# Exploring the Impact of Religious Beliefs and Ethical Principles on Undergraduate Students' Critical Thinking and Academic Performance at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana

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## ABSTRACT

The study explored the impact of religious beliefs and ethical principles on students' critical thinking and academic performance. This study employed a sequential explanatory design within a mixed-methods approach grounded in a pragmatic paradigm. The quantitative data were gathered using a simple random sampling technique to select 100 undergraduate students who attend Protestant and Charismatic churches on campus at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana and who completed the questionnaires. Using purposive sampling, the qualitative data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews with three male and two female prayer leaders from five denominational churches. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify the key themes. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, and access, were rigorously followed throughout the study. Quantitative data were analysed using frequency counts, percentages, mean and standard deviation. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r) and independent sample t-test were applied to test the research hypotheses. The findings revealed a philosophical connection between religious beliefs and ethical principles in shaping students' critical thinking and academic performance. Participants consistently identified believing in prayers and miracles as indispensable pillars of their intellectual and ethical frameworks, viewing divine intervention as a complementary force reinforcing their academic pursuits and life challenges. Though acknowledging the value of personal effort, the students emphasised that their belief in a supreme being is a core source of motivation and resilience. Believing in prayers and miracles augments self-discipline, reflection, and ethical decision-making, even when these beliefs contradict pure logic. Despite the benefits to students, tension was revealed between their spiritual commitments and academic responsibilities, with some students struggling to balance the two. Moreover, the study revealed a significant divergence between faith-based reliance and humanist perspectives, which prioritise personal autonomy and critical reasoning. Nonetheless, belief in prayers and miracles showed a weak positive correlation with critical thinking skills; other factors such as educational background, teaching methods, and personal attributes like motivation and self-efficacy played a significant role in students' academic performance. However, no significant gender differences were observed in the impact of these beliefs on critical thinking and academic performance, indicating that the influence of spirituality is equally felt across genders. It is recommended that institutions, devout religious educators and professors, policymakers, and stakeholders adopt a holistic approach that integrates both spiritual and intellectual development among students. It is also recommended that administrators, educators, and professors integrate ethical reasoning and critical thinking into the curriculum to respect diverse belief systems and foster spirituality and academic performance among university students.

**Keywords:** religious beliefs, ethical principles, critical thinking, academic performance

## INTRODUCTION

Quality education is a transformative force, equipping individuals with knowledge and shaping them into conscious and responsible change agents (Sa'dullah, 2019). In today's world, every interaction and experience within a student's milieu presents opportunities for learning, ethical and character formation, and improving

life experiences (Siswadi, 2024). This education goes beyond merely transmitting knowledge and skills; it also guides students in applying what they learn to real-world scenarios. In essence, quality education nurtures the development of values, attitudes, and behaviours that augment social cohesion and the fabric of society (Sharma, 2024). Through this holistic approach, students grasp academic thoughts and internalise the significance of integrity, equity, empathy, creativity, and social responsibility (Siswadi, 2024). Students are taught to confront reality rather than rely on the optimism that supernatural forces would fulfil their desires and responsibilities. Hypothetically, education should inspire students to consider the consequences of their actions and inactions on others and the environment, encouraging them to apply critical thinking in solving societal challenges and advancing morality.

University students are in a unique stage of life, experiencing a significant transition between adolescence and adulthood. This period is characterised by research and practice, identity development, character formation, and ethical philosophies (Pérez et al., 2023). Ghana's population is richly diverse, encompassing various racial, ethnocultural, and religious groups. Students, therefore, strive to cultivate respect for individuals and an understanding of diverse cultural practices and religious expressions (Langer, 2014). The University of Cape Coast (UCC) is one of the leading institutions in Ghana, renowned for its dedication to promoting intellectual growth and cultural diversity among its students. Within this dynamic academic setting, students are exposed to various religious beliefs and ethical values that significantly shape their identities and perspectives. These influences extend beyond the classroom, profoundly affecting students' critical thinking and inspiring their creative expeditions, including art, music, literature, and academic research. In this diverse and interconnected fabric of cultural elements, including beliefs, practices, and traditions, various religious beliefs in Christianity, Islam, and traditional African religions coexist and interact with different ethical backgrounds. These beliefs and ethics inform individual students' attitudes and drive their approaches to creativity and self-expression (Carlile & Jordan, 2013). Moreover, universities' academic curricula and extracurricular activities provide platforms for students to develop critical thinking and creatively explore and articulate their beliefs, contributing to a rich spectrum of cultural expression.

The humanist theory is intrinsically connected to student-centred learning, emphasising what teachers impart and what students learn. This theory advocates creating an environment that empowers students to explore their identities and nurture their creative potential. Humanist theory improves autonomy, critical thinking, and integrating personal values with academic endeavours (Lentes, 2024), steering students from passive reliance on phenomena and magic. Instead, it encourages diligent effort, thorough exploration, and the application of extensive research to address societal challenges. The humanist theory guides students in navigating the complexities of cultural and ethical impacts, promoting a holistic education that enhances academic success and self-actualisation (Kostyło, 2024). This involves recognising and celebrating the uniqueness and diversity of each student. Furthermore, a significant aspect of humanist theory is the formation of character and moral values. In a humanist learning environment, students are actively encouraged to engage in the learning process, ask questions, think critically, and participate in discussions (Scuotto, 2023). Teachers act as facilitators, providing guidance and support as students pursue knowledge and skills.

