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# New study links intrinsic religious motivation to higher-level patterns of thought

by [Eric W. Dolan](#) — May 22, 2021 in [Cognitive Science](#), [Psychology of Religion](#)

New research provides evidence that specific forms of religious motivation are associated with higher-level patterns of thought. The findings, which appear in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, shed light on the cognitive underpinnings of the relationship between religion and meaning in life.

"I became interested in the psychology of religion after having taught it at a small liberal arts college I previously worked at," said study author Jay L. Michaels, an assistant professor at the University of South Florida at Sarasota-Manatee.

"In preparing the course, I learned how hundreds of psychology and medical studies identified that people who are religious tend to have lower rates of heart disease, better outcomes following surgical procedures, and live longer. To me, this was interesting, as at the time it was unclear what exactly contributed to these health benefits."



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"So, I theorized that perhaps religion alters how people think," Michaels said. "I specifically began testing Dr. Crystal Park's (University of Connecticut) theory that religion enhances meaning in life, where sense of meaning is known to help people cope with stress. I theorized that if this is accurate, then religion should alter the underlying mental processes that contribute to perceived meaning. This particular article is based on this logic."

In the study, 630 adults from 48 countries completed a cognitive assessment in which they were asked to pick a phrase that best described a given behavior. They had the choice of picking a high-level description (which focused on why the action was performed) or a low-level description (which focused on mechanistic aspects of the action.) For example, one item asked whether "reading" was better described as "Gaining knowledge" or "Following lines of print."

The participants also provided demographic information and completed surveys regarding their religious motivations and spiritual beliefs.

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The researchers found that religious people with stronger intrinsic religious motivation and stronger extrinsic-personal religious motivation tended to also have stronger spiritual beliefs, which in turn was associated with thinking according to higher-level actions.

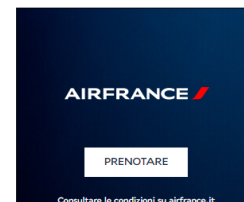
In other words, participants who agreed with statements such as "I have often had a strong sense of God's presence" (intrinsic religiosity) and "Prayer is for peace and happiness" (extrinsic-personal religiosity) were more likely to describe reading as "Gaining knowledge," and this relationship was mediated by the strength of spiritual beliefs, such as the belief that God is an all-pervading presence.

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But extrinsic-social religiosity ("I go to church mainly because I enjoy seeing people I know there") was unrelated to these patterns of thought. Moreover, among non-religious participants, there was no link between religious motivations and higher-order thought patterns.

"The main takeaway from this study is that people who are motivated to pursue religion or spirituality and integrate it fully into their life while finding it contributing to what they experience tend to think in more meaningful ways," Michaels told PsyPost. "That is, religious as well as spiritual people tend to experience thought patterns that are more organized and provide deeper sense of meaning. This meaning can help be a sort of mental anchor during times of distress."

The study, however, used a cross-sectional methodology, which prevents the researchers from drawing any strong conclusions about causality.

"As with any research, my study has flaws," Michaels explained. "It used a survey method, which means we cannot conclude religion and spirituality cause people to think in a more meaningful way. It's merely a relationship. Future work that uses experimental techniques are needed to identify if there is a cause-effect relationship."

Approximately 62% of the participants reported following some form of religion, with Christianity being the most common.

"My study used people from Western Cultures," Michaels said. "This means the data is from people who, if religious, are primarily Judeo-Christian. We need more research about people from other faiths. This is a big hurdle in the psychology of religion subfield."

"My two coauthors were both undergraduate students at the time we worked on this study," Michaels added. "I love having undergraduate students assist with my research. It provides them with a rewarding experience and often generates novel new ideas for my studies. I'm glad to note that my coauthors, Tiffany and John, have gone on to new success. Tiffany is now completing a graduate degree with Florida State University in Speech and Language science. John is now pursuing a career with our local school district."

The study, "Individual Differences in Religious Motivation Influence How People Think", was authored by Jay L. Michaels, John Petrino, and Tiffany Pitre-Zampol.

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