Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi

Dergiabant

2026, 14(1): 329-345, doi: 10.33931/dergiabant.1842592

Negotiating Spirituality and Institutional Religion: The Experiences of Yoga Practitioners in Türkiye[1]

Ruhsallık ve Kurumsal Din Arasında: Türkiye'de Yoga Pratiği Yapan Bireylerin Deneyimleri

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Geliş Tarihi (*Received*): 15.12.2025 **Kabul Tarihi (*Accepted*):** 1.03.2026 **Yayın Tarihi (*Published*):** 31.05.2026

Abstract: This study aims to explore how yoga practitioners in Türkiye perceive institutional religion, including the role of yoga in their religious lives, their motivations for turning to yoga, and their perceptions of institutional religion's approach to yoga. Semi-structured online interviews were conducted with 16 participants selected through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed through thematic content analysis within the psychology of religion framework, assisted by MAXQDA 2020. As a result of this analytical process, four themes were identified: motivation for starting yoga, after yoga, religious perspectives on yoga, and why yoga. Findings indicate that participants initially practiced yoga for psychological and physiological benefits, and individuals who felt discomfort with the strict norms and negative connotations associated with institutional religion were particularly drawn to yoga's flexible and inclusive structure. Contrary to the common assumption in Türkiye that yoga leads individuals away from religion, the results suggest that sustained yoga practice may foster forms of religiosity and spirituality that develop independently of traditional or institutional religion.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Psychology of Religion, Yoga, Institutional Religion, Religiosity, Spirituality.

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Öz: Bu çalışma, Türkiye'de yoga yapan bireylerin kurumsal dini nasıl anlamlandırdıklarını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, yoganın dini yaşamdaki yeri, bireyleri yogaya yönelten etkenler ve kurumsal dinin yogaya bakışına ilişkin algılar birlikte ele alınmaktadır. Amaçlı örnekleme yöntemiyle seçilen 16 katılımcı ile yarı yapılandırılmış çevrim içi görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu doğrultusunda elde edilen veriler, din psikolojisi çerçevesinde tematik içerik analizi yöntemiyle ve MAXQDA 2020 programı kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Bu analiz süreci sonucunda dört tema belirlenmiştir: yogaya başlama motivasyonu, yoga sonrası, yogaya ilişkin dini perspektifler ve yogayı tercih etme nedenleri. Bulgular, katılımcıların başlangıçta yogaya ağırlıklı olarak psikolojik ve fizyolojik yararlar nedeniyle yöneldiklerini, kurumsal dinle ilişkilendirilen katı normlar ve olumsuz çağrışımlardan rahatsızlık duyan bireylerin ise yoganın esnek ve kapsayıcı yapısına özellikle ilgi gösterdiklerini ortaya koymaktadır. Türkiye bağlamında yaygın olan, yoga pratiğinin bireyleri dinden uzaklaştırdığı yönündeki varsayımın aksine, bulgular sürdürülen yoga pratiğinin geleneksel ya da kurumsal dinden bağımsız biçimlerde gelişen bir dindarlık ve ruhsallık (maneviyat) anlayışını destekleyebileceğine işaret etmektedir.

Keywords: Din Psikolojisi, Yoga, Kurumsal Din, Dindarlık, Ruhsallık.

Atıf/Cite as: Aydar, Ayşe. "Negotiating Spirituality and Institutional Religion: The Experiences of Yoga Practitioners in Türkiye". *Dergiabant* 14/1 (Mayıs 2026), 329-345. doi: 10.33931/dergiabant.1842592

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[1] This study was presented as a paper at the IAPR, Birmingham, August 2025.

