



TEMPLETON WORLD

CHARITY FOUNDATION

THE SCIENCE OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Request for Proposals

Registration window: May 8 - July 2 2023

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SUMMARY

Templeton World Charity Foundation's *Science of Religious and Spiritual Exercises* initiative supports interdisciplinary scientific research to examine the causal impact of religious and spiritual exercises on human capacities and outcomes that are central to flourishing lives. Our aim is to identify and understand the mechanisms that are involved in the relationship between the practice of spiritual exercises and flourishing-related outcomes, and to consider what factors might moderate these relationships. The Foundation is particularly interested in supporting interdisciplinary teams of scientists, scholars, and practitioners to conduct empirical, quantitative research on innovative and potentially scalable practices that have hitherto been neglected in scientific research. To date, Templeton World Charity has awarded \$5 million in research funding to twelve research grants in this initiative.

The Foundation is seeking to award up to a total of \$3 million in funding to support further research on religious and spiritual exercises. Grants may be **Priority will be given to studies of religious and spiritual exercises that are not represented in our grants portfolio and that do not yet have a rigorous empirical evidence base (see [Scope](#), below).** Projects should aim to:

- 1) Empirically investigate and evaluate the causal impact of specific religious and spiritual exercises or practices on flourishing-related outcomes;
- 2) Identify and test potential mechanisms that mediate practices to their outcomes, as well as moderators that might influence those outcomes.
- 3) Provide research data and evidence that can inform innovations in spiritual exercises so that more people can benefit from their practice.

The Foundation is open to different forms of spiritual exercises from a range of religious traditions.

BACKGROUND

Religious and spiritual exercises as practical pathways for strengthening the human spirit

For tens of thousands of years, religiosity and spirituality have been expressed by humans in some form or another. At their best, the world's religions today communicate a vision of human life as meaningful and purposeful; respond to human's most intimate concerns and existential questions; and encourage commitment to prosocial values and behaviours in the context of relationships and communities that motivate the expression of those commitments. At the same time, religious and spiritual traditions attend to the transcendent dimension of human experience: they provide for our sense of the sacred, boundless, and ultimate.

Religious and spiritual traditions also contain repositories of ancient *practical wisdom* about how to live well in spite of the contours of life's experiences. These traditions often prescribe intentional, repeatable practices, habits, or pathways that strengthen people's capacity to foster deeper connections with themselves, with people and the world around them, and with the transcendent. Some spiritual exercises are deeply embedded in religious traditions as part of specific belief systems and teachings, while others transcend religious contexts. Close study of sacred texts, keeping Sabbath, various types and forms of prayers, living in simplicity, sobriety, extended periods of self-examination, confession, spiritual direction, the practice of hospitality, tithing, forms of asceticism such as fasting, iconography, stewardship, pilgrimage, are just some examples of the religious and spiritual exercises that are practiced by people around the world, individually or corporately. Often imbued with a sense of the sacred and ascribed with deep meaning, many of these exercises are believed to strengthen qualities associated with the human spirit, such as self-awareness, humility, radical generosity, love of others, a sense of purpose, wisdom and discernment and, for some, a sense of intimacy with the transcendent.

The term “exercises” is synonymous with “disciplines”, “habits”, or “practices”, all of which connote intentionality, repetition, skill, and with the purpose of strengthening the individual’s capacity to live with greater meaning and purpose, connection to others, and awareness of what is transcendent. In this program, we define spiritual exercises as **sets of defined, purposive, intentional and repeatable behaviours that have a religious or spiritual significance, and that are expected to strengthen the human spirit and lead to outcomes associated with human flourishing.** We are particularly interested in spiritual exercises that are embedded within specific religious traditions (even if a similar form of the exercise can be found across traditions).

Human flourishing and the science of spiritual exercises

We understand flourishing as a multifaceted construct that connotes a sense of appropriately directed growth and resilience in multiple areas including (but not limited to) physical and mental health, close social relationships, happiness and life satisfaction, meaning and purpose, and character and virtue.¹ Importantly, flourishing does not necessarily mean the absence of negative emotions or experiences. Some researchers have argued that flourishing involves having life experiences that are psychologically rich, varied, and perspective-changing.² Flourishing is a *state*, in that an individual’s life might be appraised as flourishing (to some degree) in a given moment by the presence of certain characteristics; it is also an *ideal aim*, in that an individual can be striving towards the ideal of flourishing even if their circumstances are less than perfect or if they are unable to fully optimise their abilities and capacities.

Religious and spiritual exercises are likely to have direct and indirect impact on one or more domains that contribute to flourishing. An example of a spiritual exercise that has been investigated extensively for its functional benefits on flourishing is mindfulness meditation. Since the introduction of a secularised form of mindfulness meditation into mainstream clinical psychology in the 1970s, numerous studies in the clinical, brain, and behavioural sciences have examined the impact of mindfulness-based practices on practitioners. The now sizable body of research on mindfulness-based interventions shows fairly consistent benefits of mindfulness interventions on mental health, physical health, cognitive, affective, and interpersonal outcomes in clinical and some non-clinical settings, and researchers have identified neurological, biological, and psychological mechanisms that underpin the exercise’s impact on practitioners.³ While most of these studies have neglected the philosophical and spiritual contexts of mindfulness, researchers are more attentive to the study of authentic forms of mindfulness practices that reflect the broader philosophical and spiritual contexts from which mindfulness was originally drawn.

