

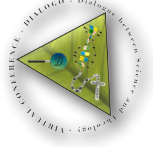


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## Taking 'the leap of faith'.

*How religious views affect people's way of living?*



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### ABSTRACT

There is consistent evidence that everything coming out from the religious/spiritual (R/S) phenomenon bends us most harshly. And that occurs regardless of the form religiousness or spirituality takes in practice or theory, despite the broad range of embracing religious concepts and creeds from atheism to fanaticism, or moreover disregarding the impossibility of labeling as good or wrong these creeds from another perspective than the one that produced it. Many people adhere to religion for the sake of their souls, but it turns out that regular participation in faith-based activities is good for the body and mind, too. Whether we are talking from a social perspective, or a psychological, mental, or bodily one, religious creeds and/or faith-based activities change us in a way or another, nearly for good and incessantly. Is that a good or a wrong thing? – the problem is that we cannot even assess this except from the same perspective that originates it, which makes even more difficult to analyze the religious phenomenon, especially for its better eventual management. Could this be a motif for lesser religious engagement in the civil societies characterized by a decreasing religious attachment?

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## I. INTRODUCTION

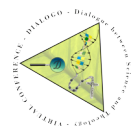
Religion is a universal human pursuit, affecting many different cultural parameters, moral concepts, and ideals, and influencing human thinking and behavior by offering answers on the meaning of human existence.<sup>[1]</sup> Either we want it or not, any religious belief, creed, or superstition turn our lives eventually in another direction than it may actually be, and that happens either positively or negatively. For example, the “new Pew Research Center study of the ways religion influences the daily lives of Americans finds that people who are highly religious are more engaged with their extended families, more likely to volunteer, more involved in their communities and generally happier with the way things are going in their lives.”<sup>[2]</sup> In the opposite situation, we have many other studies proving that, based on religious beliefs, there are also people who engage in terrorism, commit acts of violence associated with religious sayings, at the same time others are fighting for their religious beliefs against anybody through any meaning, even if it implies violence sometimes<sup>[3]</sup>. All in-between situations that happen from religious involvement give us the conclusion in this regard that we must be certain of at least one thing for sure: that religious views/beliefs interfere with our lives, altering them in a way, positively or negatively, but never leaving them untouched. That is also happening regardless of how these religious acts are conducted, willing or not, conscious or not, deliberately or purposelessly. Some may say that this should not be a special topic since everything we get in touch with within our lives alter them more or less. Still, I would like to give some examples in both directions to conclude on what would be the motifs of this alteration on behalf of religious views and also envision how selected people for this research would have acted if religious beliefs would not

have occurred in their lives.

## II. THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUSNESS OVER THINKING AND ACTING AS INDIVIDUAL

It is clear for everyone, even for non-specialists, that the level of engagement in a certain field [with no special regard to religious belief] alter the individual's thinking and acting in direct proportionality. For example, people in the political campaign staff will tend to emphasize the qualities of their promoted candidate, while ignoring or even denying his loopholes and mistakes. The same thing goes with all other circumstances and domains if we are considering the high[est] level of personal engagement. On the opposite, if the state or quality of being dedicated to a cause or activity is poor, then we can expect at all times acts of betrayal, disloyalty, and also to falseness. These two psychological factors, commitment and deception, are indirectly proportional - that is why all respectable institutions adopt weekly psychological monitoring of their employees for the special purpose of these two factors, to care for their employees or at least the need to prevent any breach of trust. Now, concerning religiousness and spirituality (R/S)<sup>[4]</sup> level of engagement, things stay no different.

From my point of view – of course, not mine alone, but embraced by me as well – there is no actual and real thing as ‘absolute freedom’; instead we can have relative power in choosing some of our pathways. Thus, choosing a religious view or another does not make you free from all burden – as it is stated – but gives you the benefit of having the elected/assumed ones. My point is that deep religious engagement does not provide you with serenity and relief, instead, it deepens you with other levels of concern, duties, worries, and fears – all sources of anxiety and distress, just the



