

Faith in the Zone: A Review of the Effect of Religiosity on Flow State

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon called ‘flow’ entered the lexicon of positive psychology in the 20th century. Conceived as the optimal experience of human life, it has gathered widespread attention among scholars to study its role in enhancing mental well-being. The interplay of individual traits and the immediate environment that elicits the flow is analogous to a time-immemorial construct: religion. Research indicates that religious practices such as rituals and meditation are conducive to the flow state, as well as contributing to similar outcomes such as shared meaning and belongingness. The present paper reviews the existing qualitative and quantitative literature concerning the two concepts, unravelling the web they weave together in creating meaningful engagement in daily life.

Keywords: *Flow State, Meaningful Engagement, Religiosity, Religious Practices*

Religiosity has been defined as the various dimensions associated with religious beliefs and involvement (Bergen & Tahmeseb, 2001). It has generally been regarded to be a multifaceted construct, consisting of cognitive, emotional, motivational, and behavioural aspects (Hackney & Sanders, 2003). The role of religious expression, both individual and societal, has been widely examined across social sciences. Most studies report positive associations between religiosity and mental health (Malinakova et al., 2020). Previous research has indicated that religious individuals report greater happiness, attributed to their sense of belonging and social networks offered by their sense of community (Rizvi & Zakir, 2016).

Flow State

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the Father of Positive Psychology, cites in his book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, ‘a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 22). Flow can lead to a fuller experience of life, and create more meaning, experiencing a sense of euphoria. It also can strengthen how people define who they are (Cziksentmihalyi, 2009). The ideal flow activity is reckoned to be sufficiently challenging to motivate an individual to

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engage in the same. The universal factors of flow, per Csikszentmihalyi's studies (1990; Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002), include challenge-skill balance, action-awareness merging, clear goals, unambiguous feedback, transformation of time, concentration on a task, a sense of control; reduction of self-consciousness, and autotelic experience.

The concept of flow is central to positive psychology. The aspects of flow, including performance, goal orientation, creativity, and emotions, became captivating to positive psychologists. Deci and Ryan (1985) were interested in flow within intrinsic motivation. Experiencing flow can allow people to lead a meaningful life in which values and strengths may be used for something much larger than themselves, where they spend less time worrying about the inauthentic and the mundane. Knowing how to enter and maintain a state of flow is regarded as an excellent recipe for enjoying activities. It has been considered an integral part of enhancing the human experience for its role in offering a meaningful life (Seligman, 2002, p. 249).

Religiosity and Flow State

While the flow state was originally conceived by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to focus on the individual, he also referenced its role in sociocultural evolution. He stated that social rituals reinforced the flow state, which contributed to no less than the survival of society. Noting that the flow state produced a loss of self, he believed that the phenomenon contributed to a sense of belonging to a group and the environment (Rufi et al., 2015). Religion, as a social construct, is certainly within the purview of these statements.

Religious groups

Parallels have been drawn between positive psychology and Buddhist practices, with research indicating that the effects of meditation, brain plasticity, and psychological processes are interrelated. Individuals who engage in Buddhist meditation were observed to experience more 'self-detached' processing, with a lesser likelihood of associating sensory events with their sense of self (Cassaniti, 2014). The detachment from the sense of self owing to the practice's performance could result from achieving a flow state.

In his essay, Johannes Bronkhorst notes that the performance of ritualized action allows Buddhist practitioners to enter into a deeper trance, drawing parallels with mindfulness. He categorizes the flow state with Buddhist meditation, hypnotic trance, and deep mystical experience as items under altered states of consciousness (Bronkhorst, 2023, p. 188). A study on the worship practices of Jews belonging to the Hasidic movement identified that the observance of the occasion of Shabbat was described to be a 'sacred lifeworld' distinct from reality, inducing an altered state of consciousness in the process (Sheppard, 2024).

A Sri Lankan study employed a narrative psychological approach to study spiritual coping among Sinhalese Buddhists. The rituals conducted in the temples included black magic, possessions, the arrival of devotees, performing offerings to gods, etc. It was observed that uncertainty in life can lead to the formation of unfavorable narratives about life events, which undermine psychological well-being and distort self-efficacy. This emphasizes the significance of spirituality and mindfulness in overcoming the negative life narratives that ultimately foster psychological health (Udayanga, 2020)

The subjective experiences of a flow state, such as changes in the perception of time and reduction of self-consciousness, and an autotelic experience, in which an action is performed for its purpose, are similar to the Qi experiences of Taoism. A Chinese study identified a

high correlation between the two concepts (Hung et al., 2021). A Thai study speculated that altered states of consciousness that accompanied the performance of Taoist rituals provide insight into how top-down expectations and cultural beliefs influence sensory input (Fischer & Tasananukorn, 2018).