In this sense, the correlation between religious beliefs (rituals, prayers, and miracles), ethical principles (taking responsibility for one's actions and consequences), and critical thinking forms a decisive axis in the development of students, exclusively in institutions where diverse cultural and ethical frameworks coexist. A university serves as a hub of higher education with the responsibility of educating academically proficient graduates who possess a strong understanding of religious values and can integrate them into their daily lives (Pratami et al., 2019). Thinking critically is a requisite (Lestari et al., 2019; Makbul et al., 2024). At the University of Cape Coast, the rich diversity of religious beliefs and ethical values offers a distinctive backdrop to explore how these fundamentals shape students' creative expressions and critical thinking skills in their academic performance. The ethical principles imparted in schools serve as a compass, guiding students in making well-informed decisions and balancing critical thinking and adherence to societal values. The findings of this study would convey significant inferences for educators, religious authorities, policymakers, and stakeholders in higher education.

A germane issue is the tendency of some students to prioritise belief in miracles and prayer over academic focus, perceiving divine intervention as the prime determinant of academic success rather than personal effort

and critical thinking applied to real-life situations.

Previous research examined the intersection of religion, spirituality, and academic achievement. For instance, studies have shown that spiritual strength can enhance student resilience (Ekwonye & DeLauer, 2019; Estanislao et al., 2017). Moreover, research asserts that students who engage in spiritual practices such as meditation, prayer, and self-reflection often use these resources to navigate academic and career-related challenges (Constantine et al., 2006; Ekwonye, 2020). However, while religious practices can offer emotional support and motivation, an overreliance on miracles and prayer without considerable effort in real-world application may result in diminished academic engagement and performance. This could also impair students' critical thinking and practical skills, as they may come to expect miracles without actively engaging in academic endeavours. Kirby (2008) examined the influence of religious schemas on critical thinking skills and found that activated religious schemas did not account for the connection between paranormal or religious beliefs and critical thinking abilities. However, the study indicated that lower critical thinking performance was associated with higher levels of extrinsic religious orientation. Also, Robbins et al. (2019) offered an alternative viewpoint, suggesting that a stronger inclination toward religious beliefs could negatively affect academic performance in college settings. In this context, a balanced approach to religious beliefs and academic engagement is significant for students to develop strong critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

This would help reduce the prevalence of rote learning and memorisation among students, as any educational system prioritising rote learning over critical thinking can stifle creativity and innovation (Korley, 2020). This aligns with the researcher's circumstantial evidence that most University of Cape Coast students, particularly those in various organised prayer groups on campus, may prioritise constant public prayer, often shouting their heads out for divine intervention over academic focus. They may seek miracles to pass quizzes and exams or to improve their Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA), thus overlooking critical thinking, creativity in problem-solving, and the importance of effort in conducting thorough academic research and taking responsibility for their actions through independent thinking. These issues hypothesise the intricate relationship between religious beliefs, ethical principles, critical thinking, and academic performance among the University of Cape Coast students, which lacks comprehensive research.

How do religious beliefs and ethical principles influence students' critical thinking and academic performance?

$H_{01}$: There is no statistically significant relationship between belief in miracles and prayers and students' critical thinking and academic performance.

$H_{02}$: There is no statistically significant difference between female and male students regarding the influence of their belief in miracles and prayers on their critical thinking and academic performance

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Humanist Theory

Humanist theory by Carl Rogers emphasises the distinctive potential for personal growth and self-actualisation within each student. Rogers believed that every person can achieve their fullest potential when provided with an environment that promotes acceptance, empathy, and understanding (Greene, 2017; Shepherd, 2024). Central to his theory is unconditional positive affection, which indicates a student's support and acceptance regardless of their feelings, thoughts, or behaviours. This approach encourages students to engage in self-exploration and reflection, enabling them to link their values and beliefs with their learning experiences. It also helps students to make numerous autonomous decisions with diminishing effects from external factors (Snider, 2024). However, by promoting trust and openness, students can develop critical thinking skills, as they feel safe to express themselves and explore diverse perspectives.

The theory has philosophical implications for comprehending the impact of religious beliefs and ethical principles on students' critical thinking and academic performance. Applying Rogers' philosophies can support an educational atmosphere that acknowledges students' religious and ethical experiences and enhances their self-awareness and cognitive development (Maryati, 2024). When students feel valued and understood within

their academic and social contexts, they are more likely to engage intensely with their coursework and ethical dilemmas, promoting critical reflection and informed decision-making (Shepherd, 2024). This perspective outlines the significance of recognising and integrating students' values into learning, signifying that religious beliefs can meaningfully influence their academic performance and growth.

## Social Cognitive Theory

The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed by Albert Bandura, postulates that a dynamic interaction of personal factors, environmental influences, and learned behaviours shapes human behaviour and cognitive processes (Cai et al., 2023; Chen & Tu, 2021). SCT is an observational learning, where students model their actions based on what they observe in their social environment. It takes an agentic view of human development, adaptation, and change (Bandura, 2002), converging on concepts that explain how students make decisions (Kim, 2024). This is further influenced by self-efficacy, where personal belief in students' ability to succeed in specific situations affects performance. Students may observe and internalise behaviours from their religious leaders or peers, shaping how they approach academic tasks and moral dilemmas (Zainullah, 2024). The implication of the theory helps elucidate how religious practices, ethical teachings, and social interactions within religious communities can directly impact students' academic and cognitive behaviours. The theory's emphasis on social influences provides a framework for understanding how students may adopt critical thinking and problem-solving skills by observing and participating in religious and ethical discussions (Zainullah, 2024). These religious beliefs guide academic performance and how social environments, such as prayer groups or church meetings, influence decision-making and reflective thinking in academic space.