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1. Introduction

Yoga, originally rooted in the fundamental doctrines and contemplative techniques of Far Eastern religious traditions, has long been regarded as a means of mental and spiritual meditation [3]. The Sanskrit term yoga is commonly understood as the "union" of the individual self (jīva-ātman) with the supreme Self (parama-ātman). Over time, the concept has evolved into a diverse tradition encompassing multiple schools and practices.[4] In the contemporary world, however, the practice of yoga has expanded far beyond its traditional religious context. Individuals who do not adhere to Buddhism or Hinduism, including those affiliated with different faiths as well as those with no religious belief, are increasingly engaging in yoga. Current estimates suggest that approximately 300 million people practice yoga globally [5], demonstrating its transformation into a widespread and popular activity. This global diffusion has positioned yoga at the intersection of religion, spirituality, health, and popular culture. Parallel to global trends, interest in yoga appears to have increased in Türkiye as well. In recent years, yoga has become more visible within urban contexts, wellness-oriented lifestyles, and alternative health practices. Although the exact number of yoga practitioners in the country is not officially documented, the growing presence of yoga studios and practices in different urban settings (including cities commonly perceived as religiously conservative) has been noted in observations and practitioner narratives, suggesting a broader cultural diffusion of yoga in contemporary Türkiye. Consequently, the topic has become the focus of research across several academic disciplines, particularly psychology and sociology.[6] Such studies aim to understand yoga not only as a physical practice but also as a phenomenon with psychological, spiritual, and socio-cultural implications.

Clarifying also the distinction between the concepts of religion and spirituality is beneficial for the present study, particularly given the way these terms shape the interpretation of participants' experiences in the following sections. A substantial body of literature has attempted to conceptualize and differentiate the two constructs.[7] While religion was historically understood as a broad category encompassing both institutional and personal elements, contemporary scholarship increasingly uses the term to refer primarily to the rigid, formally structured, and institutionally regulated dimensions of belief and practice; in contrast, spirituality has come to be associated with personal experience, transcendence, inner meaning, and existential exploration.[8]

The distinction between religion and spirituality is relatively well-established in contemporary Western scholarship. However, in societies where Islam constitutes the dominant cultural and theological framework, this separation is often less pronounced. In Türkiye, as in many Muslim-majority contexts, religion and spirituality frequently function as complementary and interwoven categories rather than

[3] Ali İhsan Yitik, "YOGA," *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Accessed 15 October 2025).

[4] Georg Feuerstein, *The YogaTradition Its History, Literature, and Practice* (Arizona: Hohm Press, 2008), 56-57.

[5] "Yoga Statistics," *YOGI TIMES* (Accessed 15 October 2024).

[6] Gizem Kandemir Altunel et al., "Turizmde Maneviyat Arayış Aracı Olarak Yoga," *Türk Turizm Araştırmaları Dergisi* 4/1 (2020), 152–163; Figen Kanbir, "Modernite ve Ontolojik Güvenlik Bağlamında Yoga Kültürü: Yoga Eğitmen Leri ve Uygulayıcıları Üzerine Nitel Bir Araştırma," *Sosyolojik Bağlam Dergisi* 5/1 (2024), 27–50; Canan Karadaş, "Yoga Yapan Bireylerin Yoga Öz-Etkililik Düzeyleri ve Etkileyen Faktörler," *YOBÜ Sağlık Bilimleri Fakültesi Dergisi* 3/2 (2022), 137–146; Sevda Köyüstü - Ali Murat Kırık, "Yogaya Genel Bir Bakış ve Yoga-Sağlık İlişkisi," *21. Yüzyılda Eğitim ve Toplum* 10/28 (2021), 123–139; Funda Polatcanlı - Sinan Akın, "Yoga uygulamalarının stresle başa çıkma düzeyi üzerine etkisinin incelenmesi," *Education Science and Sports* 6/1 (2024), 39–51; Yaşar Sari - Elif Şenel, "Bir Ekorekreasyon Faaliyeti Olarak Yoga Turizmi Üzerine Bir İnceleme," *Uluslararası Kırsal Turizm ve Kalkınma Dergisi (IRTAD)* 2/2 (2018), 20–23.

