

Funding Competition

THE SCIENCE OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Request for Proposals

SUMMARY

In 2021 Templeton World Charity Foundation launched a new five-year strategic framework that emphasizes both interdisciplinary scientific research on fundamental aspects of human nature, and the development of practical tools and innovations for human flourishing. As part of this framework, the Foundation is eager to expand our scientific understanding of how the practice of religious and spiritual exercises are linked to outcomes that are associated with human flourishing, and developing science-informed innovations in the practice of religious and spiritual exercises that impact on our capacity to live well.

The first strand of this initiative will focus on expanding our understanding of the science of religious and spiritual exercises. Research grants of up to \$500,000 will be awarded to support interdisciplinary teams of empirical researchers, scholars, and practitioners to examine the impact of religious and spiritual exercises that have hitherto been neglected by scientific research on human capacities, states, and outcomes that comprise human flourishing, and to better understand the moderators and mechanisms that are involved in the relationship between spiritual exercises and flourishing. To that end, Templeton World Charity Foundation seeks projects that aim to:

- 1) Empirically investigate and evaluate the impact of specific religious and spiritual exercises or practices on wellbeing and flourishing;
- 2) Identify and test potential mechanisms and mediators that link practices to their outcomes, as well as moderators that might influence those outcomes.

In doing so, we hope to broaden and deepen our scientific understanding of these exercises with a view to informing more innovative adaptations and applications of religious and spiritual exercises that can promote human flourishing for different people in diverse contexts.

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**. We are interested in spiritual exercises that are embedded within specific religious traditions, as well as exercises that transcend religious 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 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 dimensions of human flourishing. An example of a spiritual exercise that has been

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>

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.² 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.

We seek to expand our understanding of a more diverse set of religious and spiritual exercises by funding research on exercises that have hitherto been neglected by empirical research. We are interested in projects that seek to establish **causal links between the practice of religious and spiritual exercises and a range of states and outcomes associated with human flourishing**, and projects that will elucidate **moderators and mediators** that can potentially inform innovative applications of spiritual exercises to promote human flourishing in both traditional and non-traditional contexts. Innovative applications may include novel designs of spiritual exercises, or new ways of practice that encourage greater uptake or enhance sustained engagement.

SCOPE

This funding competition aims to **expand the evidence base of a repertoire of religious and spiritual exercises that have been neglected by empirical research**. Candidate spiritual exercises can include, but are not limited to:

- Close study of and reflection on sacred texts (i.e., *lectio divina*)
- Shabbat or keeping Sabbath
- The practice of sobriety
- Self-examination and self-reflection
- Confession
- Spiritual direction
- The practice of hospitality
- Tithing
- Fasting or other forms of asceticism
- Iconography
- Stewardship
- Pilgrimage
- Spiritual journaling
- Religion-specific forms of contemplative practices
- Different forms of prayer practices

² Creswell, J.D. (2017) Mindfulness Interventions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 68, 491-516. doi: 10.1146/annurev-psych-042716-051139.

- Synchronised singing of sacred/spiritual music

The research program is open to investigations of spiritual exercises that are embedded within or that transcend religious traditions, and to both exercises that are practiced individually and those that are practiced collectively. 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.

Research methodologies should aim to establish causality between spiritual exercises and target outcomes, and can include experimental and quasi-experimental research, as well as field experiments. Projects can include qualitative research that will inform the design of its quantitative aspects, for example to devise authentic, accurate, and appropriate operationalizations of the spiritual exercise and hypothesised outcomes. Projects should seek to identify 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 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 practical 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 amount and term

Applicants may request up to USD \$500,000. All projects must be completed within 36 months. Projects should have a start date between 1 September 2022 and 31 December 2022.

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 timeline

This funding competition has a two-stage process. The first stage involves submission of an Expression of Interest form due no later than **5pm EST on Friday November 5, 2021**.

Applicants will be notified by November 19, 2021. The second stage is by invitation only, and involves submission of a Full Proposal form due by February 6, 2022. Outcomes of Full Proposal review and decisioning will be communicated to applicants on or before July 1, 2022.

Other requirements

- Applicants who are invited to submit Full Proposals will have the opportunity, while preparing their Full Proposals, to engage in an individual conversation/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**, including pre-registering research and analytic plans, and 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 can serve as a spokesperson for the project to communicate project findings to non-experts.
- Successful grantees are expected 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. Two in-person meetings are tentatively scheduled for spring of 2023 and spring of 2025.

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?
- *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 literatures? 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 multidimensional manner?
- *Logistics:* Is the project feasible given the timeline and budget?
- *Potential scientific impact.* Is the project likely to impact the academic community?
- *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?

How to apply

To register and submit your Expression of Interest form, please visit our [submission portal](#).

Corrections

A previous version of this page stated the deadline for Full Proposal form as February 9. At the time of Full Proposal invitations, the date of submission was adjusted to February 6 and this date is noted in the application portal.