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Studying the Relationship between Spirituality and Mental Wellbeing among Catholic Nuns of Kerala: A Quantitative Study

Oliviya Joshy & Reena Merin Cherian

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STUDYING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND MENTAL WELL-BEING AMONG CATHOLIC NUNS OF KERALA: A Quantitative Study

*Oliviya Joshy*¹

Abstract

This study explores the relationship between spirituality and mental well-being among Catholic nuns in Kerala. Spirituality, a deeply personal and transcendent aspect of human experience, is central to the lives of Catholic nuns, shaping their identity and daily actions. The study examines the extent to which spirituality influences the mental well-being of these nuns. It employs correlation analysis to assess the associations between age and spirituality, age and mental well-being, and spirituality and mental well-being. The findings show a moderate positive correlation between Age and spirituality, suggesting that older nuns tend to have higher levels of spirituality. Additionally, there is a weak positive correlation between age and mental well-being, indicating that older nuns are inclined to report higher levels of mental well-being. However, the relationship between spirituality and mental well-being is extremely weak and slightly negative, implying that mental well-being may decrease slightly as spirituality increases. The results indicate a complex interplay between spirituality, Age, and mental well-being among Catholic nuns, highlighting the need for further research to understand these dynamics fully. The unique challenges and sources of support within their religious communities are also discussed, emphasising the importance of addressing mental health issues within this specialised population.

Key words: Spirituality, Mental well-being, Catholic nuns, Religion, Health

Introduction

In our contemporary world, characterised by increasing polarisation and turmoil, the importance of spirituality and mental well-being has never been more evident.

¹ CSR Executive of Marrian Infra, Reena Merin Cherian, Professor, Dept. of Sociology and Social Work, Christ University, Bangalore

Research has shown that spirituality plays a vital role in fostering inner peace and harmony which is essential in a society characterised by divisions, stress, and uncertainties. Spirituality provides a pathway to self-reflection, a deeper understanding of our purpose, and a sense of connection, offering a sanctuary for individuals to find solace, resilience, and a feeling of belonging that transcends the boundaries that often fragment our world.

Recognizing the significance of spirituality in mental well-being is a personal quest for enlightenment and a collective step toward healing the fractured soul of our society. The loss of hope in life, coupled with the search for a spiritual dimension, can have agonizing consequences in the form of mood disorders, neurosis, and even suicide.

This research explores the relationship between spirituality and mental well-being among Catholic nuns in Kerala. The empirical section presents the research's methodology, results, and limitations, shedding light on the connection between spirituality and mental well-being in a specific context.

Defining spirituality and mental well-being

Spirituality is a multiplex and multifaceted aspect of human experience that has been studied and examined from various perspectives. It deals with various beliefs, practices, and experiences that connect individuals to something greater than themselves. Spirituality often intersects with religion but can also exist independently as a deeply personal and transcendent dimension of human life².

One standard definition of spirituality is provided by³ who describes it as "a search for the sacred" and a quest for meaning, purpose, and connection to the divine or the transcendent. For many individuals, spirituality serves as a source of comfort, guidance, and inner strength during challenging times and provides a framework for understanding the mysteries of existence. One of the key elements of spirituality is

²Koenig, H. G, et al., *Religion, spirituality, and Mental health: The research and clinical implication*, ISRN Psychiatry 1, 1-33(2012).

³Pargament, K.I, *RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY: THE QUEST FOR THE SACRED* (2013)

the idea of interconnectedness with the universe or a higher power. This interconnectedness can be found in various religious traditions, as well as in secular forms of spirituality. It often involves meditation, prayer, and mindfulness to facilitate a deeper connection with the self, others, and the universe⁴.

Spirituality can also have a profound impact on mental and physical well-being. Research has shown that individuals with a strong sense of spirituality often experience greater resilience in the face of stress and adversity⁵. Additionally, spiritual practices such as meditation have been linked with minimizing the levels of anxiety and depression⁶. While spirituality is often seen as a deeply personal and subjective experience, it can also be a community and social support source. Many people find a sense of belonging and connection in religious or spiritual communities, which can provide a sense of purpose and shared values⁷.

