impossible to understand without *Diakonia* or expressing a Christ-like love—something that can be fulfilled through charity, service to others, and justice (Cunningham, 2009). In such a context, one should say that all these mentioned aspects of life are required for reaching final beatitude—eternal life granted to faithful Catholics after death (Fanfani, 2003). Pulling all these facts together, it is evident that the meaning of life in Catholicism revolves around

service to others, worshiping God through participation in the life of the church, and teaching religious truths to people around oneself.

### *Protestant Vocation*

When it comes to the Protestant perception of the meaning of life, one should say that it makes an extensive emphasis on devoting one's life to the kind of work a person is destined to do—something that represents an individual's sole duty towards God (Fanfani, 2003). Such a unique perspective on life is defined by the term “vocation.” According to the *Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, the term includes both belief and practice. More importantly, “vocation” is a general term that involves every type of activity that “fulfills the design of God's creation” (Hillerbrand, 2004). After receiving baptism, every Protestant has a vocation to devote one's life toward—taking an active part in life, namely each aspect of it, to ensure that a person achieves one's goals and does everything according to God's plan. In such a context, the notion of vocation is inseparable from a Protestant's belief in predestination—namely the idea that every person has not only a predestined role in creation, but also the belief that the particular number of people who will be saved is already established (Hillerbrand, 2004). As a result, one should say that the Protestant meaning of life focuses on the present moment along with human endeavors.

### *Comparison*

When comparing the two perspectives, we can speak about the fact that Protestantism, in contrast to Catholicism, offers greater encouragement for the “spirit of individual initiative” (Fanfani, 2003). While for Catholics the meaning of life is about directing all thoughts and actions toward God, in Protestantism, the purpose of life is about fulfilling oneself in life, thus following God's plan. Another significant difference between the approaches is about the role of participation and worship. While Catholics believe in the authority of the church, the liturgy, and worshiping through prayer, Protestants do not believe

in the complete authority of the church or the requirement of worshipping God according to pre-established liturgical approaches. In contrast, for Protestants, the meaning of life is not about repetitive prayer and ordeals, but instead about investing personal input into individual and social development. As a result, one can say the meaning of life for Catholics is more abstract, with an emphasis on the afterlife. While, for Protestants, the purpose of life is about the focus on current life.

### **Conclusion**

Considering all that has been discussed above, comparative analysis showed that Catholics and Protestants have a different perception of the meaning of life. While for Catholics, the meaning of life is about worshipping God, serving others, and participating in rituals established by the church, for Protestants, life is about the vocation to current life affairs—something that constitutes one's duty towards God. As a result, one should say that Catholics and Protestants have a different focus on the meaning of life. While Catholicism makes a greater emphasis on rituals and looks upward toward eternal life, Protestants put little faith in ceremonies and look forward toward fulfilling one's life endeavors. In such a sense, understanding the differences draws a distinct boundary between Catholicism and Protestantism, showing why believers of both churches have different attitudes toward God, rituals, and life itself.

Reference List

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