[7] R. P. Turner et al., "Religious or Spiritual Problem. A Culturally Sensitive Diagnostic Category in the DSM-IV", *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 183/7 (1995), 435-444; Brian J. Zinnbauer et al., "The Emerging Meanings of Religiousness and Spirituality: Problems and Prospects", *Journal of Personality* 67/6 (1999), 889-919; Peter C. Hill - Kenneth I. Pargament, "Advances in the Conceptualization and Measurement of Religion and Spirituality: Implications for Physical and Mental Health Research.", *American Psychologist* 58/1 (2003), 64-74; Gerard Saucier - Katarzyna Skrzypińska, "Spiritual But Not Religious? Evidence for Two Independent Dispositions", *Journal of Personality* 74/5 (2006), 1257-1292; Nancy T. Ammerman, "Spiritual But Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52/2 (2013), 258-278.

[8] Kenneth I. Pargament, "The Psychology of Religion and Spirituality? Yes and No," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 9/1 (1999), 3–16; Peter C. Hill et al., "Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality: Points of Commonality, Points of Departure," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 30/1 (2000), 51–77.

mutually exclusive ones.[9] Nevertheless, in the present study, institutional religion is used to denote socially shared and collectively regulated beliefs, norms, and ritual practices that operate through formal structures and prescriptive rules, excluding individual variation in interpretation. By contrast, spirituality refers to individually articulated experiences of meaning, transcendence, and connection, which are not bound to doctrinal commitments or institutional authority. The term religion, on the other hand, is employed as a broader category that may encompass both institutional and spiritual dimensions, recognizing that in many cultural settings these dimensions are intertwined rather than mutually exclusive. Accordingly, participants' references to "religious attitudes" are analytically treated as perceptions of how institutional religion is represented, mediated, or embodied by religious actors, rather than as direct statements about institutional doctrine itself. Finally, in the study, religious individuals (or religious adherents) are understood as social actors who interpret, negotiate, and sometimes contest these institutional norms in everyday life.

Within this framework, yoga is treated not as a theological (though its religious significance in Hindu and Buddhist contexts is acknowledged), but rather as a spiritual practice.[10] In the modern context, yoga is typically performed outside formal religious institutions, yet it engages directly with central domains of the psychology of religion, including meaning-making, transcendence, and experiential spirituality. In this respect, yoga constitutes a phenomenon that cannot be fully explained by classical typologies of religiosity, nor reduced to purely profane bodily exercise. In a cultural setting such as Türkiye, where institutional religion maintains strong symbolic and social influence, yoga provides a fruitful site for investigating how individuals negotiate the boundaries between institutional religiosity and spirituality.

Turning to studies conducted on yoga, most studies have primarily investigated the effects of yoga on mental health and well-being in the field of psychology.[11] Beyond this focus, a limited body of psychological research has examined the relationship between yoga and spirituality. For instance, Büssing and colleagues, in their study *Development of Specific Aspects of Spirituality during a 6-Month Intensive Yoga Practice*, reported that yoga instructor trainees initially exhibited low levels of spirituality; however, it significantly increased after six months of intensive yoga training.[12] Similarly, research conducted by Park and colleagues in *Why Practice Yoga? Practitioners' Motivations for Adopting and Maintaining Yoga Practice* demonstrated that although many participants initially engaged in yoga for reasons such as physical fitness or stress reduction, spiritual motivations gradually became more prominent over time.[13] A more comprehensive inquiry was carried out by Csala and colleagues in their systematic review, *The Relationship Between Yoga and Spirituality: A Systematic Review of Empirical Research*, which indicated a generally positive association between yoga and spirituality, while also noting that physical goals remain more dominant than spiritual ones among Western practitioners.[14] Finally, among the studies conducted in Türkiye, the most prominent work is *Türkiye'de Spiritüel Arayışlar (Spiritual Pursuits in Turkey)* by Cengiz, Küçükural, and Gür (2023), which investigates motivations for engaging in practices such as yoga across the country.[15] The study shows that rapid modernization and secularization in Türkiye have led, especially among urban, educated middle-class individuals, to turn not only to yoga

[9] Asım Yapıcı, "Din Psikolojisinde Süreklilik ve Değişim: Kavramsal, Tarihsel ve Yöntemsel Bir Değerlendirme," *Rize İlahiyat Dergisi* 30 (December 30, 2025), 30.