Spirituality is a multifaceted and deeply personal aspect of human experience encompassing many beliefs, practices, and experiences. It gives individuals a sense of meaning, connection, and inner strength and can positively affect their mental and overall well-being. Spirituality can be a profoundly personal journey, community, and social support source. Mental well-being is a crucial aspect of human health, encompassing emotional, psychological, and social factors contributing to an individual's overall mental health and quality of life. It is a topic of increasing importance in psychology and public health, with significant implications for individuals and society⁸.

Keyes⁹ proposed a comprehensive model of mental well-being known as the "Two Continua Model." This model suggests that mental well-being and mental illness exist on separate continua, and individuals can simultaneously experience varying

⁴Hill, P.C. et al., *Conceptualising religion and spirituality: Points of commonalities, point of departures*, XXXIJTSB 1, 50–77 (2000).

⁵*Supra* note 2.

⁶Koenig&H.Gandetal, HANDBOOK OF RELIGION AND HEALTH 560-565 (2020).

⁷*Supra* note 3.

⁸Keyes, C. L., *Mental illness and mental health? Investigating axioms of the complete state models of Mental Health*. III JCCP 73, 539–549 (2005).

⁹*ibid*.

degrees of both. Mental well-being is not the absence of mental illness but rather a distinct and positive dimension of psychological health.

Several factors contribute to mental well-being, including positive emotions, relationships, meaning and purpose, personal growth, and a strong sense of autonomy and self-acceptance¹⁰. Positive emotions, such as happiness and gratitude, play a significant role in enhancing mental well-being. At the same time, effective relationships with friends, family, and the community provide social support and a sense of belonging.

The experience of meaning and purpose in life is another essential mental well-being component. When individuals have a clear sense of their values and goals, they are more likely to experience higher levels of well-being¹¹. This is often achieved through personal growth and self-actualization, linked to pursuing one's passions, talents, and interests.

Furthermore, autonomy and self-acceptance are crucial for mental well-being. Autonomy allows individuals to make choices that align with their values and preferences, contributing to a sense of control and self-determination. Self-acceptance involves having a positive self-image and self-compassion, essential for a healthy self-concept¹².

Mental well-being is not only a personal matter but also has societal implications. Research has shown that individuals with higher levels of mental well-being are more distinctly likely to engage in pro-social behaviours, experience better physical health, and positively impact their communities¹³. It is thus right to say that mental well-being is a multidimensional construct encompassing positive emotions,

¹⁰ibid.

¹¹Steger, M. F, et al., *The Meaning of Life Questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life*, JCP 53, 80-93 (2006).

¹²R. M. King, & C. W. Kelly (Eds.), *WELL-BEING, SPIRITUALITY, AND RELIGION IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND EARLY MODERN AGES* 153–170 (2017).

¹³*Supra* note 7.

relationships, meaning and purpose, personal growth, autonomy, and self-acceptance. It is a distinct mental health dimension vital to individual and societal well-being.

Catholic nuns and spirituality

Catholic nuns and spirituality share an intricate and profoundly interconnected relationship fundamental to their way of life. Spirituality among Catholic nuns is rooted in their faith and serves as the guiding force that shapes their identity and informs their daily actions¹⁴. In the Catholic tradition, spirituality is often defined as a personal and subjective relationship with a higher power or a transcendent reality. For Catholic nuns, their spirituality is not merely a set of beliefs but a way of being. It is a commitment to a life of service to God and others, often within the context of a religious order. Principles of faith, obedience, and devotion characterise their spiritual journey.

Daily practices that enable them to nurture their connection with the divine are central to the spirituality of Catholic nuns. Prayer and meditation are integral components of their spiritual routine, providing them with moments of reflection and a deep communion with God. These practices offer emotional support and act as sources of resilience, helping nuns navigate the stresses, anxieties, and challenges they encounter¹⁵. Through their spirituality, Catholic nuns derive a profound sense of purpose, which forms the bedrock upon which they build their lives of service and dedication.

