

Research Paper

A Comparative Psychological Study of Resilience, Flourishing, and Life Orientation among Believers and Non-Believers

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study examined whether individuals who identify as religious believers differ from non-believers in levels of resilience, flourishing, and life orientation. Based on previous literature, it was hypothesized that believers would report higher scores across all three variables due to psychological benefits often associated with faith. **Method:** Ninety participants (45 believers, 45 non-believers) completed standardized measures: the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS), the Flourishing Scale (FS), and the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R). Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare group differences. **Results:** Contrary to expectations, non-believers scored significantly higher in resilience ($p = .0087$). No significant differences emerged in flourishing ($p = .0574$) or life orientation ($p = .6685$), although non-believers reported slightly higher means on both measures. **Conclusion:** Findings suggest that psychological strengths such as resilience are not exclusive to religious individuals. Non-believers may cultivate adaptability through secular coping and meaning-making strategies. The study contributes to understanding diverse pathways to well-being in the Indian context and highlights the importance of inclusive approaches in counseling and mental health interventions.

Keywords: *Believers, non-believers, resilience, flourishing, life orientation*

Religious belief systems have traditionally been viewed as vital to psychological development, offering individuals frameworks for meaning-making, moral guidance, emotional support, and coping during adversity. Numerous studies have linked religiosity to increased well-being, life satisfaction, and resilience (Ellison, 1991; Ai, Peterson, & Koenig, 2002). It is often assumed that belief in a higher power, engagement in spiritual practices, and participation in religious communities provide unique psychological advantages.

Key constructs from positive psychology viz. resilience, flourishing, and life orientation (optimism) are particularly relevant to this research. Resilience refers to the capacity to recover from stress and adversity (Walsh, 2016). Masten call this an ‘ordinary magic’. According to her, resilience in face of challenge is quite common and does not arise from superhuman abilities. i.e. such behaviours are not as uncommon as we think (Masten &

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Reed, 2002). Flourishing captures optimal psychological functioning, including positive relationships, life purpose, and self-esteem (Diener et al., 2010). Flourishing is a state of optimal human functioning that is the opposite end of the continuum from mental illness. In another term one can call it as “Optimal functioning”. Life orientation reflects an individual's general expectation of positive outcomes and is commonly conceptualized as dispositional optimism (Scheier & Carver, 1985). These traits are widely believed to be enhanced by religious belief, often through mechanisms such as spiritual coping, moral reinforcement, and strong social networks (Dolcos et al., 2021; Lim & Putnam, 2010).

However, emerging evidence challenges the assumption that religion is the sole or even superior path to psychological strength. Studies on non-believers those who identify as atheist, agnostic, or religiously unaffiliated indicate that they may also display high levels of well-being. Rivera-López and López-Torres (2019) found that atheists reported higher flourishing than believers, attributing their sense of meaning to autonomy, rational inquiry, and deep secular relationships. Neurocognitive research suggests that non-believers tend to employ analytical and deliberative thinking, which may facilitate better emotional regulation and cognitive resilience (Psychology Today, 2022). Furthermore, Berthold and Ruch (2014) concluded that it is religious practice, not belief alone, that predicts well-being, non-practicing believers and non-believers often report similar levels of life satisfaction.

In the Indian context, where religion is deeply embedded in cultural and social life, little empirical research exists comparing believers and non-believers on these positive psychological variables. With a rising secular demographic, it becomes important to understand whether religious belief is essential for developing resilience, optimism, and flourishing. This study addresses this gap by directly comparing believers and non-believers on these variables.

Aims

1. To study the Resilience level of believers and non-believers.
2. To study the Flourishing level of believers and non-believers.
3. To study the Life orientation level of believers and non-believers.

Objectives

1. To compare the Resilience level of believers and non-believers.
2. To compare the Flourishing level of believers and non-believers.
3. To compare the Life orientation level of believers and non-believers.

Significance:

The present study may throw some light on understanding the role of belief systems in coping, especially in the face of adversity. It can also show whether spirituality/faith contributes uniquely to flourishing, or if secular life orientations provide equally strong pathways to well-being. Findings will help counsellors design **culturally sensitive and belief-sensitive interventions**, whether for people with strong religious faith or those with secular worldviews. It will add to the field of **positive psychology** by clarifying how resilience and flourishing can be nurtured through different orientations. Often, believers and non-believers are seen as opposites. This research may reveal **common psychological strengths** and shared human needs for meaning, connection, and hope.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between religiosity and psychological well-being has long been studied, with consistent findings suggesting that faith can offer psychological benefits through mechanisms such as meaning-making, moral guidance, and social support (Ellison, 1991; Koenig, 2009). However, recent empirical and theoretical developments question whether these advantages are exclusive to religious individuals.

