

## Research Article

# Spirituality, Religiosity and Well-being Relationship in Early Adulthood: Testing Direct and Indirect Effect via Meaning in Life

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## Abstract

The study explored the impact of religiosity and spirituality indicators on the subjective, social and psychological well-being of individuals aged 18 to 45 years both directly and indirectly through meaning in life. A total of 199 Bulgarians took part in the study ( $M_{age} = 27.58$ ;  $SD = 8.71$ ; 82.4% females). The instruments of the study were: Brief Mental Health Continuum Short, Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiosity and Spirituality, Meaning in Life Questionnaire. Analyses showed that spiritual forgiveness predicted all domains of well-being and religious support predicted subjective well-being, all performing positive small effects. Meaning in life acted as full mediator in the relationship between daily spiritual experiences, religious support, forgiveness and all the domains of well-being. Meaning in life partially mediated the relationships between religious support and subjective well-being as well as between forgiveness and social well-being. The findings address that religiosity-based social support, daily transcendent experiences, and forgiving to oneself and the others promote well-being in early adulthood, and the underlying mechanism can be explained by meaning in life. Practical implications of the findings and directions for future research were discussed.

**Keywords:** meaning; psychological functioning; religiosity; spirituality.

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Early adulthood is a period of the life cycle that spans the ages of 17 to 45 years according to Levinson's theory (Levinson, 1996). During this period, structures of life such as self-concept and self-development, as well as career, social, professional and family relationships are intensely undergoing changes. The reconstructions in those areas make it a period of instability and challenges for the optimal psychosocial functioning of individuals. An indicator of positive functioning in the various spheres of life assumed to be well-being. Well-being is a multidimensional construct that is typically represented by the domains of: subjective well-being (SbWB) – referring to the experience of happiness and life satisfaction; psychological well-being (PsWB) – related to the judgment of fulfillment of personal potential, self-efficacy, autonomy, self-acceptance, goal setting; and social well-being (SocWB) – related to experiencing positive relationships with others and belonging to a social community (Ryan & Deci, 2001). High well-being in adulthood is associated with goal-setting, planning, and engaging in activities that are important for later life stages (Levinson, 1996), making it necessary to understand the factors that sustain it.

A growing body of researches in recent decades have highlighted the impact of religiosity on well-being (e.g. Yaden et al., 2022). Religiosity has been operationalized primarily through beliefs and practices associated with a particular religious worldview and community to which one adheres (Koenig, 2015). The literature assumed that religiosity is a multidimensional construct, but no consensus on the number of its facets occurred (Lemos et al., 2019). Most commonly, religiosity has been measured empirically through religious beliefs, frequency of individual and collective religious practices, religious status as an overall self-rating of religious intensity and religious identity as a self-defined affiliation with a particular religion.

Researches have shown positive relationships of religious beliefs with subjective well-being. For example, according to a 20-year longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of 4167 middle-aged Americans, strong religious beliefs have led to higher life satisfaction albeit the weak effects (Joshnloo & Jovanović, 2021), it have predicted higher positive affect

according to a cross-sectional study across a wide age range also (Gordon, 2019), and have positively predicted life satisfaction in people 18 to 25 years old, above and beyond the influence of demographic and personality characteristics (Haney & Rollock, 2020). However, other research has found that strong religious beliefs that guide decision-making and lifestyle have been associated with lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction in emerging adults undergoing novelty in their identity and social roles (Machado et al., 2018).

Other research has highlighted the relationship of religious status to well-being, finding differences in SbWB depending on its levels. For example, people aged from 18 to 77 years with high self-rated religious intensity have reported the experience of significantly higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction compared to those with less pronounced religiosity, but not to the non-religious (Aydogdu et al., 2021; Villani et al., 2019). Similar relationships have been found regarding affect with the experience of significantly greater negative affect among small and moderately religious compared to the strongly religious and no such differences between the non-religious and the strongly religious (Stroope et al., 2020; Malinakova et al., 2020; Lerman et al., 2018).