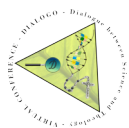
opposite most religions profess; possibly that is why an increasing number of people are actually in favor of practicing spirituality without religious commitment. However, regarding this chapter's threat, there are several directions in which high religious engagement alters individual acting and thinking. On the one hand, there are studies to underline how the high level of convictions and the frequency of attendance at religious services (but not private prayer) is associated with a larger sympathy group and a greater sense of bonding to congregation members and therefore a direct impact on happiness or life satisfaction.<sup>[5]</sup> The feelings of bonding and belonging to a group are a very primordial psychological need; it is redundant to say that from youth individuals strive to become accepted by groups while performing acts of initiation – known as *rites of passage*, sometimes most dangerous or at least awkward<sup>[6]</sup>. These ceremonies of initiation are also labeled as 'leap of faith' in the group dogma, while, in return, that group membership offers protection and aids to self-accomplishment. On the opposite, the sense of nowhere-belonging is stressful and ultimately sociopath.

On the other hand, some other studies point out that "higher religiosity/spirituality (R/S) and magical ideation scores have often been associated with increased obsessive-compulsive traits."<sup>[7]</sup> There is no secret that the relationship between religiosity and mental health has been a perennial source of controversy. It is notorious that "religiosity/spirituality and personal beliefs constitute important parameters of human experience and deserve greater consideration in the psychotherapeutic treatment of psychiatric disorders."<sup>[8]</sup> For some individuals, religious faith may enhance the ability to cope with negative life events, whereas for others, negative life events may result in greater religious faith.<sup>[9]</sup> Clinical studies indicate that "the weighted average correlation

is .03 (95% CI [.01, .05]), indicating that a greater R/S is minimally but significantly associated with better mental health."<sup>[10]</sup> Thus "individuals who have more R/S have less depression, anxiety, suicide attempts, and substance use/abuse, and experience a better quality of life, faster remission of depressive symptoms, and better psychiatric outcomes."<sup>[11]</sup> However, other clinical indicators prove that "increased religiosity was generally associated with an increased risk of PE (psychotic experiences)<sup>[12]</sup>." Although for the individual existence this is rather an improvement on its mental or physical activities and wellbeing (life satisfaction, happiness, positive affect, and higher morale) and with less depression, suicidal thoughts and behavior, drug/alcohol use/abuse, while for individual's social engagement and duties PEs are conjunction that can become problematic (e.g., personality disorders, self-centrism)<sup>[13]</sup>. These personality disorders which are educated within religious organizations are most intense and can be found within the leadership structure of many religious organizations.

\* **Anti-Social Personality Disorder (ASPD)** is the most difficult to identify for being chameleon-like ability. It consists of deceiving people who came in good faith for religious guidance and spiritual growth to whom they make commitments (which they have no intention of carrying out) while actually doing the opposite. The danger in confronting ASPDs is that they are highly revengeful and will stop at nothing until a person is completely destroyed. This personality can be violent when provoked.

\* A person with **Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD)** loves to be the center of attention proving a deeply insecure person who will stop at nothing to protect their image. NPDs believe they have a special relationship with God and therefore should be in complete control over everybody.



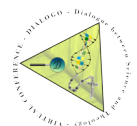
\* **Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder** (OCPD) is a compulsion to imposing rules and regulations at their will over anybody else. In religious circles, OCPDs are very legalistic about the rules and order to the point that they miss the real meaning behind worship. There is no compromise with OCPDs, everything is either black or white and they are the principal determining factor as to who falls into which category.<sup>[14]</sup>

### III. RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IMPROVING LIVING

“...do not lead us into temptation...” this is one of the most used religious prayers concerning the daily chores and duties religious people have. There are many things that we can offer here as proof for endorsing the idea that religious activities have their way of changing things to a better end in social living. Speaking of events on a big scale like slavery, and going unto the individual terms such as resisting junk food, raising self-esteem, or helping soothe the anxiety associated with mistakes in life or loses – it became obvious that religious beliefs improve living boundless in so many ways. At the same time, it is most curious about how the same cradle of improving living is also the source of the opposite outcome.