In terms of flourishing, several studies indicate that well-being can also be cultivated outside religious frameworks. For example, some research suggests that individuals who do not adhere to any faith tradition may derive meaning through autonomy, close personal relationships, and engagement in secular values (e.g., Rivera-López & López-Torres, 2019). Meanwhile, findings by Berthold and Ruch (2014) emphasize the importance of religious practice over mere belief, showing that life satisfaction tends to be higher among those actively involved in religious rituals. This highlights that engagement, rather than identity alone, is more predictive of flourishing.

With regard to resilience, religious coping strategies such as prayer, acceptance, and faith in a divine plan have been shown to reduce emotional distress and enhance adaptive capacity (Dolcos et al., 2021). Yet, other studies underscore the potential for secular individuals to cultivate resilience through distinct cognitive and emotional pathways. For instance, non-believers often exhibit more analytical thinking styles, which may improve emotional regulation and foster independent coping mechanisms (Psychology Today, 2022; Norenzayan & Gervais, 2013).

The literature on life orientation or optimism presents a more mixed picture. Some scholars argue that belief in a benevolent higher power and the expectation of divine justice contribute to a more hopeful outlook among believers (Ai et al., 2002). In contrast, studies from more secular societies reveal that non-believers can also maintain high levels of optimism, particularly when supported by stable personal values and social networks (Schnell, 2010; Lim & Putnam, 2010).

In the Indian context, studies like Yadav and Punia (2013) have noted that intrinsic religiosity defined as a deep, meaningful connection to one's faith is more strongly linked to well-being than ritualistic or externally motivated religious behavior. However, few studies have empirically examined how secular individuals in a predominantly religious society compare on these psychological variables.

Overall, the literature suggests that while religiosity may serve as one pathway to psychological strength, it is not the only one. Secular worldviews can also promote resilience, flourishing, and optimism through alternative mechanisms, including rational meaning-making, self-determination, and humanistic support systems.

This study extends previous work by directly comparing believers and non-believers in an Indian sample on three key constructs: resilience, flourishing, and life orientation. It aims to empirically test whether the psychological advantages often associated with religious belief are unique to believers or whether non-believers demonstrate comparable strengths.

METHOD

Design: The between group design was used in this study.

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Variables: Resilience, Flourishing and Life orientation.

Operational definitions:

1. **Resilience:** Scores of individuals on Brief resilience scale developed by Smith et al.
2. **Flourishing:** Score of individuals on Flourishing scale developed by Diener et al.
3. **Life Orientation:** Score of individuals on Life orientation scale developed by Scheier and Carver.
4. **Believers:** Individuals indicated affiliation with a religion or spiritual tradition that posits a higher power.
5. **Non-believers:** Individuals who identified as atheist, agnostic, or unaffiliated with any theistic tradition.

Group classification

Belief status was determined by a single self-identification item. These operational definitions follow conventions in psychology-of-religion research (Berthold & Ruch, 2014; Rivera-López & López-Torres, 2019).

Participants

Ninety adults took part in the study, divided evenly between believers ($n = 45$) and non-believers ($n = 45$). Recruitment relied on convenience and snowball sampling: the survey link was circulated through academic, professional, and social-media networks. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Because recruitment focused on belief status rather than demographic quotas, variables such as age, gender, and education were collected only descriptively and not included in the analyses. Although the non-probability sample limits generalizability, the group sizes were sufficient for the planned comparative tests.

Based on established theoretical assumptions and prior empirical findings, the study proposed the following hypotheses:

- **(H1)** Believers will report greater life orientation (optimism) than non-believers;
- **(H2)** Believers will score higher in resilience;
- **(H3)** Believers will demonstrate greater levels of flourishing.

Procedure

After providing informed consent online, participants completed a brief questionnaire hosted on Google Forms. The survey comprised demographic items and three standardized scales (see below) and required approximately 10–15 minutes to finish. Responses were stored securely and analyzed in aggregate form only.

Measures

1. **Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith et al., 2008)** – six items rated on a five-point scale assess the ability to bounce back from stress.
2. **Flourishing Scale (FS; Diener et al., 2010)** – eight items rated on a seven-point scale capture overall psychological prosperity (e.g., purpose, positive relationships).
3. **Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994)** – six scored items (plus four fillers) rated on a five-point scale measure dispositional optimism.

All instruments have demonstrated satisfactory reliability and construct validity in prior research.

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Data analysis

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for each variable within both groups (Table 1). Group differences were evaluated with independent-samples *t*-tests, using an alpha level of .05 to determine statistical significance. All analyses were performed with standard statistical software.

Variable	Group	Mean (M)	SD
Resilience	Believers	3.27	0.72
	Non-believers	3.61	0.60
Flourishing	Believers	5.38	1.03
	Non-believers	5.74	0.98
Life Orientation	Believers	3.54	0.83
	Non-believers	3.61	0.89

RESULTS

To assess whether there were significant differences between believers and non-believers on resilience, flourishing, and life orientation, independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted for each variable. Descriptive statistics and test outcomes are reported below.

