

Deconstructing the Notion of Religiosity: Hinduism in Comparison with Islam and Christianity

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Abstract

Religiosity is predominantly considered as a multidimensional psychological construct and is immensely embedded in human emotion, cognition, and behavior. It has been prominent across cultures and there has been constant interplay between fear and devotion that historically shaped moral conduct, ritual practices, and social cohesion. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered individuals' experiences of religiosity, particularly highlighting shifts in fear, moral perception, and devotional expression. This study investigates religiosity through a comparative lens, examining Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, with a specific focus on the psychological dimensions of fear and faith. Utilizing qualitative content analysis of religious texts, scholarly literature, and media accounts, the study identifies key thematic differences and similarities across the three traditions. Findings indicate that while Islam and Christianity emphasize fear as moral accountability and divine judgment, Hinduism integrates fear with karmic responsibility and diverse ritual practices. Post-pandemic shifts reveal that fear-related religiosity now extends beyond doctrinal adherence to moral uncertainty, existential concerns, and socially mediated anxieties. The study concludes that understanding these psychological mechanisms can enhance interreligious dialogue, promote moral resilience, and inform the psychology of religion in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: religiosity, fear of God, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, psychology of religion, post-pandemic morality

Introduction

Religiosity, defined as the structured engagement with the sacred and divine, functions as a central organizing framework for moral, emotional, and social life (Allport & Ross, 1967; Pargament, 1997). Traditionally, religiosity encompasses both cognitive beliefs and affective responses, including reverence, awe, and fear of God. Fear, in particular, is a potent emotional driver, influencing moral conduct, decision-making, and social cohesion. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified global existential anxieties, reshaping how individuals experience religiosity and devotion, and prompting reflection on the psychological interplay of fear and faith (Koenig, 2020).

India, as the birthplace of Hinduism, provides a unique sociocultural context for studying religiosity. Hinduism's pluralistic theology, polytheistic practices, and ethical framework contrast sharply with the monotheistic doctrines of Islam and Christianity. The present study seeks to deconstruct religiosity by exploring how fear functions across these traditions, both historically and in the post-pandemic moral landscape. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

1. How is religiosity manifested through fear and devotion in Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity?

2. What thematic similarities and differences emerge in the conceptualization of fear of God across these traditions?

3. How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the psychological dimensions of religiosity and moral behavior?

By situating religiosity within a psychological framework, this study aims to contribute to interdisciplinary scholarship at the intersection of religion, morality, and mental health.

Theoretical Framework

Psychological Dimensions of Religiosity: Religiosity is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive beliefs, ritual practices, and affective experiences (Glock & Stark, 1965; Hood et al., 2009). The affective dimension, particularly fear of God, functions as a moral regulator, promoting socially prescribed behavior through anticipation of reward and punishment (Johnson, 2016). Fear-related religiosity is not inherently negative; it can coexist with devotion, altruism, and prosocial behavior.

Fear of God as a Moral and Existential Mechanism: Across traditions, fear serves as both a social and intrapersonal mechanism. In monotheistic religions, fear of God often manifests as awareness of divine judgment and moral accountability (Pargament, 1997). In Hinduism, fear is integrated with karmic principles, guiding ethical conduct while acknowledging human diversity and agency (Flood, 1996). Post-COVID, existential anxieties, uncertainty, and perceived threats to life and health have intensified fear-related religiosity, influencing both personal devotion and collective moral behavior (Koenig, 2020).

Interfaith Perspective: Comparing Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity reveals both convergence and divergence in fear-based religiosity. While Islam and Christianity emphasize moral accountability through monotheistic judgment, Hinduism employs a nuanced framework combining polytheistic worship, karmic consequences, and ethical duty (dharma). Intersectionality between traditions is evident in shared cultural practices, ritualized moral instruction, and social reinforcement of fear-mediated ethical norms.

Methodology

Research Design: This study employs qualitative content analysis to examine religiosity across Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. This method is particularly suited to deconstructing textual, doctrinal, and cultural representations of fear and devotion, and identifying recurring psychological themes (Krippendorff, 2013).