Another aspect of religiosity with broad empirical support for enhancing well-being has been religious practices. According to a meta-analysis, all but three studies have showed that individual and collective religious practices as well as religious beliefs have been positively associated with well-being among 10 535 participants from 24 countries (Hoogeveen et al., 2022), and according to a systematic review of studies over the past two decades, they have been associated with happiness regardless of religion, gender, nationality, or race (Rizvi & Hossain, 2017). A meta-analysis of 256 studies with over half a million participants also has found that religious practices have been significantly and positively associated with life satisfaction (Yaden, et al., 2022). Both collective and individual religious practices have predicted higher positive affect and lower negative affect among people under 30 years (Aftab et al., 2018; Montero-Marin et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2023) as well as a higher life satisfaction among people of all ages (Aydogdu et al., 2021), although this effect has been weak (Dunbar, 2021; Krok et al., 2023; Ozmen et al, 2018). However, other studies have distinguished their effects indicating that collective but not individual religious practices have influenced well-being and predicted higher positive affect and lower negative affect among 2276 respondents across a wide age range (Gordon, 2019), as well as it have been positively associated with life satisfaction, albeit with a small effect according to a meta-analysis of 48 longitudinal studies (Garssen et al., 2021) and with higher social well-being also (Dunbar, 2021).

However, age differences in the predictive power of religiosity on well-being, as well as the stronger effect of religiosity on well-being with increasing age, have been empirically confirmed in literature. For example, in a study of a sample of 952 739 adults in 150 countries, aged 15 to 99 years, religiosity have been a significant predictor of life satisfaction only among those over 33 years (Joshani & Jovanović, 2021). Further, age has moderated the association of religiosity with life satisfaction (Yaden et al., 2022), as well as the association with affect in a study of five age cohorts (Gordon, 2019). The attenuation of the effect of religiosity on well-being in younger performed consistently with the tendency for younger age cohorts to be less religious than elders (Bengtson et al., 2015) as well as to identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious" (Exline et al., 2022; Pew Research Center, 2018).

Although spirituality and religiosity have historically been viewed as one construct, research analysing definitions in recent decades has distinguished them as overlapping constructs but with different underlying meanings (Harris et al., 2018). Religiosity has been viewed as a culturally embedded, institutional and codified spirituality that focuses on specific belief systems and rituals, and spirituality as seeking and establishing a connection with the sacred (Harris et al., 2018). It also refers to the subjective experience of interconnectedness with larger transcendent realities such as a Higher Power, the universe, humanity, and the world, which can take place within or outside of a religious context (Koenig, 2015). In support of distinguishing them as separate constructs, research has reported an independent and even stronger effect of spirituality on life satisfaction, compared to religiosity, across a wide age range (Esteban et al., 2021; Yaden, et al., 2022).

Research has indicated that the impact of religiosity and spirituality on well-being have been not always direct, but through their functions to sustain meaning in life (MIL) (e.g. You, & Lim, 2019). MIL refers to an appraisal of the importance of personal life, the presence of meaningful purpose and a sense of coherence that consistently leads to higher well-being across all life stages (Steger et al., 2006). Given tendencies for MIL to be less pronounced in early adulthood compared to middle and late adulthood (Baikeli et al., 2021), religiosity and spirituality have been positively related to MIL in individuals up to 30 years (Phillips et al., 2023; Yoon et al., 2021) and through its promotion, it has enhanced SbWB (Ardelt & Ferrari, 2019; Craig et al., 2022; Li & Liu, 2023; Pavelea & Culic, 2024).