In addition to personal practices, religious rituals play a significant role in nurturing the spirituality of Catholic nuns. Rituals such as the Holy Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours facilitate their connection with the divine and strengthen community bonds within their religious orders. Communal worship and shared spiritual

¹⁴*Supra* note 1.

¹⁵Bowling, A. B., Hyman, R. B., & Abell, C. H, *Spirituality and mental health of women survivors of sexual abuse*. V JRH 54,1703-1717 (2015).

experiences create a sense of belonging and mutual support, enhancing their spiritual well-being¹⁶.

Catholic nuns find meaning and fulfilment in their spirituality. Their faith informs every aspect of their lives, from interacting with others to their commitment to prayer, service, and personal reflection. Their spirituality serves as a source of guidance. It gives them a deep emotional and psychological strength to navigate their vocation's unique challenges and demands.

The spirituality of Catholic nuns is an integral and multifaceted aspect of their identity and daily lives. It represents a deeply personal and subjective connection with their faith, a relationship with a higher power, and a source of profound purpose and strength. Their spirituality is expressed through daily practices, communal rituals, and a deep sense of community within their religious orders, ultimately shaping their distinct way of life.

Catholic nun and mental well-being

Mental well-being among Catholic nuns is a topic of growing interest, as their unique way of life brings both opportunities and challenges that can significantly impact their mental health. Catholic nuns lead lives of great devotion and service to their faith and communities. Their strong spiritual foundation, characterised by daily prayer, meditation, and communal rituals, can give them a deep sense of purpose and emotional support¹⁷. These spiritual practices have been shown to promote mental well-being by helping nuns manage stress, anxiety, and depression. Furthermore, the bonds formed within their religious communities offer social support, reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness¹⁸.

However, despite the potential benefits of their spiritual lifestyle, Catholic nuns, like individuals in any other profession, may experience mental health challenges.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

Research findings, such as those from Johnson et al. (2019)¹⁹, suggest that Catholic nuns may experience elevated levels of stress and anxiety compared to the general population. The study also highlights the reluctance of nuns to look around for medical help for their mental health issues due to a perceived stigma within their religious communities. This reluctance can result in delayed or untreated mental health problems, potentially exacerbating the severity of the issues.

The unique demands of religious life can contribute to mental health issues among Catholic nuns. Isolation, often an inherent aspect of their vocation, can usher in feelings of loneliness and impact their mental well-being. The pressure to uphold high moral and ethical standards set by their religious orders can lead to perfectionism and self-imposed stress²⁰ (McClellan, 2018). Nuns may also experience difficulties associated with the demands of celibacy and chastity, which can contribute to emotional and psychological challenges.

The mental well-being of Catholic nuns is influenced by their unique way of life, which combines the benefits of solid spirituality and community bonds with the potential challenges of stress, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. Recognising the importance of mental health within their communities is essential to ensure nuns can access the support and resources they may need. Curtailing the disgrace bordering on mental health issues and encouraging open dialogue can promote the overall well-being of Catholic nuns and help them address any mental health challenges they encounter.

Hypotheses

The literature presented above suggests a link between the personal life path and the level of spirituality. Therefore, we hypothesize a positive correlation exists between

¹⁹Johnson, E. M., Robinson, E. L., et al., *Mental health and well-being among Catholic nuns*, XXVIII JMH 5, 497–503 (2019).

²⁰MacLellan, A., *Mental health challenges for women religious: A preliminary study*, II ROR 77, 236–253 (2018).

spirituality and mental well-being among Catholic nuns (H1). However, we also consider the possibility that there may not be a positive relationship between spirituality and mental well-being among Catholic nuns, which we label our null hypothesis (H0). As there are limited reports specifically focused on this relationship in the context of Catholic nuns, our study aims to investigate whether spirituality has a vital role in understanding the mental well-being of nuns or if there is no such association.