[10] Mary Grace Antony, "'It's Not Religious, But It's Spiritual:' Appropriation and the Universal Spirituality of Yoga", *The Journal of Communication and Religion* 37/4 (2014), 63-81.

[11] Agneta Anderzén-Carlsson et al., "Medical Yoga: Another Way of Being in the World-a Phenomenological Study from the Perspective of Persons Suffering from Stress-Related Symptoms," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being* 9 (2014).

[12] Arndt Büssing et al., "Development of Specific Aspects of Spirituality during a 6-Month Intensive Yoga Practice," *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* 2012/1 (2012), 1-7.

[13] Crystal L Park et al., "Why Practice Yoga? Practitioners' Motivations for Adopting and Maintaining Yoga Practice," *Journal of Health Psychology* 21/6 (2016), 887–896.

[14] Barbara Csala et al., "The Relationship Between Yoga and Spirituality: A Systematic Review of Empirical Research," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021), 1-17.

[15] Kurtuluş Cengiz et al., *Türkiye'de Spiritüel Arayışlar* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2023).

but also to various spiritual practices as resources for coping, self-development, and meaning-making beyond institutional religion.

Despite their valuable contributions, these studies differ from the present research, which aims to explore how individuals who practice yoga in Türkiye perceive institutional religion and its associated beliefs and practices in one fundamental respect. Existing scholarship has largely focused on Western practitioners, whose sociocultural and religious contexts differ markedly from those in Türkiye. In Western settings, religion and spirituality are commonly treated as distinct categories, and identities such as "spiritual but not religious" are widely used to denote non-institutional forms of religiosity.[16] In Türkiye, as in many Muslim-majority societies, however, institutional religion maintains a strong symbolic influence, and religion and spirituality remain largely intertwined, with Western terminology rarely employed in everyday discourse.[17] The present study is situated within the Turkish cultural and religious landscape, offering a perspective that has been largely overlooked in the literature. By examining yoga practitioners in Türkiye, the study addresses a significant gap and provides insights that cannot be captured through Western-centered samples alone. As mentioned earlier, a study addressing similar issues has been conducted in the Turkish context. However, although the research offers an important sociological perspective on spiritual pursuits, its findings do not examine the phenomenon through a psychology of religion lens, which constitutes the distinct focus of the present research. Moreover, most existing studies focus primarily on individuals' spirituality and tend to leave institutional religion outside the scope of analysis, which is one of the key ways in which the present research differs from prior work. In this study, however, the concept of institutional religion is employed to understand participants' perspectives on beliefs and practices that are widely accepted and socially shared, rather than their private and subjective faith experiences. By doing so, the study aims to capture how yoga practitioners position themselves in relation to socially shared religious norms, rather than limiting the analysis to their private, subjective understanding of religion.

In summary, despite extensive research on yoga and spiritual practices, there is a clear gap in the literature regarding how yoga practitioners in Türkiye perceive institutional religion, interpret its stance toward yoga, and integrate yoga into their religious or spiritual lives. This gap, particularly within the framework of the psychology of religion, forms the central motivation of the present study.

2. Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design to provide a comprehensive account of the perspectives of individuals practicing yoga toward institutional religion (including their motivations for engaging in yoga, the role yoga plays in their religious or spiritual lives, and their perceptions of institutional religion's stance toward yoga). Semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic content analysis, which enabled the identification of patterned meanings in participants' accounts, including their motivations for engaging in yoga and the transformations they reported over time. Using an interpretive analytical framework, the study aims to identify recurring patterns and meanings in participants' accounts and to present these findings in a descriptive, context-sensitive manner. [18] Finally, from a psychology-of-religion standpoint, the study adopts a functional approach. In this framework, the phenomena are interpreted in terms of the roles they fulfill in individuals' lives, rather than in relation to doctrinal content or theological truth claims.