In summary, the literature seems to be dominated by studies that show differential associations of aspects of religiosity with well-being primarily in emerging adults or across a wide age range. On the other hand, the tendencies for the effect of religiosity on well-being to

attenuate for younger people, as well as they to be more spiritual than religious, and the spirituality to influence well-being independently, address the need to identify the impact of both religiosity and spirituality on well-being. Religiosity and spirituality, as sources of religious or spiritual meaning, correspond with the discovery of meaning in personal life. Moreover, through MIL, religiosity and spirituality enhance SbWB of people aged between twenties and thirties. However, the role of MIL as a mechanism for the influence of religiosity and spirituality on other domains of well-being in people in early adulthood remains unclear. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore the impact of the spirituality and religiosity on well-being in people aged 18 to 45 years. The first objective outlined was to estimate the direct impact of different aspects of spirituality and religiosity on subjective psychological and social well-being and the second objective was to explore the role of meaning in life as mediator in these relationships. Identifying those aspects that promote well-being, and clarifying the role of MIL in these relationships, could assist in the development of programs and interventions to maintain optimal psychosocial functioning for individuals at this stage of life. To meet the objectives and in line with the literature review, it was hypothesized that:

H1: Spirituality positively predicts subjective well-being (1a), and religiosity positively predicts subjective, psychological, and social well-being (1b).

H2: Meaning in life mediates the relationships of spirituality and religiosity with subjective, psychological, and social well-being.

## Method

### Participants

The study took place in Bulgaria and was conducted with 199 adults aged between 18-45 years ( $M = 27.58$ ,  $SD = 8.71$ ). The respondents were distributed as follows: by gender: male 35 (17.6 %), female -164 (82.4%); by religious identity: Christians - 128 (64.3 %); Muslims- 60 (30.2 %), other: 4 (2 %), atheist- 7 (3.5 %); religious status: strongly religious- 22 (11 %), moderately religious -113 (56.8 %), slightly religious-51 (25.6%), non-religious -13 (6.5 %).

### Instruments

*The Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness and Spirituality* (BMMRS, Fetzer, 2003). The BMMRS is one of the first scales to distinguish between the constructs of religiosity and spirituality. It consisted of eight subscales, of which "Individual religious practices", "Organizational religiosity", and "Religious support"- measuring religiosity; "Daily spiritual experiences", "Meaning", "Values/Beliefs," and "Forgiveness"- measuring spirituality. The "Religious and spiritual coping" subscale combines religious and spiritual dimensions,

and due to the lack of distinction, was not included in the current study. To make the statements appropriate for all religions, the term "God" was replaced with "Higher Power." The "Daily spiritual experiences" subscale measured the experience of transcendence and consisted of six items with a six-point response scale ranging from 1 (many times a day) to 6 (never). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  reliability for the sample was 0.92. The "Meaning" subscale measured the sense of meaning in life through two statements with a four-point response scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). (e.g., "The events in my life unfold according to a divine or higher plan."). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  reliability for the sample was 0.83. The "Values/Beliefs" subscale measured spiritual values and beliefs and consists of two statements with a four-point response scale, from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). (e.g., "I feel a deep sense of responsibility for reducing pain and suffering in the world."). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  reliability for the subscale was quite low with 0.28, denoting problematic internal consistency. The "Forgiveness" subscale measured the degree of forgiveness toward self, others, and belief in forgiveness by a higher power (e.g., "I know I have been forgiven by a higher power."). It consisted of three statements that were rated on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (always) to 4 (never). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  reliability for the sample was 0.68. The "Individual Religious practice" subscale measured religious behavior outside of organized religious activity (e.g., "How often do you watch or listen to religious programs on television or radio?"). This subscale was composed of five statements, four of which used an eight-point response scale and one of which used a five-point response scale ranging from 1 (more often) to 5 or 8 (never), respectively. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  reliability for the sample was 0.83. The "Religious support" subscale measured the extent to which local congregations provide help, support, and comfort (e.g., "If you had a problem or were facing a difficult situation, how much comfort would people in your religious community be willing to give you?"). The subscale consisted of four statements with a four-point response scale that ranges from 1 (very often) to 4 (never). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  reliability for the sample was 0.68. The "Organizational religiosity" subscale measured participation in public religious activity (e.g., "How often do you attend religious services?"). This subscale consisted of two statements with a six-point response scale ranging from 1 (more than once a week) to 6 (never). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  reliability for the sample was 0.77. The scale contained additional measures of self-rated religious status as strong, moderate, slight, or non-religious as well as self-defined religious identity.