## Students' Critical Thinking and Academic Performance

Students' critical thinking is a cognitive process that involves systematically and logically analysing, evaluating, and synthesising information. It requires thinking undoubtedly and rationally recognising the logical connections between ideas (Alsaleh, 2020). Critical thinkers challenge assumptions, identify underlying values, evaluate evidence, and assess conclusions, which in turn helps to increase student's academic performance. It encompasses gathering facts and the capacity to reflect on the validity and reliability and how these facts interconnect (Dunne, 2015). Though justifications for critical thinking may vary, they commonly emphasise the ability to reason, reflect, evaluate arguments, and solve problems effectively in the academic setting. Developing these skills is significant for academic performance, as students who think critically are better equipped to engage deeply with academic content, construct well-reasoned opinions, and achieve higher academic success.

Critical thinking incorporates a variety of skills and dispositions. According to the American Philosophical Association's Delphi Report, critical thinking includes the skills of interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. Interpretation involves comprehending and expressing the meaning or significance of various experiences, situations, data, events, and judgments (Taylor, 2023). Critical thinking identifies the intended and actual inferential relationships among statements, questions, concepts, descriptions, or other forms of representation intended to express belief, judgment, experiences, reasons, information, or opinions (Mastuti et al., 2022). Also, it involves assessing the credibility of statements or descriptions of a student's perception, experience, situation, judgment, belief, or opinion and drawing reasonable conclusions from the available data (Taylor, 2023). However, Students' critical thinking focuses on applying skills in analysis and evaluation to their inferential judgments with a view toward questioning, confirming, validating, or correcting either their reasoning or results in academia.

The fundamentals of academic success are allowing students to engage with content critically, analyse arguments, and create coherent and well-supported conclusions (Chusni et al., 2020). This independent thinking in learning encourages students to take responsibility for their education and question and explore beyond the surface of their study subjects (Elder & Paul, 2020). Moreover, critical thinking is essential for adapting to new situations and continuous learning in a rapidly changing world. It helps students become active, engaged citizens capable of making logical decisions personally and professionally (Saepuloh et al., 2021). In crux, enhancing critical thinking, educational institutions prepare students for exams and life-long problem-solving and decision-making in an increasingly complex and information-rich world.

## Religious Beliefs and Ethics

Religion pertains to established beliefs, rituals, and practices within a communal or institutional framework. However, spirituality is a more personal and individualised journey, focusing on a connection with oneself, others, nature, and a higher power (such as God, Allah, deities, or any transcendent force) in a significant way (Pargament et al., 2013; Utriainen, Husgafvel, Knott, & Illman, 2024). Numerous meta-analyses have shown that religion acts as a protective factor for young people, shielding them from engaging in high-risk behaviours such as sexual immoralities, internet fraud or scamming, smoking, delinquency, and school truancy, and alcohol consumption (Koletić et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2020; Utriainen, Husgafvel, Knott, & Illman, 2024). Religious beliefs are convictions and practices related to the existence, nature, and worship of a deity or deities and the moral codes governing the conduct of human affairs as espoused by religious ethics (Ogunlola, 2020; Schweiker & Clairmont, 2020). These beliefs often provide bases for comprehending the world and elucidating existential questions and moral guidance. On the flip side, ethics is the branch of philosophy concerned with questions about what is ethically right and wrong, good and evil, and fair and unfair. Ethics involves systematically studying principles and standards that guide human behaviour and decision-making (Chaddha & Agrawal, 2023). Although religious beliefs often integrate ethical guidelines, ethics as a discipline can exist independently of religious doctrines based on analytic influences and humanist principles.

## Religious Beliefs and Ethics on Students' Critical Thinking

Religious beliefs and ethics significantly shape students' critical thinking abilities by providing an outline for moral reasoning and decision-making (Sulaiman et al., 2022). Students who adhere to religious beliefs often view their academic pursuits through the lens of these values, encouraging them to think deeply about the implications of their knowledge and actions (Small, 2023). Ethical principles derived from religious teachings can enhance critical thinking by promoting a reflective mindset, urging students to consider the broader consequences of their choices (Jasminto & Rofi'ah, 2024). For instance, discussions on ethical dilemmas in class can prompt students to critically analyse various perspectives, enhancing a more nuanced understanding of religious and philosophical issues.

Attending church meetings on campus can influence students' critical thinking in several ways. These gatherings often serve as a platform for engaging with diverse viewpoints and ethical discussions, which can stimulate critical scrutiny and reflection (Schoem, Modey, & John, 2023). In the Ghanaian context, religious beliefs and ethical principles differ because many church members tend to believe wholeheartedly rather than thinking outside the box. Unfortunately, logical reasoning is less applied to religious beliefs. Many students, particularly Christians, regularly believe in miracles and prayers rather than applying effort. I believe that divine intervention occurs automatically for those who take the initiative and put in the effort. However, many student believers often quote, "If God does not build the house, the builders work in vain, and if God does not protect the city, the guards keep watch in vain," suggesting that without God's intervention, human efforts are ultimately futile and so students may wait till miracle happens. Therefore, true success and security come from divine intervention rather than human efforts.