An ethnographic study on contemporary Christian evangelical congregants observed that participants trained in mental absorption through prayer reported more internal sensory experiences, characterized by sharper mental imagery, greater focus, and more powerful self-reported experiences with God (Luhrmann et al., 2010). An fMRI study indicated that improvised prayer activated the temporoparietal junction, the temporopolar region, the left medial prefrontal cortex, and notably the precuneus, responsible for self-reflection (Schjoedt et al., 2009).

Mitha (2018) explores the intersection between the biopsychosocial model and the religious sphere by studying the tradition of Sufism. He identifies the practice of reciting the name of God and reflecting on the various ideations of the self as analogous to the Western theories of mindfulness and introspection. Sufi healing allows practitioners to shift their locus of control from external fatalism to an internal sense of responsibility for their spiritual well-being.

In an interview, a Hindu practitioner of mantra yoga reported dream-like experiences associated with different regions of his body, considering them ‘gifts of the goddess’. He expressed both feelings of profound lightness and heaviness during his meditation, characterizing them to be therapeutic byproducts of his practice (Ruff, 2019).

A British article about Paganism, which involves the worship of spirits of the elements of earth, air, fire, and water, inspected the flow experiences inherent in such practices, collating them with eudaimonic well-being. Ryff’s theory of psychological well-being that posits six dimensions of eudaimonia: personal growth, self-acceptance, positive relation with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, and purpose in life, were examined concerning Paganism. The authors concluded that all six dimensions were identified in Pagan practices, thus fostering eudaimonia (Sonnex et al., 2022).

The ritual use of ayahuasca in the religious groups Uniao do Vegetal and Santo Daime of Urban Brazil was studied by Barbosa, Giglio, and Dalgalarondo in 2005. ‘Search for self-knowledge’ was the most prominent motivation among these groups after the use of ayahuasca. The most significant altered states of consciousness experiences included visual phenomena, peacefulness, and numinousness. They also experienced more assertiveness, joy, and serenity in their lives. More specifically, the Santo Daime group reported reduced minor psychiatric symptoms after the hallucinogen experience.

Cognitive effects

Preliminary evidence that religiosity affects cognition, particularly the attention and perception of adherents, was offered by a Dutch study, which identified that Dutch Calvinists and atheists attended less to global aspects of perceived events (Colzato et al., 2008). A Wisconsin Card Sorting Test assessed religious and non-religious individuals on their cognitive flexibility. Religious individuals exhibited higher cognitive persistence, which is associated with engagement in goal-directed behavior (Zmigrod et al., 2018).

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A Swedish study employed fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) to investigate the effects of silent mantra meditation on the activation of the hippocampus. Meditators with fewer than two years of experience were observed to elicit significant activation in the bilateral hippocampus, including the relaxation response. The authors speculate that memory consolidation could be one possible explanation for hippocampal activation, linking meditation training with working memory capacity (Engström et al., 2010).

A review by Barnby, Bailey, Chambers, and Fitzgerald (2015) suggests that an increase in activity of the prefrontal cortex was observed in individuals who engaged in secular mindfulness practices, which holds implications for their higher-order cognitive abilities. Religious/Spiritual groups showed a decreased activation in their inferior parietal cortex, with or without meditation. This implies that their spatial attention and multimodal sensory integration would be affected. These neurological observations help broaden our understanding of how the brain interprets the concept of 'self' and 'other' (higher being) since mindful and spiritual practices differ in these two aspects.

Religious chanting can evoke a flow state, for which research has put forth several explanations. The collective ritual of chanting produces endorphins, triggering a biochemical change. Many traditions highlight the chant's sound or meaning, which activates focused attention. Lastly, in forms of chanting that include complex and simultaneous rhythms, the challenge presented by the task could also elicit the optimal conditions required to produce a flow state in the chanter (Perry et al., 2022).