The main aim of this study is to explore how individuals who practice yoga in Türkiye perceive institutional religion. In line with this aim, the study seeks to examine participants' motivations for turning to yoga, the role of yoga in their religious lives, and their perceptions of institutional religion's approach to yoga. To address this aim, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

[16] Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Hill - Pargament, "Advances in the Conceptualization and Measurement of Religion and Spirituality," 52.
[17] İsmail Albayrak, "İslam Açısından Din ve Maneviyat İlişkisi," *Değerler ve Eğitimi II Sempozyum Bildirileri Kitabi*, (2015), 113.
[18] John W. Creswell, *Araştırma Deseni Nitel, Nicel ve Karma Yöntem Yaklaşımları* (Türközü Ankara: Eğiten Kitap, 2017); Sharan B. Merriam, *Nitel Araştırma Yöntemleri*, trans. Selahattin Turan (Ankara: Nobel Yayınları, 2018).

1. What motivates individuals to practice yoga?

2. Are there changes in religious attitudes and behaviors after practicing yoga, and if so, what are they?

3. How do individuals perceive the stance of institutional religion on yoga?

4. Why do individuals prefer yoga over the established practices of institutional religion?

2.1. Participants

The study group comprised 16 individuals who regularly practiced yoga. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, and access to the sample was facilitated via the snowball technique. To protect participant anonymity, personal identifiers were replaced with alphanumeric codes, with each participant designated as "P1, P2, P3, …, P16."

Participants had been engaged in yoga practice for a minimum of six months and up to 10 years. Their ages ranged from 21 to 44, and the group consisted of two men (P7 and P8) and fourteen women. Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently enrolled in, or to have completed, a university-level education. Detailed socio-demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in the table below.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Participants[19]

Participant Number	Age	Education Attainment	Occupation	Marital Status	Duration of Yoga Practice
P1 (female)	25	MA-S	Teacher	Single	5 years
P2 (female)	41	BA	Unemployed	Married	6 years
P3 (female)	24	BA	Teacher & Yoga Instructor	Single	6 years
P4 (female)	42	BA	Yoga Instructor	Married	8 years
P5 (female)	25	MS	Biotechnology Specialist	Single	3 years
P6 (female)	29	BA	Yoga Instructor	Single	5 years
P7 (male)	44	BA	Teacher	Single	7 years
P8 (male)	40	BA	International Trade Specialist	Single	1 year
P9 (female)	21	UG	Student	Single	7 months
P10 (female)	41	BA	Regional Manager/ Yoga Instructor	Married	6 years

[19] Educational status categories are abbreviated as follows: BA = Bachelor's degree holder; MA-S = Master's degree student; MA = Master's degree holder, UG = Undergraduate Student.

P11 (female)	26	BA	Teacher	Single	7 years
P12 (female)	45	BA	Yoga Instructor	Married	7 years
P13 (female)	30	BA	Engineer	Single	6 years
P14 (female)	29	MA-S	Seafarer	Single	5 years
P15 (female)	27	MA-S	Student	Single	1 year
P16 (female)	40	BA	Yoga Instructor	Married	10 years

Finally, ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Şırnak University (10/02/2025). The committee approved the data collection procedures and confirmed their compliance with ethical standards. All participants provided informed consent, and voluntary participation was ensured. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

2.2. Data Collection Measures

Data were collected through semi-structured online interviews comprising five open-ended questions focusing on participants' experiences with yoga and institutional religion. Each interview was conducted via video conference, lasted approximately 35–60 minutes, and was audio-recorded with participant consent. The semi-structured format allowed participants to elaborate freely on their experiences while ensuring that key thematic areas relevant to the research questions were consistently addressed. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, and anonymity was ensured by using participant codes in place of personal identifiers. All data were stored securely and handled in accordance with ethical research standards.

3. Analysis

A qualitative content analysis approach was used to examine the interview data. All transcripts were uploaded to MAXQDA 2020, after which a multi-stage coding procedure was applied. First, meaning units were identified and labelled through open coding. These initial codes were then compared, refined, and clustered to form conceptual categories. In the final stage, the categories were synthesized and abstracted into themes.