*Mental Health Continuum Short Form* (MHC-SF; Keyes et al., 2008). Scale consisted of 14-items to assess three domains of well-being. The subjective well-being subscale (SbWB) consisted of three items about affect and general satisfaction with life. Social well-being

subscale (ScWB) consisted of five items that represent social contribution, social integration, social actualization, social acceptance, and social coherence. Psychological well-being (PsWB) consisted of six items that represent self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, personal growth, autonomy and purpose in life. Participants were required to respond to items on a six-point Likert-type scale based on the experiences they had had over the last month (never, once or twice, about once a week, 2 or 3 times a week, almost every day, every day). In our study internal consistencies were: SbWB- .82, ScWB- .73, PsWB- .81

*Meaning in life questionnaire* (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006). The scale includes presence and searching meaning in life subscales. In the study it was used the presence of meaning of life subscale only. It consisted of 5 items that assessed how much people perceive their lives as meaningful and coherent being rated on seven-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  reliability for the subscale in the study was 0.63.

### **Procedure**

The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1965 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments. Prior to participating in the study, respondents were informed of the purpose of the study and that participation was voluntary and anonymous. All participants provided written informed consent. The study was conducted online via a Google form sent via email, and the form took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Participants received no reward and could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

### **Data analysis**

Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine observed scale characteristics, assumption of normality, and correlation estimates between the study variables. Normality was investigated using kurtosis and skewness scores and their cut-off values. Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to explore the associations between the variables of the study. Furthermore, Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to investigate well-being differences between groups on religious status and religious identity. After examining the preliminary analyses stepwise multiple regression analyses were carried out. By entering sets of variables in a specific sequence: religiosity indicators (religious support, organizational religiousness, private religious practices) at first and spirituality indicators (forgiveness, meaning, values, daily spiritual experiences) at second, we were able to calculate the added amount of explained variance ( $R^2$ ) in the WB domains scores of each set. Results from the stepwise regression model were interpreted using standardized

coefficient ( $\beta$ ) scores and squared-multiple correlations ( $R^2$ ). Multicollinearity in the models was checked by variance inflating factor (VIF) and Durbin-Watson (DW) test. A mediation model was tested to analyse the mediating role of presence of meaning in life in association of religiosity and spirituality indicators and well-being domains using the PROCESS macro (Model 4) for SPSS version 4.2 (Hayes, 2018). Considering the advantageous of bootstrapping procedure, the bootstrap method with 10 000 resamples to estimate the 95% confidence intervals (CI) was investigated for indirect effect (Hayes, 2018). The data were analyzed using the SPSS IBM software (Version 26).

## Results

Kurtosis and skewness scores obtained were in the range between -2 and + 2, indicating acceptable normality distribution of the data. Correlational analysis revealed a positive moderate correlation of MIL with SocWB and a strong correlation with SbWB and PsWB, a positive weak correlation of religious support with SbWB and PsWB, a weak positive correlation of forgiveness, dally spiritual experiences, values and meaning with well-being domains, a weak positive correlation of MIL with religious support, forgiveness, dally spiritual experiences, values, meaning (see Table 1)

**Table1.**

*Correlational Relationship Between Spirituality, Religiosity, Meaning in life and Well-being Domains*

|         | 1      | 2      | 3      | 4      | 5      | 6      | 7      | 8      | 9      | 10     | 11 |
|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|----|
| SbWB    | -      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |    |
| SocWB   | .51*** | -      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |    |
| PsWB    | .70*** | .57*** | -      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |    |
| MIL     | .63*** | .39*** | .64*** | -      |        |        |        |        |        |        |    |
| RS      | .29*** | .08    | .21**  | .22**  | -      |        |        |        |        |        |    |
| OR      | .02    | .12    | .05    | .06    | .18**  | -      |        |        |        |        |    |
| PRP     | -.22   | -.10   | -.03   | .07    | .12    | .53*** | -      |        |        |        |    |
| Forg    | .24*** | .26*** | .21**  | .24*** | .31*** | .25*** | .47*** | -      |        |        |    |
| Values  | .15*   | .26*** | .16**  | .14**  | .18**  | .26**  | .08    | .47*** | -      |        |    |
| DSE     | .22*** | .17**  | .17**  | .25*** | .29*** | .43*** | .54*** | .61*** | .58*** | -      |    |
| Meaning | .16*   | .18*   | .16*   | .13*   | .18*   | .25*** | .01    | .49*** | .97*** | .58*** | -  |