Method

Participants

Kerala, a predominantly Catholic region, was the primary source for our sample collection. Our study encompassed 60 individuals aged 18 to 91 (mean Age = 53.4; SD = 21.73). The participants were drawn from various Catholic congregations across Kerala, reflecting the diversity within this religious community. Obtaining the sample from Catholic nuns was challenging due to their affiliations with different religious orders, each governed by specific rules and hierarchies. As a result, our sample size was relatively modest, given the intricacies of accessing this specialised group. Consent from the respective Abbots or Mother Superiors was a prerequisite for participation, underscoring the rigorous protocols associated with the Catholic religious life. Despite these constraints, our study aims to provide insight into this unique population's spiritual and psychological spheres, integral to understanding the broader context of spirituality and well-being among Catholic nuns.

Measures

In this study, we used two instruments to study Catholic nuns' spirituality and mental well-being levels. They are given below.

1. The Spiritual Involvement and Beliefs Scale (SIBS): (Robert L.; Mary A., Debra S; and Linda) The Spiritual Involvement and Beliefs Scale assesses an individual's spiritual beliefs, attitudes, and practices. The scoring instructions forth on scale are given as follows:

- For positively worded items (where agreement indicates a higher level of spirituality), the scoring is typically:
 - Strongly agree=5
 - Agree=4
 - Neutral=3
 - Disagree=2
 - Strongly disagree=1
- For negatively worded items (where disagreement indicates a higher level of spirituality), the scoring is typically reversed:
 - Strongly agree=1
 - Agree=2
 - Neutral=3
 - Disagree=4
 - Strongly disagree=5
- For other items (items 24 - 26), the scoring might depend on the response frequency, with the highest frequency category typically receiving the highest score and the lowest frequency category receiving the lowest score.

2. The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS): (Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS). © NHS Health Scotland, University of Warwick and the University of Edinburgh, 2006)

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale is a tool designed to measure an individual's mental well-being. It covers subjective well-being and psychological functioning. The scale contains fourteen positively worded items that addresses various aspects of positive mental health. Participants are requested to express their level of agreement with these statements using a scale ranging from 1 to 5.

The scale is derived by adding up the answers for each item.

- The minimum scale score is 14, indicating low mental well-being.
- The maximum scale score is 70, indicating high mental well-being.

These instruments are used to assess different aspects of spirituality and well-being, and the scoring methods are designed to help quantify and evaluate these dimensions in research and clinical settings.

Procedure

The study was conducted with the subject's consent in 2023. Before starting the test procedure, participants were informed of the research conditions (approximately how long it would last and ways of answering) and were assured complete anonymity. The questionnaires were handed out to the participants in a given session in a convenient sampling manner to avoid the effect of the order. The subjects were asked to answer all questions. The sessions lasted an average of 15 minutes.

Result

Age and spirituality

Table1.

Correlation Matrix

Spirituality Age

spirituality	Pearson's r	—
	df	—
	p-value	—
Age	Pearson's r	0.223 —
	df	57 —
	p-value	0.089 —

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

This report explores the correlation between spirituality and age. Spirituality is a multifaceted and intricate concept that can embrace various beliefs, rituals, and personal encounters. Conversely, age is a straightforward demographic variable influencing different aspects of an individual's life. Understanding the potential relationship between spirituality and age interests various fields, including psychology, sociology, and health sciences. We performed a correlation analysis using Pearson's correlation coefficient to assess whether there is a statistically significant relationship between these two variables.

Methods:

The data used in this analysis consists of 60 data points, each representing an individual. We measured spirituality using a specific metric or questionnaire, and age was recorded as a continuous variable. Pearson's correlation coefficient was employed to measure the magnitude and direction of the connection between spirituality and age. Results:

1. Correlation Coefficient(r):

The calculated Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) amounted to 0.223. This positive value indicates a positive correlation between spirituality and age, suggesting that, on average, as Age increases, spirituality tends to grow as well. The strength of this correlation is considered moderate. However, it is crucial to note that the correlation coefficient itself does not provide information about the statistical significance of the relationship.

2. Degrees of Freedom (df):

This analysis had 57 degrees of freedom, signifying the number of data points used to compute the correlation coefficient.