An American study measured altered states of consciousness recorded after an extreme religious ritual among participants. In a performance called the 'Dance of Souls', participants who were both pierced and unpierced for the ritual experienced two altered states of consciousness: the flow state and transient hypofrontality, the latter of which was characterized by reduced executive functioning. The authors speculated that the dance could have relieved negative emotions rather than induced positive emotions in the participants, which they had hypothesized (Lee et al., 2016).

Well-being

In their pilot study, Lazaridou & Pentaris explored the link between spiritual expressions and mindfulness. Their main findings suggest that individuals who notice events by detaching themselves from them are more likely to be spiritual and have past spiritual encounters. Being more self-aware also seems to contribute to spiritual wellness. Interestingly, those who are mindful report metaphysical experiences like "out of body" experiences (Lazaridou & Pentaris, 2016).

A study investigated the link between mindfulness and life satisfaction among Indian employees who practised Vipassana meditation regularly. Meditators and non-meditators were assessed on measures of the two parameters, yielding results of higher mindfulness and life satisfaction levels among consistent meditators (Pradhan et al., 2016). It can be inferred that Vipassana meditation induces a flow state of mind.

Building upon the Upward Spiral Theory of Lifestyle Change, Van Cappellen et al. (2008) state that religious behaviours can expand the range of positive affect, from everyday experiences of gratitude to intense experiences of awe. These positive emotions are described to be self-transcending and can also become sacralized, acquiring divine

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significance for practitioners, which in turn encourages the increased practice of these behaviours.

Juhi (2022) examined how male and female meditators and non-meditators differ on flow, compassion, psychological well-being, and thought suppression. His study concluded that meditators are higher on all four parameters when compared to non-meditators. Concerning gender differences, males showed higher levels of psychological well-being as compared to females, with no significant differences between genders observed on the other three parameters.

Dunbar (2020) highlights the role of immersion into a 'mystical stance', a state of trance experienced by religious practitioners that contributes to adherence to faith and human social bonding. A virtuous cycle, in which mystical stance and religiosity reinforce each other, may be observed here.

Masters and Spielmans (2007) concluded that a supplicant's mental focus on wishing for the improved health of others during prayer could enhance their sense of empathy, improve their interpersonal relationships, and lessen focus on their personal or health concerns. The authors also reported that the subjective experiences of supplicants, such as the feeling that they were interacting with God while praying, were a significant predictor of their well-being.

Meaning

Martinez & Scott (2014) surveyed the extent to which flow and spirituality (meaning-making) contribute to happiness across artistic, athletic, and academic activities on the West Coast regarding the nine dimensions of flow, spirituality, subjective well-being, and activity setting. Results indicated that spirituality and two dimensions of flow i.e., the balance between perceived challenge and skills and an autotelic personality was positively related to subjective well-being. They concluded that the most significant factor in the route to happiness is engagement in a meaningful activity, more so than the factors of type of activity or level of engagement.

A study in Madrid examined how meaning in life, religiosity, and spirituality contributed to post-traumatic growth (PTG) during the COVID-19 crisis. Women showed higher PTG than men. Perceived Spirituality generally concurs with meaning in predicting social and interpersonal growth. In a model that incorporated meaning and PTG, religiosity was found to be a significant variable that contributed to the latter. Having life goals and purpose in life was associated with better PTG than merely having meaning in life (Prieto-Ursúa & Jódar, 2020). This suggests that the shifting focus from crisis to the creation of achievable goals contributes to higher growth.

Schnell and Pali (2013) studied 85 pilgrims who trailed the Camino de Santiago, or the Way of St. James. They found that about two-thirds of pilgrims were motivated to take part in the pilgrimage to seek clarity in life. They either travelled for purely religious reasons or in the quest for clarity. Immediately after the journey, as well as four months afterwards, they experienced significant meaning in life and overcame meaning crises. Independent of the motivation to participate in the pilgrimage, they reported stronger commitment to vertical self-transcendence (religiosity/spirituality), horizontal self-transcendence (social commitment, union with nature, self-knowledge, health, generativity) and self-actualization.