Note: \* -  $p < .05$ ; \*\* -  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* -  $p < .001$ ; SbWB- Subjective well-being; SocWB- Social well-being; PsWB- Psychological well-being; MIL- Meaning in life; RS- Religious support; OR- Organizational religiousness; PRP- Private religious practices; Forg- Forgiveness, DSE- Daily spiritual experiences.

Further, no significant differences in well-being domains were found between groups with different religious status and religious identity (assymp. sign  $> .05$ ) Stepwise regression analyses showed that SbWB was predicted positively by forgiveness and the perceived religious support with small effects. The model was significant  $F(2, 196) = 11.99, p = .001$  and explained 10 % of the variance in dependent value, DW = 1.98, tolerance (.894 -.947),



VIF (1.05- 1.11). Stepwise regression analyses showed that PsWB was positively predicted by forgiveness with a small effect. The model was significant  $F(1, 197) = 8.469, p = 0.04$  and explained 4.1% of the variance in dependent value,  $DW = 2.07$ , tolerance (947), VIF (1.00). Stepwise regression analyses showed that SocWB was positively predicted by forgiveness with a small effect also. The model was significant  $F(2, 188) = 14.308, p = .000$  and explained 6.9 % of the variance in DV,  $DW = 1.97$ , VIF (1.00). (see Table 2).

**Table 2.**

*Summary of Stepwise Regression Analyses for Predictors of Well-being Domains*

| DV    | IV                | B      | SE    | $\beta$ | $p$  | $t$    | 95%<br>LL | CI<br>UL |
|-------|-------------------|--------|-------|---------|------|--------|-----------|----------|
| SbWB  | Const             | 8.261  | 1.187 |         | .000 | 6.96   | 5.92      | 10.602   |
|       | Religious Support | .322   | .093  | .244    | .001 | 3.445  | .138      | .506     |
| PsWB  | forgiveness       | .227   | .101  | .159    | .026 | 2.245  | .028      | .426     |
|       | Const             | 22.012 | 1.520 |         | .000 | 14.480 | 19.014    | 25.010   |
| SocWB | forgiveness       | .522   | .179  | .203    | .000 | 2.910  | .168      | .876     |
|       | (Constant)        | 11.226 | 1.415 |         | .000 | 7.935  | .302      | .960     |
|       | forgiveness       | .631   | .167  | .260    | .000 | 3.783  | .302      | .960     |

Mediation analyses to test the hypotheses 2 were conducted. The direct effect as the pathway from the independent variable to the dependent variable while controlling for the mediator was estimated. The indirect effect as pathway from the independent variable to dependent variable through the mediator was calculated using bootstrap resampling. A significant indirect effect was detected when the zero was not found in the 95% Boot CI. As shown in table 3 significant indirect effect of daily spiritual experiences, forgiveness and religious support on well-being domains through MIL were found. MIL fully mediated the relationships between daily spiritual experiences and SbWB, PsWB and SosWB; between forgiveness and SbWB and PsWB, as well as the relation between religious support and PsWB and SocWB. MIL partially mediated forgiveness - SocWB relationship as well as religious support - SbWB relationship. (see Table 3)