3. P-Value:

The p-value associated with the correlation coefficient was found to be 0.089. The p-value is a crucial component in determining the statistical significance of a correlation. In this context, the p-value represents the probability of observing a correlation coefficient as extreme as the one calculated (0.223) if there were no actual correlation in the population.

Age and mental well-being

Table 2

Correlation Matrix

		Age Mental Well-being	
Age	Pearson's r	—	
	df	—	
	p-value	—	
Mental Well-being	Pearson's r	0.18	—
	df	57	—
	p-value	0.17	—
		3	

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2. The data report presents the results of a correlation analysis examining the relationship between age and mental well-being. The aim was to determine whether there is a statistically significant connection between these two variables. We used Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) to quantify the strength and direction of this relationship. The dataset for this analysis included 57 data points.

Results:

1. Correlation Coefficient:

The Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) between Age and mental well-being was calculated to be 0.180. This positive value suggests a positive correlation, indicating that as age increases, mental well-being tends to increase as well, albeit with a relatively low strength of association.

2. Degrees of Freedom(df):

The degrees of freedom for this analysis were 57, which corresponds to the number of data points used to calculate the correlation coefficient.

3. P-Value:

The p-value associated with the correlation coefficient was found to be 0.173. The p-value quantifies the chance of observing a correlation coefficient of 0.180 or a more extreme value when there is no real correlation in the entire population. A p-value below a chosen significance level (e.g., 0.05) is typically required to establish statistical significance.

Spirituality and mental well-being

Table 3

Correlation Matrix

		Mental Well-being spirituality	
Mental Well-being	Pearson's r	—	—
	df	—	—
	p-value	—	—
spirituality	Pearson's r	-0.063	—
	df	57	—
	p-value	0.637	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

This report presents a correlation analysis investigating the relationship between mental well-being and spirituality. The primary goal was to determine if there was a statistically significant relationship between these two variables. Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was utilized to gauge the magnitude and direction of this association, and the examination involved a dataset containing 57 data points.

Results:

1. Correlation Coefficient:

The Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) between mental well-being and spirituality was calculated to be -0.063 . This value is negative, suggesting a weak negative correlation. In other words, there is a slight tendency for mental well-being to decrease as spirituality increases, although the strength of this association is meagre.

2. Degrees of Freedom(df):

The degrees of freedom for this analysis were 57, which corresponds to the number of data points used to calculate the correlation coefficient.

3. P-Value:

The p-value associated with the correlation coefficient was found to be 0.637. The p-value signifies the likelihood of witnessing a correlation coefficient of -0.063 , or a more extreme value, under the assumption that there is no genuine correlation within the entire population. A p-value below a chosen significance level (e.g., 0.05) is typically required to establish statistical significance.

Based on the obtained report, we accept the null hypothesis (H_0) and reject the alternative hypothesis (H_a).

Discussion

Discussion on Age and spirituality

The results of this analysis reveal several important insights:

1. **Positive Correlation:** The positive correlation coefficient (0.223) suggests that, on average, there is a tendency for spirituality to increase as age increases. In other words, older individuals in the sample tend to report higher levels of spirituality. However, the strength of this relationship is moderate, meaning that while there is a positive association, it is not particularly strong.
2. **P-Value:** The p-value of 0.089 is essential in interpreting the results. A p-value below a chosen significance level (e.g., 0.05) is typically required to establish statistical significance. In this case, the p-value is more significant than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$), indicating that the correlation may not be statistically significant at the conventional significance level.

Interpretation:

While the analysis shows a positive correlation between spirituality and age, the p-value of 0.089 suggests that this correlation may not be statistically significant. In other words, the observed correlation could have occurred by chance. Hence, we cannot definitively state that a statistically significant relationship between spirituality and age exists in this specific dataset. In summary, this dataset's correlation analysis between spirituality and Age yielded a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.223$). However, the p-value of 0.089 indicates that the correlation may not be statistically significant at the conventional significance level of 0.05. Further research with a more extensive and diverse sample or consideration of other potential influencing factors is warranted to obtain more robust conclusions about the relationship between spirituality and age. These results underscore the significance of approaching the interpretation cautiously and highlight the necessity for further research to comprehend the intricate relationship between spirituality and Age.