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In a study regarding the dimensions of religiosity and meaning in life, Martos et al., (2010) found that the 'Inclusion of Transcendence' dimension of religiosity which means accepting the possibility of a transcendent reality, was positively correlated to the presence of meaning. The 'Symbolic Interpretation' dimension, indicating an open and complex approach to religious beliefs, was positively correlated to the search for meaning. From this, it is understood that life seems to be more meaningful when an open and complex approach (as opposed to a rigid and literal approach) to religiosity is taken.

A longitudinal study identified that the participants of a Spanish Christian festival called Tamborrada experienced increased feelings of transcendence, self-esteem, ideas about the benevolence of the world, as well as meaning in life (Włodarczyk et al., 2021).

Using a grounded theory approach, the meaning-making and outcomes of spontaneous mystical experiences (SME) among atheists were studied. The SMEs of atheists and religious people were similar in terms of phenomenological content, but atheists had difficulties aligning secular views with SMEs. They adopted a more agnostic/spiritual worldview than organized religions and felt more well-being with their SMEs (van der Tempel & Moodley, 2020).

A study explored relationships between religious orientations, religious orthodoxy, and flow. Three religious orientations were examined: intrinsic religiosity, which involved shaping one's life around religious beliefs and practices; extrinsic religiosity, which included trying to gain rewards from religious participation; and quest, which involved seeking non-conventional religious meaning. The results indicated that those who scored high on intrinsic religiosity tended to have more intense flow experiences; those who scored high on extrinsic religiosity tended to experience flow more often during public religious gatherings (Brown, S.R., 2006).

Rejection

Some researchers take the stance that there is no significant correlation between religiosity and flow state. Shapiro (2018) argues that a sensational experience, which he defines as a mode of experience that directs one's full attention to a moment, is indistinguishable between an atheist and a theist. He also asserts that the attribution of sensory experiences to immediate perception rather than to God is unmediated and offers less distraction from the present world. A 2016 study conducted four empirical studies on participants who were administered the Cognitive Reflection Test. The authors observed that atheists scored higher than theists and pronounced the first group more reflective (Pennycook et al., 2016).

A Canadian study assessed 8-12-year-olds in public and private, faith-based schools on spirituality, religiousness, and happiness. They found that children's spirituality was strongly linked to their sense of happiness in life. However, religious practices like praying, meditating, or attending church did not show any correlations with happiness. Personal domains like values of one's own life were good predictors of happiness among children (Holder et al., 2008).

Researchers studied the flow states of golfers and their spirituality using two measures of each domain. Significant correlations were not found between spirituality and flow indicating that these golfers experienced flow with the former not playing a pronounced role (Spittle & Dillon, 2014).

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When administered a spirituality scale, the responses of atheists indicated that when divested of sacred connotations, they do find purposeful life experiences and self-reflection to be valuable. They perceived elements of spirituality such as awe and emotional reactions to beauty in an experiential rather than religious sense (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2010).

CONCLUSION

The present review examined the existing body of literature about the relationship between the domains of religiosity and the flow state. It was identified that religious beliefs and practices that fell under Abrahamic, Eastern, Pagan, and Indian traditions were conducive to producing a flow state of mind among adherents. Research also indicated that specific rituals such as meditation, religious chanting, and dancing have cognitive implications for aspects of executive functioning such as attention, perception, and memory, along with inducing an altered state of consciousness. This aligns with previous studies that identified that the prefrontal cortex, the region that regulates executive functioning, influences religious belief (Wain & Spinella, 2007). Several studies also concluded that practitioners experienced enhanced well-being that accompanied being in the zone, with experiences of mindfulness, empathy, compassion, self-transcendence, gratitude, and awe. Participation in religious activities resulted in meaningful engagement among adherents, associated with the variables of mystical experiences, social commitment, and self-actualization. A few studies went against the tide, questioning the positive correlation largely identified with the two aforementioned domains. These authors argued that secular and spiritual experiences divorced from religion were just as effective in inducing flow state experiences. There is evidence to suggest that spirituality, distinct from religion, has positive implications for well-being (Ivtzan et al., 2011). Among gender differences, one study identified that men showed higher psychological well-being levels than women. A different study conducted during the pandemic concluded that women showed greater post-traumatic growth than men. Religion as a major social construct has been long identified as having healthy outcomes for mental health (Koenig & Larson, 2001), which in turn attracts greater faith among adherents. Being mindful of the fruits offered by this domain and consciously adopting them in daily practice could allow individuals to discover a newfound appreciation for the present moment.

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