**Table 3.**

*Summary of Mediation Analyses About Meaning in Life as Mediator Between Spirituality, Religiosity and Well-being Domains*

| IV   | M   | DV    | DE   | <i>p</i> | IE    | Boot SE | Boot LLCI | Boot ULCI |
|------|-----|-------|------|----------|-------|---------|-----------|-----------|
| DSE  | MIL | SbWB  | .032 | .152     | .0608 | .0175   | .0279     | .0966     |
| DSE  | MIL | PSWB  | .005 | .892     | .1166 | .0337   | .0555     | .1869     |
| DSE  | MIL | SocWB | .066 | .154     | .0596 | .0188   | .0261     | .0998     |
| Forg | MIL | SbWB  | .144 | .079     | .2014 | .0665   | .0833     | .3425     |
| Forg | MIL | PSWB  | .170 | .241     | .3772 | .0442   | .1464     | .6297     |
| Forg | MIL | SocWB | .464 | .004     | .1854 | .0649   | .0693     | .3217     |
| RS   | MIL | SbWB  | .223 | .003     | .1653 | .0667   | .0400     | .3030     |
| RS   | MIL | PSWB  | .195 | .143     | .3152 | .1225   | .0841     | .5637     |
| RS   | MIL | SocWB | .013 | .931     | .1769 | .0732   | .0451     | .3288     |

*Note:* IV- Independent variable, M - Mediator, DV- Dependent variable, IE- Indirect effect; DE - Direct effect; *p*- statistical significance of DE; Boot SE - Bootstrap standard error of IE, Boot LLCI - Bootstrap lower limit confidence interval of IE, Boot ULCI - Bootstrap upper limit confidence interval of IE, DSE- Daily spiritual experience, Forg - Forgiveness; MIL - Meaning in life, RS - Religious support; SbWB - Subjective Well-being, PsWB - Psychological Well-being, SocWB - Social Well-being, All coefficients reported are unstandardized unless otherwise noted. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

## Discussion

The study showed that religious status and religious identity were not associated with differences in levels of well-being, suggesting that the type of religion being affiliated and perceived religious intensity were not factors that influenced the well-being of 18- to 45-year-olds. These results can be linked to Bulgaria's religious demography. The main traditional religions in Bulgaria are Christianity and Islam, with 71.5% of the population identifying as Orthodox Christians and 10.8% as Muslims, according to the latest census in 2021. The vast majority of Bulgarians have reported Orthodox affiliation and moderate levels of religiosity, but in Bulgaria this identification has been related more to the national and cultural identity than to actual level of the religiousness (Kanev, 2002). This specificity prevents the identification of differences between active members of a confession and those who are only culturally attached to it, and hides the higher level of religiosity of the Muslim population compared to the Orthodox population (Kalkandjieva, 2008). Given that our sample is predominantly Christian, the lack of differences in well-being by religious status could be explained by this tendency for there to be a discrepancy between declared religiousness and how religious people really are.

The study also found that spirituality referring to the predisposition to forgive, and religiosity which refers to perceived support from the religious community, directly positively increased well-being. Specifically, the propensity to forgive predicted the three domains of well-being, and religious support predicted subjective well-being, thus partially confirming Hypothesis 1. The effects of forgiveness on well-being are consistent with established positive associations with PsWB and SbWB across a large age range according to meta-analytic studies (Davis et al., 2015; Gao et al., 2022) and other cross-sectional studies (Adeeb et al., 2022; Fincham & May, 2019). According to a longitudinal study of 1575 respondents aged 18 to 22 years, forgiveness was also associated with higher levels of positive affect, psychological and social well-being (Cowden et al., 2023).

The study showed that MIL mediated the relationships of perceived religious support, propensity for forgiveness, and daily spiritual experiences with well-being, thus confirming Hypothesis 2. Religious support, forgiveness, and experiences of transcendence and connectedness to a higher power, humanity, and the world lead to life satisfaction, experiences of happiness, positive appraisal of personal resources (e.g., sense of self-worth, autonomy, and mastery to cope with the environment), and of social relationships (e.g., sense of belonging and emotional closeness). MIL is the mechanism through which the influence of daily spiritual experiences on subjective, psychological, and social well-being is fully realized, as well as the impact of the propensity to forgive on subjective and psychological well-being, and that of religious support on social and psychological well-being are fully realized. The impact of the propensity to forgive on social well-being and religious support on subjective well-being perform both directly and in part through the meaning of life. These aspects of spirituality and religiosity foster a sense of coherence, maintain life purpose and meaningfulness which with its inherent cognitive, motivational, emotional, and pro-social aspects of this experience, facilitate well-being for individuals during this period of life.

