

How spirituality induces liberal attitudes

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Meditation affects political beliefs differently than does religious prayer. Credit: RelaxingMusic via Flickr

(Phys.org) —People become more politically liberal immediately after practising a spiritual exercise such as meditation, researchers at the University of Toronto have found.

"There's great overlap between religious beliefs and political orientations," says one of the study authors, Jordan Peterson of U of T's Department of Psychology. "We found that religious individuals tend to be more conservative and spiritual people tend to be more liberal.

"Inducing a [spiritual experience](#) through a guided meditation exercise led both liberals and conservatives to endorse more liberal [political attitudes](#)."

Lead author Jacob Hirsh of U of T's Rotman School of Management said, "While religiousness is characterized by devotion to a specific tradition, set of principles, or code of conduct, spirituality is associated with the direct experience of self-transcendence and the feeling that we're all connected.

In three studies, the researchers – Hirsh, Peterson

and Megan Walberg, also from U of T's Department of Psychology, examined their participants' political views in relation to their religiousness and spirituality. In the first study, they asked 590 American participants whether they identified as Democrat or Republican. In the second study, they measured 703 participants' political orientations and support for the major American and Canadian political parties.

The researchers confirmed that religiousness was associated with political conservatism, while spirituality was associated with political liberalism. These associations were in turn due to the common values underlying these orientations: conservatism and religiousness both emphasize the importance of tradition, while liberalism and spirituality both emphasize the importance of equality and social harmony.

In the third study, the researchers recruited 317 participants from the U.S. and asked half to complete a spiritual exercise consisting of a guided meditation video. Those who watched the video were asked to close their eyes and breathe deeply, imagining themselves in a natural setting and feeling connected to the environment. They were then asked about their political orientation and to rate how spiritual they felt. The researchers reported that, compared to those in the control group, participants who meditated felt significantly higher levels of spirituality and expressed more liberal political attitudes, including a reduced support for "tough on crime" policies and a preference for liberal political candidates.

"Spiritual experiences seem to make people feel more of a connection with others," says Hirsh. "The boundaries we normally maintain between ourselves and the world tend to dissolve during spiritual experiences. These feelings of self-transcendence make it easier to recognize that we are all part of the same system, promoting an inclusive and egalitarian mindset."

The researchers hope that these findings can not

only advance our understanding of [spirituality](#), but also help future political dialogue.

"The conservative part of religious belief has played an important role in holding cultures together and establishing common rules. The spiritual part, on the other hand, helps cultures renew themselves by adapting to changing circumstances," says Peterson. "Both right and left are necessary; it's not that either is correct, it's that the dialogue between them produces the best chance we have at getting the balance right. If people could understand that both sides have an important role to play in society, some of the unnecessary tension might be eliminated."

"Spiritual Liberals and Religious Conservatives" was published in the December edition of *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

Provided by University of Toronto

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