It is a notorious fact for everyone that a critical feature of religious creed is ‘self-control’ over many things, usually of those that ‘are’ or at least ‘are appointed’ by religious views as damaging. We refer to certain food consumption, or of substances [such as alcohol, drugs, etc.], to acting or inaction, to proceeding or to endure – everything in religion is about assuming control over your life [of course under the strict supervision and ‘divine’ guidance of a religious leader, confessor or guru]. It is also well-known the phrase of ‘the leap of faith’, envisioned either as a very pleasant and joyful way such as that in Paradise

Island, Bahamas<sup>[15]</sup>, or as one of the most dangerous rites of passage on Pentecost Island<sup>[16]</sup>, this concept strives to leave you out of self-control and place you entirely in ‘God’s capable and powerful hands’. This is just the opposite related to what we taught previously, as empowering self-control. From an internal perspective ‘following the word of God’ has the most healing and positive effect in one’s life, mentally, bodily, socially, and other dimensions of an individual entity. As proved in the chapter above, overall the religious faith produces several positive effects, engaging individuals to many things that produce ‘the happiness hormones,’<sup>[17]</sup> that improve one’s way of perceiving himself and the world. From the inside, any religious community seeks equilibrium for its adepts, in mind and body through a variety of means. *Keep your expectations low* will reduce disappointment from people, while God is always trustworthy and gives you what you deserve – this universal creed offers both comforts to those in distress, as well as satisfactions for those afflicted. Building a *grateful personality* keeps you open-minded, sincere, and appreciative to everything, no matter how small it is, that you receive in life; being grateful as a daily habit on bigger and smallest things significantly rise in happiness. Another happiness booster appointed in religious practice is to *cultivate altruism*; those who give money away [easily] rather than spending it on themselves get higher energy of positiveness. Not only that, but people who volunteer for selfless reasons live longer, according to a study published in August 2011 in the journal *Health Psychology*. *Focus away your negative emotions* is also part of the R/S healing process. Either it teaches us to stay free of rage and revengeness, or to express it fully to those that caused these negative emotions, R/S views were always dealing with them in a way or another, but never let them harm you from inside. The whole philosophy of religious views on the

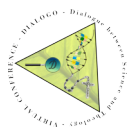


individual level is not to seek happiness itself, for it will give you anger, anxiety, lack of self-trust, and eventually unhappiness. Instead, it is in pursuing activities that make you happy, rather than happiness itself.

From the same religious psychotherapy is the fact that regardless of the relation you have with others, even family, ‘the religious family’ welcomes you the way you are, disregarding all your flaws and imperfections, all your past and uncomfortable deeds. Simply ‘God welcomes you as you are right now’, a sinner – this is the fundamental theme of all Christian [not limited to] Neo-Protestant religious discourse and not only. The profound positive thinking of these religious movements has only one purpose: to set one’s mind free of self-pity and remorse over the past and move on in freedom [from your past] and responsibility [to your new institution of affiliation]. Helping others, renouncing the dark past, letting God’s energy to fill you from within and to drive your life while protecting you wherever you are and whatever you do – these and many other similar concepts are fundamental keys in discovering how R/S views build satisfaction and total engagement of their disciples.

In a quick reference on how R/S improve living, we can successfully add some examples, out from the enterprise R/S have over individuals in general. Thus, besides welcoming everyone aleatory and taking care of their needs, R/S is used as a tool for several categories to purposefully improve life/living to a better outcome. One example might be **the case of elders**. “According to one 1998 study published in the American Journal of Psychiatry, older patients who were hospitalized for physical problems but also suffered from depression recovered better from their mental struggles if religion was an intrinsic part of their lives. More recently, scientists reported in the Journal of Clinical Psychology in 2010 that

belief in a caring God improves response to psychiatric treatment in depressed patients. Interestingly, this increased response wasn’t tied to a patient’s sense of hope or any other factor that might be bestowed by religion, according to study researcher Patricia Murphy of Rush University.”<sup>[18]</sup> The concept of positive aging is gaining attention in the literature as an approach to health and well-being that incorporates several factors into the lives of older adults, one of which is consistent R/S. “Religion, spirituality and/or belief are still centrally important for many people, providing structure, meaning and understanding to everyday life, as well as support through life challenges.”<sup>[19]</sup> Many features R/S provide for the individual’s improving living are used in these social reinsertion processes with success. “We find that religious attendance is associated with higher levels of social integration and social support and that social integration and social support are associated with lower levels of loneliness.”<sup>[20]</sup> As an important indicator of social well-being in later life, loneliness is known to increase the risk of poor health and premature death. In the case of elders’ positive aging the usual fact of the increased risk of social isolation and loneliness drops in damage and effects if the R/S factor is called. It provides various and numerous factors to elders on health, well-being, and positive aging. For elders in R/S engagement, *positive aging* is generated by maintaining relationships, having a good [social/religious] family and social support, and active participation in some activities and within the community produce *positive emotions*. The R/S factor thus acts through spiritual activities (e.g., prayer) that can *reduce feelings of isolation, positive spirituality can reduce some of the feelings of helplessness and loss of control, and the ability to cope with health.*<sup>[21]</sup> Optimism, hope, positive emotions, higher self-esteem, feelings of purpose and meaning, sense of control et. al.<sup>[22]</sup> are some of the