The role of religious support in sustaining well-being is not surprising insofar as it is a form of social support, and religiosity being related to interpersonal institutional and collectivistic aspects based on the doctrine, values, and traditions of a formal religious group, implies the formation of such a religious social network. On the other hand, spiritual experiences are personal dynamic process that focuses on individual feelings, experiences, and thoughts (Pargament, 1999). These are associated with experiences of compassion for self and others, awe, mercy, admiration, love, hope, inner peace, harmony, and joy that create a sense of strength, guidance or support from a connection to a transcendent source, a sense of blessing in difficult times, and existential meaning. In-depth interviews with people of

diverse religious, ethnic, socioeconomic, and age groups, with people of no religious affiliation, and with people from many countries have shown that daily spiritual experiences are associated with buffering of stress, stronger resilience, posttraumatic growth, or meaning-making of challenges (Underwood et al., 2022). These features, may explain the indirect positive effects of this aspect of spirituality found on the domains of well-being. Although no direct impact on well-being was found, in contrast to previous findings (Fenzel & Richardson, 2022; Ubharadka, 2019), it can be assumed that these discrepancies are due to the age of the respondents, namely up to 30 years. Furthermore, as long as religiosity and spirituality are not mutually exclusive, everyday spiritual experiences have theistic as well as non-theistic aspects (Hammer & Cragun, 2019), suggesting their broader effects on well-being for both those who are spiritual but non-religious and those who are religious but non-spiritual. As a dynamic process, with considerable within-individual daily variance, daily spiritual experiences can be stimulated by interventions in people in early adulthood, regardless of their self-rated religiosity and religious affiliation. Interventions that stimulate these experiences are gaining widespread use as part of health care in clinical populations with somatic and mental illness (Gonçalves et al., 2015). These types of interventions may be useful in the care of complete positive mental health in healthy people in early adulthood.

The study showed that the propensity to forgive is the only aspect of spirituality and religiosity that has both direct and indirect positive effects on all the facets of well-being—personal, emotional, social. Forgiveness is conceptualized as a process of interaction between emotions, cognitions, behaviors, and/or intentions in which current and desired emotions and motives for forgiveness are operationalized through emotion regulation strategies that reduce negative affect and increase positive affect (Brady et al., 2023). Forgiveness supports the resolution of internal and external conflicts by providing positive emotional balance, self-acceptance, and the maintenance of relationships with others, thereby increasing well-being. Understanding forgiveness as a process and applying an emotion regulation perspective to it may find application in interventions to support well-being in people aged 18 to 45. Interventions can target specific components in this process, for example, setting desired emotional goals or training towards effective emotion regulation strategies related to forgiveness.

The study found no significant direct or indirect predictive effect of spiritual beliefs on well-being. Belief in the existence of an external transcendent source is a key difference between people who define themselves as atheist, non-religious and/or non-spiritual and those who define themselves as religious and/or spiritual (Saroglou et al., 2011). Such beliefs

represents a universal dimension of spirituality and religiosity that is interrelated with the others (i.e., belonging to a religious community, bonding in religious practices, and behaving in religious ways), each reflecting different psychological processes and mechanisms of how religiosity and spirituality influence health and well-being (Saroglou et al., 2011). Beliefs reflect ongoing cognitive processes and mental schemas through which events are interpreted, and the resulting explanations and evaluations in cognitive processing determine subsequent emotional experiences and behavioral intentions (Saroglou, 2011). In support of this, some studies have found that beliefs influence well-being indirectly through sequential links between interpretations of events and positive emotional experiences (Ramsay et al., 2019) or by encouraging participation in religious practices (Pérez & Rohde, 2022). This suggests that some emotional-behavioral constructs may mediate or complement the cognitive in nature meaning in life as mechanism of the belief-well-being relationship. Further, the effect of beliefs on the well-being might manifest in a longitudinal rather than a cross-sectional approach. For example, research has shown that spiritual beliefs positively predict growth in well-being over 10 years in a nationally diverse longitudinal study (Highland et al., 2022). The impact of beliefs on well-being also depends on the cultural context in which people live. A study of 10,535 participants from 24 countries, recruiting 120 analysis teams, provided evidence that the effect of religious belief systems on well-being depends on the cultural norms of religiosity, which refer to the perceived importance of religious beliefs and behaviours for the average person within a given culture (Hoogeveen et al., 2023). In addition, research has found that there appears to be a relationship between spiritual beliefs and SWB in religious countries, but not in secular ones (Pérez & Rohde, 2022). Given that Bulgarian culture can be classified as secular-rational, but not traditional, according to the Inglehart-Welzel cultural map (Wvs, 2023), where religion tends not to be very important for the society, beliefs related to transcendence did not have a significant impact on the well-being in the explored Bulgarian sample.