On the other hand, this perspective contrasts with a more humanistic view of another quote: "Look to the ant, you lazy person; observe its behaviour and learn from it! The ant has no boss, supervisor, or leader, yet it collects food during the summer and gathers supplies during the harvest. How long will you continue to sleep and 'keep praying for a miracle to happen'? Are you lazy?" The interpretation of these views depends on how individuals conceptualise and apply them in their daily lives. For students who regularly participate in church activities, integrating religious beliefs and consistent prayer discourse into their academic experience can become more obsessed with miracles, reinforcing their beliefs rather than putting effort and thinking outside their domains. During quizzes and examinations, most students' believers pray on their books and usually put their heads on the table, thinking a miracle would happen in the twinkle of an eye.

The equilibrium between religious activities and academic responsibilities is significant. Students often struggle to manage their time between attending church programs and fulfilling academic obligations (O'Connor, Hoge & Alexander, 2020). When church activities interfere with class hours, it can create a conflict, resulting in poor academic performance. This situation encourages students to prioritise and make

decisions that align with their long-term goals (Hyun et al., 2020). Moreover, the influence of believing in miracles and prayer is not a wrong concept, but students are required to strike effortlessly while seeking divine attention. Although some students may believe prayer enhances their ability to think critically by providing clarity and focus, others may view it as a supplementary tool rather than a primary driver of academic success.

**Role of Religious Beliefs and Ethics in Educational Development**

Religious beliefs and ethics influence students' attitudes toward learning in educational settings by instilling values that promote academic diligence and curiosity (Gomez, 2024; Tohirin & Nurfuadi, 2024). Religious education often emphasises virtues such as perseverance, responsibility, and respect, which are foundational for academic success. These virtues encourage students to approach their studies with purpose and commitment, promoting a disciplined and motivated attitude toward learning (Watts, Fullard & Peterson, 2021). Moreover, ethical education promotes intellectual honesty and integrity, ensuring that students value the pursuit of knowledge and truth. This ethical foundation helps students develop a positive and proactive approach to their educational journey, viewing learning as a meaningful and integral part of their personal growth.

Religious beliefs and ethics, therefore, shape students' interpersonal relationships within the educational setting emphasising the importance of empathy, respect, and equity in interactions with peers and teachers. In crux, by internalising these ethical principles, students learn to circumnavigate social subtleties in a way that promotes positive and respectful relationships to increase their academic performance (Horwitz, 2022). Religious teachings often advocate for community, compassion, and understanding, which helps promote a supportive and inclusive school culture, enhances students' social experiences, and contributes to a collaborative and harmonious learning atmosphere where students feel valued and implicit.

# RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a sequential explanatory design within a mixed-methods approach grounded in a pragmatic paradigm. Quantitative data were obtained through a simple random sampling technique involving 100 undergraduates from Protestant and Charismatic churches on campus. A purposive sampling was employed to select five specific churches for the study. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, and access, were strictly adhered to throughout the research. Quantitative data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics (frequency counts, percentages, means, standard deviations) and inferential statistics such as the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient and independent sample t-test were applied to test the research hypotheses. Rigorous validation of quantitative and qualitative data was ensured. In the quantitative phase, content validity was established by an expert review of survey instruments and a pilot test was conducted in two mother churches. The reliability coefficient for the nine (9) items was assessed using Cronbach's alpha in SPSS, indicating a high level of internal consistency with a value of .824. Qualitative data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews with five student prayer leaders from selected churches at the University of Cape Coast. Qualitative credibility was enhanced through member checks and triangulation of diverse perspectives. Thematic analysis identified, analysed, and reported patterns (themes) within the data.

# RESULTS AND FINDINGS

**Quantitative Results**

The study employed 100 undergraduate students from 5 denominational churches on campus who were selected to fill out the questionnaire for the study. The results are shown in *Table 1*.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

| Statement | R % | S % | VO % | A % | M | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| How often do your religious beliefs and ethical principles enhance your critical | - | - | 54.0 | 46.0 | 3.4600 | .50346 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| thinking abilities? | | | | | | |
| How often do you attend church meetings on campus? | 8.0 | 16.0 | 30.0 | 46.0 | 3.1400 | .96311 |
| How often do you have sufficient time to reflect on your academic content? | | 40.0 | 24.0 | 36.0 | 2.9600 | .63011 |
| How often do prayers and miracles influence your critical thinking skills? | - | - | 44.0 | 56.0 | 3.5600 | .50143 |
| How often do church programs interfere with your class hours? | 66.0 | 34.0 | - | - | 2.3000 | .47852 |
| How often do you believe prayer is more effective than personal effort in achieving academic excellence? | 6.0 | 12.0 | 34.0 | 48.0 | 3.3400 | .79351 |
| How often do you discuss ethical dilemmas in your academic work or classes? | - | 24.0 | 50.0 | 26.0 | 2.0200 | .51400 |
| How often do you integrate religious and ethical discussions in your academic experience? | 12.0 | 20.0 | 32.0 | 36.0 | 2.2300 | .62698 |
| How often do you believe prayer improves your academic results? | - | 22.0 | 32.0 | 46.0 | 3.2300 | .79693 |
| Total Mean/SD | | | | | 3.10 | .7293 |

Source: Field Data 2024; [Rarely = 1; Sometimes = 2; Very Often = 3; Always = 4]