4. Findings

The analytic process yielded four central themes that captured the essence of participants' narratives: motivations for starting yoga, after yoga, religious perspectives on yoga, and why yoga.

4.1. Motivations For Starting Yoga

The first theme focuses on the participants' motivations for beginning yoga. Within this theme, the participants' perspectives on why they started practicing yoga were coded, resulting in the formation of five categories that represent meaningful clusters of these codes.

Table 2. Theme of Motivations for Starting Yoga and Categories

Theme	Categories	Responses	Codes
Motivations for Starting Yoga	1.Physiological Factors	8	1.1. Engagement in physical activity 1.2. Desire for recovery
	2.Psychological Factors	7	2.1. Avoidance of anxiety and stress 2.2. Turning toward the inner self 2.3. Pursuit of mystical experiences 2.4. Coping with disappointment 2.5. Desire to develop mindfulness 2.6. Seeking a sense of tranquility
	3. Advice	3	3.1. A recommendation from a close one
	4. Major Life Events	2	4.1. Divorce/separation 4.2.Having a child
	5. Search for Novelty	1	5.1.Desire to try something new

4.2. After Yoga

The second theme addresses changes in participants' religious beliefs and practices or spirituality after beginning yoga. In this theme, participants' statements were coded, yielding two categories that represented coherent patterns.

Table 3. Theme of After Yoga and Categories.

Theme	Categories	Responses	Codes
After Yoga	1.Individuals Experiencing Positive Transformation	9	1.1. Increasing religiosity 1.2. (Re)engagement in religious practices 1.3. Awakening religious curiosity 1.4. Religious recommitment 1.5. Spiritual transformation beyond institutional religion 1.6. Non-theistic spiritual transformation 1.7. Conversion from atheism
	2.Individuals Who Remain Unchanged	7	2.1. No shift in belief

4.3. Religious Perspectives on Yoga

The third theme focuses on participants' perspectives regarding institutional religion's view of yoga. In this theme, participants' statements were coded, leading to the identification of three categories that reflect coherent patterns within the codes.

Table 4. Theme of Religious Perspectives on Yoga and Categories

Theme	Categories	Responses	Codes
Religious Perspectives on Yoga	1.Negative	10	1.1. Attitudes of religious people 1.2. Conflict between yoga and religion
	2.Positive	4	2.1. Science/ health practice 2.2. Common ground with religion
	3.Neutral	2	3.1. Intention/purpose 3.2. Not a threat or rival to religion

4.4. Why Yoga

The fourth theme centers on why individuals practicing yoga prefer it over the established institutional religious practices. In this theme, participants' statements were coded, resulting in the formation of four categories that represent coherent patterns among the codes.

Table 5. Theme of Why Yoga and Categories

Theme	Categories	Responses	Codes
Why Yoga?	1. Inadequacies of Institutional Religion	25	1.1. Negative public image 1.2. Strict and rigid rules 1.3. Moral values being sidelined 1.4. Inability to renew or adapt itself 1.5. Gender inequality 1.6. Intimidating 1.7. Lack of emotional or social engagement 1.8. Insufficient spiritual fulfillment 1.9. Hindrance to personal growth 1.10. Overemphasis on the afterlife or the future
	2. Positive Aspects of Yoga	22	2.1. Flexible practice 2.2. Embracing and inclusive attitude 2.3. Self-reflection and inner awareness 2.4. Focus on becoming a better human being 2.5. Absence of punitive concepts or punishments 2.6. Gender equality 2.7. Connection with people on a personal level 2.8. Common goals with religion
	3. Criticisms Directed at Religious Individuals	14	3.1. Excessive focus on outward form and ritual 3.2. Lack of knowledge and understanding 3.3. Tendency to judge others

		3.4. Imposing beliefs onto others 3.5. Intolerance toward difference or diversity
4. Other Motivations	10	4.1 Interest in physical activity or sport 4.2. Desire to try something new 4.3. Willingness to explore all possible solutions 4.4. Seeking relaxation and mental relief

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that participants predominantly initiated yoga practice for physiological purposes, particularly exercise and physical recovery. This tendency aligns with previous research, which has consistently identified physical and psychological motivations as the primary determinants of yoga engagement, while underscoring its contributions to general health and overall well-being[20].