¹ VanderWeele, T. J. (2017) On the promotion of human flourishing. *Proceedings in the National Academy of Sciences*, 114, pp. 8148-8156. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1702996114>

² Oishi, S., & Westgate, E. C. (2022). A psychologically rich life: Beyond happiness and meaning. *Psychological Review*, 129(4), 790–811. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rev0000317>

³ Creswell, J.D. (2017) Mindfulness Interventions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 68, 491-516. doi: 10.1146/annurev-psych-042716-051139.

SCOPE

This funding competition aims to **fill gaps in the Foundation's current portfolio of projects that expand the evidence base of religious and spiritual exercises' impact on flourishing-related outcomes**. We are particularly interested in proposals on the following:

- Investigations of the impact of practices from indigenous religious traditions or Eastern religious traditions
- Under-researched forms of contemplative practices, including but not limited to contemplation on mortality (such as *Maranasati* meditation and *memento mori*) or meditation in or about nature
- Different forms of prayer, such as those that involve sacred texts (e.g., *Lectio divina*), visual images and icons, or self-reflection (e.g., prayer of *Examen*)
- Social spiritual exercises, such as group meditation
- Confession
- Movement-based spiritual exercises

Please see [Current Projects](#) below for a list of projects that have been funded in this initiative. The Foundation is unlikely to consider projects that focus on spiritual exercises that overlap significantly with those with this list.

The Foundation is open to investigations of spiritual exercises from a range of religious traditions and cultures, and to both individually- and collectively-practiced exercises. We are particularly interested in religious and spiritual exercises that have potential for adaptation and application in innovative ways in contemporary and diverse settings, that have a relatively low barrier to entry for adoption by practitioners, and are likely to be scalable. Researchers' engagement with expert practitioners who can advise on the operational definitions, throughout the project is a requirement.

Preference will be given to projects with robust methods that seek to establish the presence or absence of a **causal relationship between spiritual exercises and target outcomes** while controlling appropriately for potential confounding variables. Experimental, quasi-experimental, and field experimental research is preferred, though projects can include qualitative elements that will inform the design of its quantitative aspects, for example to devise authentic, accurate, and appropriate operational definitions of the spiritual exercise and hypothesised outcomes. We are interested in both self-report and more indirect measures of variables of interest, and we are particularly interested in studies that **supplement self-report measures of subjective well-being with more objective indicators, such as physiological measures or biomarkers**. Projects should seek to identify and test potential moderators and mediators that may affect the effectiveness of the practice. We are particularly interested in understanding the factors that can inform the design and delivery of innovative adaptations and implementations of religious and spiritual exercises in contemporary contexts.

What is beyond the scope of this funding competition?

- Projects on religious and spiritual exercises that already have fairly robust evidence of their impact on well-being, for example mindfulness meditation
- Projects on highly esoteric spiritual exercises that are not easily scalable or unlikely to be adapted to different contexts
- Projects on the neuroscience of spiritual exercises, or on other mechanisms that cannot be easily manipulated for the purposes of enhancing the exercise's impact
- Projects that examine spiritual exercises for children
- Projects with a sole focus on the *development* of novel forms of spiritual exercises or innovative tools to enhance the practice or delivery of spiritual exercises. This is likely to be a future priority for the Foundation, but is not included in the present funding competition.

AWARD DETAILS

Award amount and term

Applicants may request Small Grants of up to US \$260,000, or Large Grants of up to USD \$500,000, inclusive of overheads which are capped at 15% of direct costs. Travel and lodging costs for individuals not employed by the organization that will legally receive grant funds (the "Legal Organization") cannot exceed 10% of the request amount. This restriction on travel and lodging is not applicable to individuals employee by the Legal Organization. All projects must be completed within 36 months. Projects should have a start date between May 1 and October 31, 2024.

Eligibility

This funding competition is open to researchers worldwide. Applications are encouraged from, but not limited to, scholars in the behavioural sciences such as psychology, cognitive science, anthropology, religious studies, and sociology. The Project Director must hold a doctoral-level degree or equivalent at the time of application. Projects involving a Co-Director with expertise in religious or spiritual exercises are encouraged.

Application process and key dates

This funding competition has a two-stage process. The first stage involves submission of an Expression of Interest form. The second stage is by invitation only, and involves submission of a Full Proposal form that includes several sections including a Project Description, budget and budget narrative, project outputs, and expected outcomes. Full Proposals will undergo formal internal and external reviews, and a final funding decision will be made by the Foundation. Projects must have a start date between May 1 and October 30, 2024.