The influence of religious beliefs and ethical principles on critical thinking abilities has a mean score of 3.10 and a standard deviation of .7293. The study revealed that prayers often influence their critical thinking skills ($M = 3.5600$; $SD = .50143$). Also, it revealed that students' religious beliefs and ethical principles enhance their critical thinking abilities ($M = 3.4600$; $SD = .50346$). Students always believe prayer is more effective than personal effort in achieving academic excellence ($M = 3.3400$; $SD = .79351$). Again, it was revealed that students believe prayer improves their academic results ($M = 3.2300$; $SD = .79693$). Similarly, it revealed that students always attend church meetings for prayers and worship on campus ($M = 3.1400$; $SD = .96311$). The study also indicated that students sometimes feel that they have sufficient time to reflect on their academic content ($M = 2.9432$; $SD = .63011$). However, these results highlight the various degrees to which religious beliefs and ethics influence different aspects of students' academic and critical thinking experiences.

Table 2: Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient

| Pearson Correlation | Belief in Miracles and Prayers |
|---|---|
| Belief in Miracles and Prayers | 1 |
| Students' critical thinking and academic performance | .324** |

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Pearson product-moment correlation between believing in miracles and prayers and students' critical thinking and academic performance was found to be low positive and statistically significant (r = .324, $p$ = < 0.05. H₁ was therefore supported.

Table 3: Independent Sample t-test

| Students' membership in the church | N | M | SD | F | t | df | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male Membership | 50 | 3.744 | .5762 | 5.038 | 24.17 | 129.0 | .0723 |
| Female Membership | 50 | 3.721 | .5749 | | | | |

Source: Field Data (2024)

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the influence of belief in miracles and prayers on male and female respondents' critical thinking and academic performance. There were no significant differences (t(df) = 124; $p$ =.07 in scores for male membership ($M$ = 3.744, $SD$ = .5762) and female membership ($M$ = 3.744, $SD$ = .5762). The magnitude of differences in the means was insignificant.

**Qualitative Results**

The study purposively selected five undergraduate student prayer leaders for semi-structured interview sessions, focusing on their beliefs and ethical principles. Among the participants, there were three male prayer leaders and two females. The interviews were conducted based on the study objectives, which were recorded and transcribed verbatim. These pseudonyms represented the male and female prayer leaders: MPL01, MPL02, MPL03, FPL04, and FPL05. The pseudonyms protect the participants' identities, ensuring their personal information remains confidential, which is significant in maintaining ethical research standards. The results from the participants were transcribed as follows:

**Theme 1:** Moral guidance and ethical decision-making through religious beliefs

MPL01, in his responses, specified that:

*Religious beliefs and ethical principles provide a moral foundation, encouraging me to approach critical thinking responsibly and with integrity. For example, my religious faith teaches me to seek truth and justice, which aligns with the principles of critical thinking. This moral guidance helps me to assess information and arguments more thoroughly and ethically. Sometimes, there are conflicts with logical thinking and belief systems, but I understand the dynamics as a believer. I constantly pray for better grades...yeah, I do. I believe I will graduate with first- or second-class upper honour. Though I still try to achieve my goal…, everything is in God's hands.*

**Theme 2:** Role of prayer and faith in academic success and critical thinking

MPL02, in his contribution, replied that:

*Ethics is indeed derived from religious beliefs. In my church, some tenets govern its members. These tenets guide my decision-making processes, helping me weigh the consequences of my actions logically and morally. Believing in miracles and prayers is not a crime but gives you hope. I believe in prayer because it is a Christian weapon; no critical thinker or scientist can prove it wrong...... Prayer always works for me, and I believe in it more than excessive efforts. I have D's and D+ grades in my portal, but I do not attribute them to constant prayers because they are the will of God. I am at level 200 now; I believe my grades will improve by God's intervention. I will keep praying, and I believe miracles will happen. I do not believe much in human effort.*

**Theme 3:** Prayer as a tool for self-reflection and enhanced critical thinking

MPL03 similarly responded that:

*You see, many people are naive regarding religious beliefs and ethical principles. However, I will not change*

*what I believe in, especially for being a prayer warrior. I believe in miracles and prayers because they encourage me to question and reflect on issues before making choices, and it is a significant component of critical thinking. Many people think believers do not think logically, but I do. When I engage in practices such as prayers and meditations, I develop habits of self-reflection and introspection, which enhances my ability to think critically about any issues. I believe in both prayer and effort, but the former is necessary…. God first, and with Him, all things are possible.*

**Theme 4:** Religious teachings as a foundation for discipline and respect in critical thinking

FPL04, in her responses, indicated that:

*I go to church meetings and pray every day. Religious teaching instils a sense of discipline and respect for diverse viewpoints, which is essential for critical thinking, too. I learn to listen to and understand others' perspectives. This respectful engagement with individuals strengthens my critical thinking skills and helps me to make well-informed decisions. I pray daily because prayer works more than any physical activity or effort. You can study all books in the world, but without believing in the divine's miracles, you are nothing, and it will be challenging to succeed in your academics because we get attacked spiritually every minute…. we are not fighting against flesh and blood, but against principalities…. Efforts alone cannot solve man's issues.*

**Theme 5:** Faith in miracles over effort in achieving academic success

In her opinion, FPL05 said that:

*Asking If I believe in miracles and prayers more than effort, I will say yes, I do believe that because it is my spiritual missile. Everyone can think critically before taking action, but believing in the supreme being gives hope, spiritual strength, and protection. Tell you one miracle: I had a problem studying two particular courses last semester. Physics and Advanced Calculus, and I am not good at Mathematics. I fasted for days and asked God to intervene; honestly, I had 'A's in those courses, and I knew I put less effort into achieving those grades. I will believe in the miracles of God each day rather than depending on my efforts.*

The findings revealed a philosophical link between religious beliefs and ethical principles in shaping students' critical thinking and academic performance. Most students revealed prayers, miracles, and belief as vital pillars of their ethical and intellectual frameworks. The participants expressed that divine intervention through prayer or miracles complements and reinforces their academic pursuits and life challenges. Personal effort was acknowledged; however, students revealed that belief in supernatural beings is their core motivation and resilience source. The student also revealed that religious practices such as prayer encourage self-discipline, reflection, and an ethical decision-making approach, even when these beliefs contradict pure logic. The belief acts as a compass, providing hope and resoluteness in the face of academic adversity.

Moreover, the study revealed that prayer and belief in miracles considerably influence students' critical thinking abilities and academic performance, enhancing their cognitive processes. It also showed a delicate tension between religious commitments and academic responsibilities, as students often struggle to harmonise spiritual practices with educational demands. Although these practices can cultivate discipline, focus, and resilience, potentially benefiting academic success, reliance on religious beliefs for guidance and support may inadvertently marginalise non-religious students, thereby deteriorating educational disparities. The study further illuminated a sharp contrast between faith-based reliance and humanist theory, which advocate personal autonomy, critical reasoning, and self-reliance as the primary vehicles for academic success.

Finally, the study found that although belief in miracles is correlated with a slight improvement in critical thinking abilities, the association remains weak. This suggests that other elements such as educational experiences, pedagogical approaches, cognitive engagement, and personal traits like motivation and self-efficacy likely play a role in shaping critical thinking. Furthermore, an analysis of gender differences showed no substantial discrepancy in how belief in miracles and prayer influenced academic performance; such beliefs affect both male and female students similarly and portentously.

# DISCUSSION

## Quantitative

The quantitative results revealed that religious beliefs and ethical principles enhance the ability to think critically and portentously, and these factors play a role in students' cognitive processes. This assertion is in sync with Eckersley (2022), indicating that spirituality and moral values can provide a solid foundation for reflective thinking and ethical decision-making. The regular practice of prayer is viewed as more effective than personal effort in achieving academic excellence, indicating the firm reliance on spiritual practices to reinforce academic performance. Small (2023) claims that some students may think other students perceive them negatively. This perception is supported by studies suggesting that religious practices can imp a sense of discipline, focus, and resilience, which are beneficial for academic success (Esat et al., 2024). Academic achievement plays a momentous part in students' development, as it is closely linked to school adaptation and future success in life. Esat et al. (2024) argue that participation in church activities and religious groups provides students with access to academic counselling and information on higher education and financial support, even though this reliance on religious groups for such resources may inadvertently exclude students who are not religious or do not belong to a supportive religious community. Possibly, widening educational disparities debunk that miracles and prayers increase academic performance, which infers that in the technological world, every facet of human activity comes with critical thinking and applications in real-life circumstances (Epstein, 2024).

Moreover, students believed prayer directly improved their academic results and regularly attended church meetings for prayers and worship. This consistent engagement in religious activities on campus suggests a deep integration of belief into students' daily routines. Integrating belief into students' daily routines may offer comfort and a sense of community, but it does not align with Humanist theory's emphasis on personal autonomy, critical thinking, and self-reliance. This assertion is in corroboration with Leslie and Borunda (2024) that humanism advocates for an equilibrium where students' achievements are seen as the result of their efforts and abilities, with an openness to questioning and exploring a variety of perspectives beyond religious frameworks to benefit the well-being of all people. Studies also show that humanism encourages individuals to rely on their abilities, efforts, and rational thinking to achieve goals rather than attributing success to divine intervention (Mateus, 2024; Sa'dullah, 2019a; Sharma, 2024).

The study also revealed that students sometimes struggle to find sufficient time to reflect on their academic content, pointing to a potential skirmish between religious commitments and academic responsibilities. This tension is reflected in the existing literature that explores the challenges of balancing spiritual practices with academic demands (Karakas, 2010; Shields, Kestenbaum & Dunn, 2015). The study revealed the challenge students face in balancing their religious commitments with academic responsibilities, signifying that insufficient time for reflection on academic content can create conflicts. This arduousness accentuates the need for academic institutions to consider the spiritual practices of students and their impact on academic performance. Literature supports this notion, indicating that integrating spiritual practices can enhance well-being and academic success (Benefiel et al., 2014; Javaid et al., 2024; Esat et al., 2024; Karahan et al., 2024). However, the pressures of academic life can hinder students' ability to engage in these practices (Parks, 2011; Small, 2023), who revealed that students often struggle to align their spiritual beliefs with their educational pursuits. This suggests that universities might benefit from creating environments accommodating spiritual and academic needs, ultimately fostering a more holistic approach to student development.