There was no significant direct influence of individual and collective religious practices in predicting well-being, which is inconsistent with previous findings among Muslims and Christians (Aftab et al., 2018; Aydogdu et al., 2021; Montero-Marin, 2019; Phillips et al., 2023). These differences may be due to the cultural context of the studies, as there are cross-national and cross-cultural variations in the effects of religious practices on well-being (Leite et al., 2023). For Bulgarians, Orthodox identification is most often not even based on formal ties to religious institutions (i.e. the church), but refers to latent religiosity associated with everyday religious beliefs, traditions and customs (Kanev, 2002). In this regard, despite the declared Orthodox identity of the vast majority of Bulgarians, the level of participation in

organized religious practices has remained low, and the same trend has been observed among Muslims, although not as pronounced (Kalkandjieva, 2008). Moreover, according to a recent survey of 15 countries in Europe, religious non-attenders significantly have outnumbered those who have attended at least once a month (Pew Research Center, 2018). Religious practices however significantly have affected well-being only when they occur at least once a week, but not less (Dunbar, 2021), suggesting that the lack of a significant effect on well-being in our study to be due to their reduced frequency. There was no indirect effect of these practices on well-being through meaning in life either. It suggests that other factors are likely to mediate the relationship, such as found in previous research role of perceived social support (Dunbar, 2021; Gan et al., 2023) and enhanced experiences of love, hope, awe and gratitude (Van Cappellen et al., 2023; Wnuk, 2023).

### Limitations and directions for future research

The results of the study should be considered in light of several limitations. First, because of the cross-sectional design, caution is needed in interpreting the relationships between the variables observed in this study. Future longitudinal designs are needed to establish the observed relationships over time. Another limitation of the study is the need to generalize the results to the Bulgarian cultural context insofar as the effects of religiosity on well-being are moderated by the specific background culture (Leite et al., 2023). Furthermore, the unequal distribution of respondents by gender cannot differentiate the effect of gender in the relationships of interest. Another limitation is the use of the convenience sample approach to data collection, which does not allow the results to be applied to the general population. Therefore, random selection of participants is recommended in future studies. In addition to MIL, other psychological variables are likely to mediate the influence of religiosity and spirituality on optimal psychosocial functioning. The mediating role of emotion regulation (Dolcos et al., 2021), dispositional hope (Wnuk, 2023), self-efficacy (Gan et al., 2023), and gratitude (Ethan, 2020) has been presented in the literature, but their effects have not been examined in early adulthood samples. Future research that explore mediation role of these factors would add to understanding about mechanisms through which religiosity and spirituality maintain positive psychosocial functioning in individuals aged 18 to 45.

### Conclusions

The study shows that religious support, propensity to forgiveness, and daily spiritual experiences positively influence well-being in early adulthood. The underlying mechanism of the influence can be explained by meaning in life. Feeling supported by religious community, the tendency to forgive to oneself and others, and daily experiences of transcendence increase well-being through maintaining meaning in life. Furthermore, religious support and

forgiveness promote well-being independently and beyond this mechanism. Findings suggest that fostering these aspects of spirituality and religiosity can be incorporated into programs aimed at maintaining optimal psychosocial functioning for individuals aged 18-45 years.

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