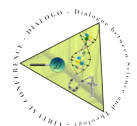
many features R/S factor brings into elders [not limited to] lives and attracts positive outcomes. In fact, there are opinions and research conducted in this regard that older adults tend to be more religious than younger generations, and some claim that religiosity can increase with age<sup>[23]</sup>.

Another example in which people are helped to get through their special [negative] situation with R/S leverage is of those in prison<sup>[24]</sup>. It is not a subject as studied as the previous one, but nevertheless, the researches proved to have the same improvement and positive influence on all the investigated cases. "First, religious participation can help an inmate overcome the depression, guilt, and self-contempt that so often accompanies the prison sentence. This is especially the case for younger inmates who lack experience coping with prison. These inmates can immerse themselves in the teachings of faith as a way to restore a sense of self-control in the face of the often dehumanizing prison environment. Second, other inmates, older and more experienced, may seek a way to avoid the constant threats faced in prison. Involvement in religion can reinforce attitudes and behaviors that circumvent the traditional hustles of prison life."<sup>[25]</sup> The same thing goes with other corrections departments<sup>[26]</sup>, religious and spiritual help being provided since forever to these social categories successfully.

#### IV. ACTING WORSE IN LIFE BY FOLLOWING RELIGIOUS VIEWS

Usually, when appointing the 'bad' influence of religious views in peoples' lives, we address faith-based violence and terrorism. "There are continuing acts of intolerance and violence based on religion or belief against individuals, including against persons belonging to religious communities and religious minorities around

the world, and the number and intensity of such incidents, which are often of a criminal nature and may have international characteristics, are increasing."<sup>[27]</sup> Either we remember the entire history of the religious phenomenon or refer to what happens in our times alone, and there will always provide us with a significant amount of acts of violence and terror from the religious environment towards the secular society and backwards. Setting 22 August as the *International Day of Remembrance of and Tribute to the Victims of Terrorism*,<sup>[28]</sup> the General Assembly of United Nations strongly deplored all acts of violence against persons based on their religion or belief, as well as any such acts directed against their homes, businesses, properties, schools, cultural centers or places of worship, as well as all attacks on and in religious places, sites, and shrines that violate international law. Of course, due to this tragic involvement in the public space, there are many voices and movements – raising in numbers – that struggle to ban religious practice and faith from the public sphere looking to reduce to the minimum its influence over the aspects of our lives. With all the struggle in the secular society in this direction and purpose, the importance and thus the influence of the religious and spiritual realms cannot be shut away entirely. On the contrary, there are studies and reports conducted in this direction that prove contrariwise. *The World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on the Role of Faith* has investigated, in its report *Does Faith Matter?*<sup>[29]</sup>, some of the ways in which faith and spirituality have a positive impact on society. "In some societies, traditional religious institutions are more marginalized and separated from public life, with a growing number of people saying they have no religious affiliation. Yet more than eight in ten people worldwide still identify with a religion".<sup>[30]</sup> However, regardless of the positive, mostly individual, effects religions have in society, the results



of their bad influence and outcomes are more devastating and irreparable. The theologians strive to prove religion's good nature to the people while sociologists and anthropologists bring the certainty of facts that religious views are mostly used for human motifs thus with bad results. In this regard studies have proved that "the greatest importance seems not to lie on R/S beliefs in general, but rather on specific religious coping strategies"<sup>[31]</sup>. Religious coping reflects the functional expressions of R/S in stressful situations. Positive religious coping is suggested to have a positive impact on mental health, while the negative one (ie, wondering whether God has abandoned someone or believing in a punishing, vengeful, or simply indifferent God) has been repeatedly found in close association to negative psychological adjustment, higher psychopathology scores, and worse mental health status and treatment outcomes<sup>[32]</sup>.