In practical terms, while an increase in belief in miracles is associated with a slight rise in students' critical thinking abilities, the correlation remains weak. This proposes that belief in miracles does not strongly predict or account for a significant portion of the variance in critical thinking skills. Other factors are likely to substantially influence critical thinking development, such as educational background, teaching methods, cognitive engagement, and exposure to diverse perspectives (Almulla, 2023). Moreover, personal attributes like motivation, self-efficacy, and prior knowledge could also play a critical role (Campo et al., 2023; Lee, Wang & Lim, 2024). Although significant, the observed correlation indicates that a belief in miracles does not solely drive the relationship and that educators should consider a broader range of influences when implementing critical thinking skills among students. In essence, the independent sample t-test showed no

significant differences in the influence of belief in miracles and prayers on critical thinking and academic performance between male and female respondents. This implies that gender does not play a significant role in how these beliefs impact academic performance. The mean difference further reinforces the idea that the effects of belief in miracles and prayers on critical thinking and performance are consistent across genders. This finding infers that educational interventions aimed at enhancing academic performance through spiritual beliefs may be equally applicable to all students (Rozikan et al. 2024), regardless of gender, promoting a more inclusive approach to addressing the diverse needs of the student body.

**Qualitative**

The qualitative results indicated that some students emphasise the balance between faith and personal effort, while others place significant value on divine intervention, attributing their achievements to prayer and fasting. Notwithstanding all the tensions between religious beliefs and logical thinking, students steer these conflicts dynamically, integrating faith and reason to promote personal growth and academic achievement. The themes generated from the research question are discussed below.

Some students indicated that their religious beliefs provide a moral compass, helping them make decisions logically and morally. This moral guidance integrates religious values with critical thinking practices (MPL01, MPL02, MPL03). MPL01 emphasised the alignment of religious teachings with the principles of critical thinking, perceiving that religious beliefs (such as miracles and prayers) provide a moral foundation that encourages thorough and ethical assessment of information. This perspective was echoed by MPL02, who indicated that religiously, ethics guide students' decision-making by incorporating moral considerations. Both members acknowledged a potential conflict between religious beliefs (miracles and prayers) and logical thinking, yet they believed in the complementary nature of miracles and prayers and personal effort in achieving academic success. Chou, Lee, and Fudano (2022) assert that ethical values typically focus on fairness, honesty, accountability, and responsibility, aiming to encourage integrity and deter unethical behaviour. Religion has traditionally influenced the development of ethical and moral values (Astrachan et al., 2020; Elsayed, Lestari & Brougham, 2023). In the Euthyphro, Socrates posed a well-known question: is something good because the gods love it, or do the gods love it because it is inherently good? While Socrates leaned toward the latter idea, many have contended that God defines morality and cannot exist independently of divine command (McKay & Whitehouse, 2015). This aligns with the view that religious beliefs guide moral decisions, which are made through religious principles and rational deliberation.

The majority of the students revealed that their belief, especially prayer, plays a significant role in their academic journey. For them, prayer offers hope, emotional support, and spiritual strength, often superseding efforts or work (MPL02, MPL03, FPL04, FPL05). FPL05 attributes her success under challenging courses to fasting and prayer rather than academic effort. MPL03 referenced that religious beliefs encourage questioning and reflection, an essential critical thinking component, while addressing the misconception that believers lack logical reasoning. Liyanapathirana and Akroyd (2023) state that religions frequently incorporate rituals, prayer, and worship to establish a connection with the divine or express belief. Students often include moral and ethical guidelines that influence behaviour and decision-making. Belief at work has emerged as a social movement addressing the concern that individuals and churchgoers who wish to integrate their faith with their work often feel unsupported by those outside the church. Although students from various faith backgrounds are involved, the Christian community has been the most active in promoting the dialogue around the intersection of faith and work (Alayan, 2021; Miller, 2007). Grade Point Average (GPA) is a continuous indicator of a student's academic performance, reflecting their ability to engage in and sustain various self-regulatory behaviours. These behaviours include effective time management, maintaining emotional balance, and ensuring physical fitness, all contributing to academic success. Therefore, by managing these aspects, students demonstrate their capacity to adapt and perform consistently over time (David, Singh, Ribeiro & Gomes, 2022; Rode et al., 2005).

Some students acknowledged the importance of effort and logical reasoning despite relying heavily on religious beliefs. They see prayer as enhancing their capacity for critical thinking and perseverance, but they also maintain that effort plays a role in their academic performance (MPL01, MPL03). MPL03 emphasises the balance between prayer and self-reflection as necessary for critical thinking and academic performance. The

coexistence of religious beliefs and logical reasoning suggests that students recognise the complementary roles of faith and effort in their academic journey. Though prayer is seen as a means to enhance critical thinking and perseverance (Wood & Hilton, 2012), students understand that personal effort is equally crucial for success (Lynam, Cachia, and Stock, 2024). This perspective resonates with the idea that faith can inspire and motivate, but personal diligence and intellectual effort justly drive achievement (Small, 2023).

A key sub-theme emerged is the belief in divine intervention, where some students attribute their academic success more to miracles than personal effort. These students view religious practices like prayer and fasting as more influential in achieving good grades than studying alone. For instance, FPL05 recounts a personal experience of earning 'A's in challenging courses, crediting this achievement to their dedication to fasting and prayer rather than academic preparation. This perspective highlights faith's significant role in shaping their approach to education and success. Belief in God does not justify elevating one's truth claims or asserting superiority over individuals of other faiths. Instead, it recognises that the ultimate truth belongs to God, and all people are viewed as equals, deserving of God's care. This perspective promotes humility and respect for others, acknowledging that faith in God should foster unity and compassion rather than division or superiority (Grümme 2017).