Resilience

A statistically significant difference was found in resilience scores, with non-believers reporting higher levels ($M = 3.61, SD = 0.60$) than believers ($M = 3.27, SD = 0.72$), $t(88) = -2.70, p = .0087$. This suggests that non-believers demonstrated greater psychological adaptability and capacity to recover from stress than their religious counterparts.

Flourishing

The difference in flourishing scores between believers ($M = 5.38, SD = 1.03$) and non-believers ($M = 5.74, SD = 0.98$) approached statistical significance, $t(88) = -1.93, p = .0574$. While non-believers scored slightly higher, this difference did not reach the conventional threshold for significance.

Life Orientation (Optimism)

No significant difference was observed in life orientation scores between believers ($M = 3.54, SD = 0.83$) and non-believers ($M = 3.61, SD = 0.89$), $t(88) = -0.43, p = .6685$, indicating that both groups held similar levels of dispositional optimism.

Variable	Group	Mean (M)	SD	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	Significance
Resilience	Believers	3.27	0.72	-2.70	0.0087	Significant
	Non-believers	3.61	0.60			
Flourishing	Believers	5.38	1.03	-1.93	0.0574	Marginal
	Non-believers	5.74	0.98			
Life Orientation	Believers	3.54	0.83	-0.43	0.6685	Not Significant
	Non-believers	3.61	0.89			

DISCUSSION

This study tested three directional hypotheses predicting that believers would outperform non-believers on life orientation, resilience, and flourishing. The data disconfirmed all three

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expectations. Most notably, non-believers demonstrated significantly higher resilience, whereas group differences in flourishing and life orientation were small and statistically non-significant.

Greater resilience among non-believers is consistent with research suggesting that secular individuals often draw on analytic, self-directed coping strategies that foster emotional regulation and adaptive problem-solving (Norenzayan & Gervais, 2013; Psychology Today, 2022). Such strategies may substitute for the faith-based coping and community support typically credited with bolstering believers' resilience (Ai et al., 2002; Dolcos et al., 2021). Our findings therefore challenge the long-standing assumption that religiosity is inherently protective against psychological distress and highlight secular pathways to psychological strength.

Although non-believers showed marginally higher flourishing, the difference did not reach significance. This pattern echoes Rivera-López and López-Torres (2019), who argue that flourishing can be nurtured through autonomy, purposeful activity, and supportive relationships irrespective of religious commitment. Likewise, the absence of a group difference in optimism supports the view that hopeful future expectations can arise from diverse personal values, life experiences, and social networks (Lim & Putnam, 2010).

Taken together, the results add to a growing cross-cultural literature indicating that well-being is not monopolized by religious belief. In India where faith remains a dominant cultural force demonstrating higher resilience among non-believers underscores the need to avoid pathologizing secular worldviews and to recognize multiple routes to psychological health.

From an applied standpoint, mental-health services, educational programs, and counselling interventions should validate both religious and secular coping resources. Practitioners who assume religiosity as the default source of well-being risk overlooking the strengths and preferences of secular clients.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore whether religious belief influences levels of resilience, flourishing, and life orientation. Based on existing literature, it was hypothesized that believers would demonstrate higher scores across all three variables. However, the results did not support these assumptions. Non-believers scored significantly higher in resilience, while the differences in flourishing and life orientation were not statistically significant, though mean scores were slightly higher among non-believers.

These findings suggest that psychological strengths such as resilience and well-being are not exclusive to religious individuals. In fact, non-believers may develop emotional adaptability and life satisfaction through alternative frameworks such as rational thinking, personal meaning, and secular support systems. Within the Indian context, where religiosity is culturally embedded, this study contributes to a more inclusive understanding of mental health by acknowledging that non-believers too can thrive psychologically without reliance on religious belief systems.

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Limitations, Practical Suggestions and Suggestions for Future Research

Limitations

- This study used a convenience sample recruited online; consequently, demographic diversity was limited and findings cannot be generalized to the wider population.
- Belief status was measured by a single self-identification item, without assessing strength of conviction or frequency of religious practice.

Practical Suggestions

- Mental health professionals and counselors should acknowledge that both religious and secular individuals can possess unique psychological strengths. Counseling approaches must be inclusive, allowing for diverse belief systems.
- Educational institutions and community well-being programs should design interventions that are belief-neutral offering coping strategies, mindfulness, or meaning-making practices that resonate across belief orientations.
- Public health messaging and mental health awareness campaigns should avoid assuming that religiosity is a universal protective factor, and instead promote respect for varied psychological coping styles.

Suggestions for Future Research

- Future studies should expand the sample size and include greater demographic diversity to enhance generalizability.
- Belief systems should be studied in more depth assessing not only identification as a believer or non-believer but also the intensity of belief, spiritual practices, and personal meaning systems.
- Well-being over time.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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