Discussion on Age and mental well-being

The analysis findings can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. **Positive Correlation:** The positive correlation coefficient (0.180) suggests that mental well-being increases as age increases. In other words, older individuals in the sample tend to report higher mental well-being levels. However, it is essential to note that the strength of this correlation could be higher, indicating that while there is a positive relationship, it could be stronger.
2. **P-Value:** The p-value of 0.173 is essential in interpreting the results. This p-value exceeds 0.05 ($p > 0.05$), suggesting that the correlation may lack statistical significance at the standard significance level.

Interpretation:

The analysis shows a positive correlation between Age and mental well-being, with older individuals reporting higher levels of mental well-being. However, the relatively low correlation coefficient and the p-value above 0.05 suggest that this correlation may not be statistically significant. The observed correlation could have occurred by chance.

Discussion on spirituality and mental well-being

The provided correlation matrix shows how Spirituality and Mental well-being are related. Pearson's r , a statistical metric, is used to identify the strength and direction of the linear relationship between these two variables. The correlation coefficient between Spirituality and Mental well-being is -0.063, indicating a weak negative correlation. Pearson's r typically falls within the range of -1 to 1, where -1 signifies a perfect negative linear correlation, 0 denotes no linear correlation, and 1 suggests a perfect positive linear correlation. The negative value of Pearson's r indicates that as spirituality levels increase, mental well-being decreases slightly, and vice versa. However, the value of -0.063 is very close to zero, signifying that the correlation between Spirituality and Mental well-being is extremely weak.

This implies that the changes in one variable do not correspond with consistent and proportionate changes in the other and that the linear association between these variables in this particular sample is fragile. This negative correlation within

significant correlation sheds light that Catholic nuns do have mental health issues, which tend them to rely on spiritual activities as a means of finding solace from their problems.

Catholic nuns often face unique challenges related to their mental well-being due to their distinct way of life. The vow of poverty, celibacy, and the pursuit of a life of prayer and service can result in stress and isolation²¹. Additionally, the demands of religious life, including a strict schedule and rigorous spiritual practices, may impact their mental health²². Spirituality is at the core of a nun's life, encompassing their deep connection with God, prayer life, and commitment to religious practices. Their spirituality informs their daily routines and provides comfort, strength, and guidance in their challenging vocation²³. The relationship between mental well-being and spirituality among Catholic nuns is intricate. On one hand, spirituality can serve as a protective factor for mental health. Studies have shown that individuals with strong spiritual beliefs and practices tend to experience lower levels of anxiety and depression²⁴. Nuns' unwavering faith and commitment to their spiritual life can provide them with resilience against the psychological stressors inherent in their calling.

Conversely, the strict demands and sacrifices required in the life of a nun may also pose challenges to their mental well-being. Isolation, limited social interactions, and the suppression of personal desires can be sources of stress and potential mental health issues²⁵. Catholic nuns typically have access to a robust support system within

²¹Fitchett, G. et al., *SPIRITUALITY, AND WELL-BEING: THE RESEARCH AND CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS* (2017).

²²O'Malley, M., *MENTAL HEALTH IN THE CONSECRATED LIFE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES* (2019).

²³Krog, A. B., *EVERYDAY MYSTICISM AND SPIRITUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY* 303–315 (2016).

²⁴Hart, P. L., *Prayer and Mental Health: An Inquiry into the Relationship Between Religion, Spirituality, and Mental Health*, III OJMP 04, 32–47 (2015).

²⁵Woods, E. J., *Mental health of cloistered nuns: A qualitative and quantitative study*. XX MHRC 9, 929–939 (2016).

their religious communities. Fellow nuns, spiritual directors, and the broader Church community provide emotional and spiritual support. Moreover, nuns often engage in communal prayer, a source of solace and encouragement during difficult times²⁶.

²⁶Krejci, L. P., SISTERS OF THE SPIRIT: FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN THE HOLINESS AND PENTECOSTAL MOVEMENTS (2020).