Students specified that their religious beliefs enhance respect for others' perspectives, enhancing their critical thinking ability. Therefore, engaging with diverse viewpoints allows them to develop well-rounded arguments and decisions (FPL04). FPL04 emphasised how religious discipline teaches respect for different viewpoints, which improves critical thinking. The influence of religious ethics on promoting respect for diverse viewpoints has significant implications for both personal growth and academic development (Cáceres, Nussbaum & Ortiz, 2020; Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021). Students who draw on their religious teachings to respect others' perspectives enhance their ability to think critically, as engaging with various believers helps them form more comprehensive arguments (Gardner, 2021) and make balanced decisions (Elsayed et al., 2023). This respect for diversity, rooted in religious discipline, promotes tolerance and strengthens their capacity for thoughtful reflection, enriching their intellectual and moral development and academic performance. Some students acknowledge that there can be conflicts between religious beliefs and logical thinking. However, they direct these conflicts by understanding the dynamic nature of belief and logic (MPL01). MPL01 admitted that there can be clatters between belief systems and logic but accepts the dynamics as part of being a believer. This assertion aligns with (Makbul et al., 2024) that distinguishing the tension between religious beliefs and logical thinking has imperative implications for students' intellectual and spiritual growth. Hence, by acknowledging these conflicts, students like MPL01 demonstrated an awareness of the intricacy of steering faith and logic. Somewhat seeing these clangs as insurmountable, they view them as a natural aspect of being a believer. This dynamic approach encourages flexibility and adaptability in reconciling different belief systems, endorsing a deeper thoughtful of their belief and critical reasoning skills, eventually contributing to their academic performance.

The belief in spiritual protection as a factor in academic achievement highlights the intersection of belief and academics, where students view spiritual warfare as directly influencing their success. For some, corresponding to FPL04, prayer is a requisite for safeguarding against unseen spiritual forces that they believe can hinder academic progress. This reliance on spiritual protection suggests a balance between faith-based practices and rational academic efforts. It implies that religious ethics play a decisive role in shaping students into responsible and reflective critical thinkers, blending spiritual beliefs with practical approaches to achieving academic success (Muksin, 2024; Yasin et al., 2024). Hassan, Rahman, and Islam (2023) suggested that religion plays a role in daily life, impacting personal choices and behaviours. Students' spirituality is linked to their academic performance in schools, as revealed by Benefiel et al. (2014), who noted that integrating spiritual beliefs and ethical values can enhance performance through practices like regular prayer. Moreover, research indicates that many individuals feel God is a guiding influence in their work processes (Snodgrass et al., 2017).

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the study revealed an intricate philosophical connection between religious beliefs and ethical principles in shaping students' critical thinking and academic performance. For many students, prayer,

miracles, and belief are not merely supplementary to their academic endeavours but serve as the cornerstone of their intellectual and ethical frameworks. These spiritual practices provide a deep reservoir of motivation, resilience, and ethical guidance, reinforcing that belief can be a powerful catalyst for academic perseverance and decision-making. This belief system offers a moral compass that guides students through academic challenges, inculcating a sense of purpose and direction even when these convictions diverge from purely rational approaches.

Nevertheless, the findings also emphasised a tension between the commitments to religious practices and the demands of academic life. It revealed that faith-based practices such as prayer improve discipline, focus, and resilience, which are beneficial to academic achievement; they may inadvertently create an exclusive environment for non-religious students. This reliance on religious communities for academic and emotional support risks deepening educational disparities, as it may exclude those who do not share the same beliefs. Moreover, the contrast between faith-based reliance and humanist philosophy reveals a fundamental challenge in balancing spiritual and intellectual development. Therefore, educational institutions are responsible for creating a more inclusive environment that acknowledges and integrates spiritual practices and critical thinking in promoting holistic growth for all students.

The belief in miracles shows a weak correlation with improved critical thinking skills; the study suggests that other factors such as educational background, teaching methodologies, cognitive engagement, and intrinsic traits like motivation and self-efficacy play a pivotal role in increasing critical thinking among students. The absence of significant gender differences in how belief in miracles influences academic performance further supports the notion that spiritual beliefs can enhance academic achievement uniformly across different student groups. To cultivate a truly inclusive and supportive educational setting, institutions must consider interventions that recognise the role of spirituality while instantaneously emphasising personal effort, rational inquiry, and cognitive engagement as indispensable components of student development.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, it is recommended that educational institutions adopt a holistic approach that integrates both spiritual and intellectual development. This could include offering quiet prayer, meditation, or reflection spaces and organising faith-based support groups or mentorship programs promoting community. Furthermore, educators in institutions, devout religious educators and professors, policymakers, and stakeholders should adopt a holistic approach that integrates both spiritual and intellectual development among students. Workshops or courses on ethical decision-making drawn from secular and religious perspectives can help students develop a balanced approach to critically thinking about academic and life challenges. Also, administrators, educators, and professors should incorporate ethical reasoning and critical thinking into the curriculum to respect diverse belief systems and promote spirituality and academic performance among university students. This can bridge the gap between faith-based reliance and humanist epitomes, providing a comprehensive cognitive and moral development framework. Finally, educational interventions that promote academic success through spiritual beliefs should be inclusive, ensuring that non-religious students or those from diverse religious backgrounds are not marginalised.

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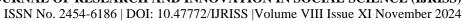
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