Deadline for submitting Expression of Interest: July 2, 2023

Notification of outcome for Expression of Interest: July 31, 2023

(By invitation only) Deadline for submitting Full Proposal: September 24, 2023

Notification of funding decision: March 1, 2024

Project start date: Between May 1 and October 31, 2024

Other requirements

- Applicants who are invited to submit Full Proposals may have the opportunity, while preparing their Full Proposals, to attend office hours with the founders of Sacred Design Lab to discuss how to strengthen researcher/practitioner collaborations in their projects. Sacred Design Lab is a research and design consultancy that is committed to understanding and designing for spiritual well-being in the contemporary world. TWCF has partnered with Sacred Design Lab to explore how to encourage rigorous and context-sensitive scientific explorations of religious and spiritual exercises so that findings will be useful to practitioners and innovators. Applicants are strongly encouraged to take advantage of this opportunity.
- Successful grantees are required to commit to **research transparency and best practices in open research**. All research must be pre-registered and grantees must comply with TWCF's Open Access Policy.
- Successful grantees will be asked to produce one **scientific research report aimed at practitioners** as one of the grant's outputs, with the aim of helping practitioners understand the underlying science, highlighting findings that are most significant and relevant for practical application, and explaining the value of research to people who share the practice.
- Successful projects should **involve at least one expert practitioner** or a leader of a practitioner community who will provide meaningful and substantial input into the project's operational definition of the spiritual exercise in question. The expert practitioner should also be willing to serve as a spokesperson for the project to communicate project findings to non-experts.
- Successful grantees will be required to engage with other TWCF-funded projects in this initiative, including participation in online and in-person meetings or events and contributing to initiative-wide publicity and engagement activities. We recommend including travel budget for at least one in-person meeting that will take place in the USA.
- The Foundation strongly encourages applicants to seek and secure additional funding from other sources for this project. Additional funding can be in cash or as in-kind contributions.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

Projects will be evaluated on the following dimensions:

- *Fit with initiative aims*: How well does the project advance our understanding of the causal impact of religious and spiritual exercises on well-being and flourishing that is currently neglected by research and that is not currently explored by TWCF-funded research?

- *Strength of researcher-practitioner engagement*: To what extent does the project team demonstrate integrated collaboration between the researcher and practitioner teams?
- *Conceptual and methodological rigor*. Is the project grounded in current and relevant theoretical frameworks? Does the project reflect a strong research design and employ rigorous and appropriate methodologies?
- *Multidimensional approach to human flourishing*: Does the project conceptualize and operationalize human flourishing in a holistic and multidimensional manner?
- *Logistics*: Is the project feasible given the timeline and budget?
- *Potential scientific impact*. Is the project likely to impact the empirical, scientific research on religious and spiritual exercises and research on how humans flourish?
- *Potential practitioner impact*: Is the project sufficiently grounded in practitioner experience and context that it is likely to have an impact on one or more practitioner communities? Is it likely to stimulate thinking and enthusiasm about innovative ways to design and apply religious and spiritual exercises as practical pathways for human flourishing?
- *Potential for cultural impact*: Is the project likely to make contributions to cultural understanding and appreciation of religious and spiritual exercises? Is it likely to stimulate greater curiosity and openness to religious and spiritual exercises as practical pathways to flourishing?

CURRENT PROJECTS

Priority will be given to projects that examine religious and spiritual exercises that are not represented in the list below.

TWCF0595	From the Heart: Testing the Efficacy of Heart-Centered Contemplation
TWCF0596	Centering and Flourishing: A Smartphone-Based Intervention Experiment
TWCF-2022-30279	Fasting and Flourishing: A Comparative Analysis
TWCF-2022-30280	Extending the Table: Does Shabbat Dinner as a Spiritual Practice Increase Social Connectedness?
TWCF-2022-30281	Expanding the Exercise, Science, and Discourse of Spiritual Flourishing: Toward a Science and Practice of Indigenous Traditions
TWCF-2022-30283	Gratitude Blessings as a Key to Flourishing: The Translational Potential of the Jewish "Nisim B'chol Yom" (Miracles of the Every Day)
TWCF-2022-30289	The Christian Practice of Lament: Mechanisms of Change, Moderators, and Flourishing Outcomes
TWCF-2022-30290	The Paradoxical Effects of Religious Fasting on Prosociality and Flourishing
TWCF-2022-30292	Temporal Dynamics of Felt Security in Jewish Ritual and Experience
TWCF-2022-30294	Toward Evidence-Based Spiritual Therapeutics: Randomized Controlled Trial of Hesychastic Prayer

<u>TWCF-2022-30295</u>	<u>Understanding the Psychological, Behavioral, and Social Outcomes of the Ramadan Fast</u>
<u>TWCF-2022-30296</u>	<u>Creating the Sacred from the Profane: The Psychological Mechanisms, Moderators, and Outcomes of Mass Singing Events Held By Koolulam</u>

HOW TO APPLY

Step 1: Download and complete this [Expression of Interest Template](#).

Step 2: Complete the Expression of Interest registration form at [this URL](#). We recommend copying and pasting your responses from the template into the corresponding fields of the online form. Please note that the registration form does not allow saving before submitting, which is why we have provided the template above as you prepare your submission. Once submitted, you will receive a confirmation email that your Expression of Interest has been received.