Data Sources: The analysis draws from a combination of classical religious texts (Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita; Quran; Bible), scholarly literature (Flood, 1996; Peters, 1994; Johnson, 2016; Bolkhary, 2011), and media accounts and cultural narratives illustrating contemporary devotional practices post-pandemic. A total of six key scholarly sources were selected following systematic literature search on Google Scholar, JSTOR, PubMed, Springer, and ResearchGate, using keywords 'Hinduism,' 'Islam,' 'Christianity,' 'fear of God,' and 'religiosity.'

Data Analysis: Texts and literature were coded thematically, focusing on expressions of fear, moral regulation, and devotional practices. Codes were refined iteratively to identify emergent themes across traditions. Reliability was ensured by independent coding and cross-validation of thematic categories.

Ethical Considerations: Given the use of publicly available texts and literature, no human participants were involved. The analysis was conducted with sensitivity to religious beliefs and cultural contexts.

Findings / Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Fear as Moral Regulation: Across Islam and Christianity, fear functions as a mechanism for moral compliance and accountability. The Quran emphasizes adherence to Allah's commandments under the awareness of divine judgment, while the Bible frames fear as reverential awe that guides ethical behavior (Johnson, 2016). Post-COVID, believers increasingly associate fear with moral uncertainty, reflecting heightened concerns about mortality, health, and societal vulnerability.

In Hinduism, fear operates within a karmic framework, guiding ethical action through anticipated consequences rather than punitive divine wrath (Flood, 1996).

Theme 2: Devotion and Fear Interplay: While fear motivates compliance, devotion mediates psychological well-being. In all three religions, fear without devotional engagement can produce anxiety, guilt, or moral distress. The pandemic amplified this interplay, as individuals turned to ritualized practices (prayers, online congregations) to manage existential fear and regain a sense of control (Koenig, 2020). Hinduism exemplifies integration: fear of karmic consequence coexists with devotion to specific deities.

Theme 3: Intersectionality and Cultural Mediation: Hinduism and Islam intersect in Indian sociocultural contexts through shared rituals, festivals, and everyday practices. Communal religious observances, cuisine, and educational institutions foster interreligious engagement, influencing the psychological expression of fear and devotion. This intersectionality illustrates how religiosity is not purely doctrinal but also socially mediated.

Theme 4: Post-Pandemic Shifts in Religiosity: COVID-19 has prompted notable shifts in moral and devotional expressions: increased reliance on fear-based moral reasoning due to uncertainty and perceived loss of control, diversification of devotional practices (digital worship, hybrid rituals), and greater psychological reflection on personal ethics, mortality, and social responsibility. These changes underscore the dynamic interaction between environmental stressors and religiosity, highlighting fear's central role in post-pandemic moral psychology.

Discussion

The findings illustrate that fear is a central psychological mechanism shaping religiosity across Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. While doctrinal differences exist — monotheistic judgment versus polytheistic karmic consequence: fear functions universally to regulate moral behavior, reinforce social norms, and structure ethical reasoning. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified existential anxieties, altering the psychological experience of religiosity. Devotion and fear, traditionally balanced, are now intertwined with heightened mortality salience, prompting adaptive and maladaptive moral behaviors. This observation aligns with Pargament's (1997) theory of religious coping, suggesting that religiosity serves as a mechanism for meaning-making under stress.

The comparative perspective also reveals that cultural context mediates the expression of fear-related religiosity. Hinduism's pluralistic framework allows individualized engagement with divine principles, while Islam and Christianity emphasize conformity to prescribed moral codes. Intersectionality, particularly in multicultural societies like India, fosters shared moral norms and mitigates extreme fear-based practices through social reinforcement.

Conclusion and Implications

This study deconstructs religiosity through the psychological lens of fear, highlighting its centrality in moral regulation, devotion, and post-pandemic adaptation. Key insights include:

1. Fear as a universal moral regulator across religious traditions, manifesting differently according to theological frameworks.
2. Devotion mediates fear, enabling ethical engagement without maladaptive anxiety.
3. Cultural intersectionality shapes religious experience, particularly in diverse societies.
4. Post-pandemic shifts underscore the dynamic interplay of fear, morality, and psychological resilience.

Understanding these mechanisms has practical implications for mental health professionals, religious educators, and policymakers, fostering interventions that respect cultural diversity while promoting moral resilience and psychological well-being

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