Opposite to what is mostly found in the literature, religion does not act as a protective barrier to the primary objective of terrorism, which consists in the use of violence to create fear<sup>[33]</sup>. People worried about the probability of becoming a target in terrorist attacks are also victims of terrorism.

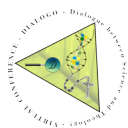
## V. RELIGIOUS VIEWS AND PANDEMIC

The last concern I want to overview in this research is, of course, how religious views have altered pandemic spread and if it made a difference, for better or worse. The point is that it should not be a problem for the actual research either this influence is for worse or better solving and containing the spread of this new coronavirus, Sars-coV-2, since we are only concerned here if R/S has an actual influence conducting to altering the path of things. Instead, the global influence of religious phenomenon has been visible for all, entirely and not addressing a

single faction or religion. Therefore, I said it is global, even if not entirely manifested in the same direction. While some religious factions have proved diligent and willing to support governments in containing the spread of Covid19, many others tended to oppose most impositions or even rise riots against some of them. This is not essentially a statement against one or another religious community since there are also parties in every religious denomination acting against or embracing these (medical) impositions.

Thus while some Churches responded with understanding and consideration for the human worldly needs, other defiles these impositions and the public health with their disrespectful responses. For example, the *Megachurch* in suburban Los Angeles had closed its doors in mid-March because of the coronavirus pandemic; after its reopening in late July was in full capacity and with no regard to public health whatsoever, as some photos and videos posted on social media<sup>[34]</sup> by church officials show indoor services and tightly packed rows of congregants, most if not all of whom are maskless. In holding church, MacArthur is betting on divine protection in a pandemic hotspot. Los Angeles County is reporting 1,500-2,000 new Covid-19 infections a day.<sup>[35]</sup> In Korea, the largest Christian Church, the *Shincheonji Church of Jesus*, had no regard for these regulations and, in return, most of their churchgoers got infected. About 60% of the country's more than 4,000 confirmed cases are sect members. Deaths nationwide now stand at 28. Lee Man-hee, the leader of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, got on his knees and bowed at a news conference for forgiveness.<sup>[36]</sup>

Another example in this religion-State agreement against Covid pandemic has been with *Orthodoxy*, 'a' Church that promotes its most intimate and fundamental creed as being 'one' (not necessarily 'the one'), but despite this, it acts more and more as plural,



especially from the last decade. Amid actual pandemic, this multi-one Church proved its capability to act in multiple directions, by no means as one, unitary and unique. Concerning the pandemic's containing some were benevolent and assumed them fully (as it was the case with the Russian Patriarchy, the Patriarchate of Tbilisi, or Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Christian Church), while others raised public riots and vocal disobedience (e.g., The Serbian Orthodox Church, The Bulgarian one, Greek, Georgian, and others)<sup>[37]</sup>.

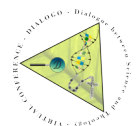
On the other hand, for different reasons (e.g., for political propaganda, populism, or religious support in campaigns) there is an alarming trend of government officials ignoring public health warnings and refusing to call on houses of worship to close while it is crucial to respond thoughtfully and prudently to this pandemic. As a response to these religious exemptions, many religious communities say that there is nothing to be afraid of inside a Church, "for Jesus is my sanitizer"<sup>[38]</sup>. On account of God's unworldly protection over a more than a worldly threat, many religious communities have discontent with these impositions and denied any possibility of people getting the infection by religious means. All this resistance to obeying special rules for special times suggests that it is ignoring the science and advice of health experts. To the other side of the chain, the entire Romano-Catholic Church took all the necessary measures containing the pandemic spread and help the authorities in this regard. Thus it will always be remembered the image of Pope Francis delivers an extraordinary blessing "To the City and to the World" on Friday to pray for an end to the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic to an empty plaza.

It is a fact that there are also changes this pandemic imposes on religious rituals and expression. With all the reactions coming from religious communities involving

either obedience to regulations and thus a consistent drawback from previous rituals, or on the contrary others' disobedience - all these force religious communities to change the relationship with the State in public statements. In the end, it is obvious from all the social media's comments that the relations religion has with the civil world have worsened and the process of secularization entered another stage.

### CONCLUSION

It is thus a fact that regardless of the form religiousness or spirituality takes in practice or theory, in spite of the extensive range of trust and embracing religious concepts and creeds from atheism to fanaticism, moreover disregarding the impossibility of labeling as good or wrong these concepts and creeds from another perspective than the one that produced it - all in all, everything coming out from religious phenomenon influences us most viciously. Faith permeates our world, providing a moral and ethical compass for the vast majority of people as well as with purpose, means, and highly, unearthly values on acting at a 'divine call'. The greater the renunciation of one's own person and opinion while increasing obedience to the 'divine calling', the richer the reward in the after-life - this is the hope offered by any religious creed. It is, in fact, the engine of the most extreme and controversial faith-based acts - of course from diverse perspectives, mostly secular and non-religious. Due to these sine-qua-non conditions, of forgetting common sense and disregarding reasoning, from outside of the religious acts and creeds, they seem perilous and hazardous, thus people tend to label them as illicit and contestable. Day by day, age after age, generation after generation, human acts religiously grounded and obtained through the leap of faith are increasingly challenged and socially rebuked. This is tagged for example the





Mosaic and Muslim baptism that requires invasive interventions on the human body, the absolute fast of the Jainists, the sharing with a single teaspoon of all parishioners even during the pandemic to Orthodox Christians - all this passes as alienable and primitive before those who do not I share that [religious] faith. However, regardless of these social disagreements, there is no escape from this vicious circle of conducting [socially labeled] 'dangerous' acts by those inside the religious phenomenon who carry out their lives trying to please the divine. Unexplainable, irrational, and beyond any self-preservation instinct, the 'leap of faith' makes people act unpredictably and against the social-ethical codes. To this extent, most religious acts and moreover what drives them to fulfill cannot be accepted by the secular society and thus, closing the circle, ensures the religious people that their faith-based acts should continue to pursue for they are unearthly and worthy of divine rewards. In conclusion, the unseen forces and highly contestable motifs from the religious/spiritual realm continue to bend our nature and our lives in the most conspicuous way.

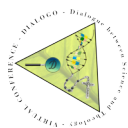
Trying to measure and find the heavier plate while balancing the positive effects with those of bad influence religious beliefs have over individual/people, there are two sides of these results that must be taken into consideration for the conclusions. On the one hand, we have their numbers in which the positiveness has a larger proportion, while the bad one has fewer, on the other hand, though speaking in quantities the negative effects are more visible in proportion than insignificant results of those positive. In other words, the peaceful tranquility that the individual gains in attending religious acts will always matter less to civil society compared to the countless deaths and more other lives destroyed by religious terrorism and wars.

In both cases, the usual interactive destinies are disturbed. Initiation thus provides initiates with the means to learn means that allow them to appear simultaneously as themselves and not as themselves. In doing so, they convey to the uninitiated the very idea of transformation itself. What is defining in this process is the change itself, always lasting and irreversible. But to submit a conclusion that this influences, negative motif for lesser religious engagement in the civil societies characterized by a decreasing religious attachment

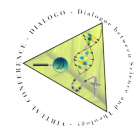
There are, of course, many other issues over which religious views and beliefs have important influence (e.g., cross-cultural and cross-religious influences, the mutual influence between culture and religions, etc) but they are altogether related to the social problems raised by religious background and not, in particular, the aim of the actual study. However, there still others with specific regard to our research (e.g., religious background affecting people's choices over food, clothes, art, et.all. – but of course there are many studies already published in some of this regards), but, due to the extend of this research, they were left behind, perhaps with concern to the second paper on this topic; for the moment it is not a promise, but it could definitely be a proposal.

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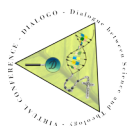
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- Religion: is an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent (God, higher power, or ultimate truth/reality).
- Spirituality: is the personal quest for understanding answers to the ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about relationship with the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of a community. Spirituality is understood as ideas surrounding “a sense of connectedness, purpose, meaning and ‘transcendence of self’”. [Nelson-Becker, H.; Ai, A.L.; Hopp, F.P.; McCormick, T.R.; Schlyeter, J.O.; Camp, J.K. Spirituality and Religion in End-of-life Care Ethics: The Challenge of Interfaith and Cross-Generational Matters. *J. Soc. Work* 2015,45,104–119. P106]
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