Participants who associate yoga with physical benefits often described it as a supportive practice for bodily health and recovery. One participant stated, *"Gaining strength and improving flexibility. That was my first goal"* (P11). Another participant emphasized the role of yoga in alleviating physical discomfort, stating, *"I suffered from severe joint pain, along with back, neck, and arm pain, among others"* (P14).

In line with physiological motivations, participants most frequently cited psychological reasons for starting yoga. These included *"avoidance of anxiety and stress"* and *"turning toward the inner self."* Consistent with these findings, prior research has demonstrated that yoga reduces depressive symptoms and promotes relaxation and overall well-being [21], supports emotion regulation [22], and is effective in treating anxiety disorders [23]. Similarly, in Türkiye, a study found that the majority of individuals engaging in spiritual practices were motivated primarily by health concerns [24]. Hence, it is not surprising that yoga serves as an activity addressing both psychological and physiological needs. One participant explained, *"I have experienced periods of stress, sadness, and anxiety about the future. During these times, I practice meditation to regulate my mood and cope with my worries"* (P15). Another participant emphasized the role of yoga in enhancing mindfulness, stating, *"It helps me focus on something, to clear my mind… to remain in the present moment"* (P1).

In addition to physiological and psychological motivations, some participants reported beginning yoga upon the suggestion of close acquaintances, following major life changes such as divorce or becoming a parent, or as a way to introduce novelty into their daily routines. For example, one participant explained, *"I had my daughter seven years ago. A year later, I felt that, how can I put it, I needed to get out more and find some relief."* (P2). Another participant stated that during the process of divorcing his wife, he tried many different ways in an attempt to cope and to feel better, expressing this as follows: *"You try praying, thinking that it might help; you try yoga as well, anything that could help."* (P8)

[20] Manisha Kalpesh Gohel et al., "Effect of Long-Term Regular Yoga on Physical Health of Yoga Practitioners", *Indian Journal of Community Medicine: Official Publication of Indian Association of Preventive & Social Medicine* 46/3 (2021), 508-510; Park et al., "Why Practice Yoga?", 887.

[21] American Psychological Association (APA), "Yoga Effective at Reducing Symptoms of Depression," (Accessed 30 October 2025).

[22] Carolina B. Menezes et al., "Yoga and Emotion Regulation: A Review of Primary Psychological Outcomes and Their Physiological Correlates," *Psychology & Neuroscience* 8/1 (2015), 82–101.

[23] Robin Nemeroff et al., "Yoga as a Treatment Intervention for Anxiety-Spectrum Disorders," *Practice Innovations* 9/2 (2024), 119–131; Amy Wachholtz - Kenneth Pargament, "Is Spirituality a Critical Ingredient of Meditation? Comparing the Effects of Spiritual Meditation, Secular Meditation, and Relaxation on Spiritual, Psychological, Cardiac, and Pain Outcomes," *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 28 (September 1, 2005), 369–384.

[24] Cengiz et al., *Türkiye'de Spiritüel Arayışlar*; Kanbir, "Modernite ve Ontolojik Güvenlik Bağlamında Yoga Kültürü: Yoga Eğitmen Leri ve Uygulayıcıları Üzerine Nitel Bir Araştırma."

Based on the data regarding motivations for starting yoga, all participants except one (P12), who stated that she *"began practicing yoga after having a spiritual experience during a vacation in Australia,"* did not report engaging in yoga for spiritual, religious, or transcendental reasons. These findings challenge prevailing assumptions in Türkiye, indicating that, contrary to common belief, individuals are primarily drawn to yoga for relaxation and relief from physical discomfort rather than for spiritual or religious purposes.

Taken together, these findings suggest that yoga is primarily approached by participants as a pragmatic and functional practice aimed at enhancing physical well-being and psychological self-regulation, rather than as a spiritual or religious pursuit. In the Turkish context, yoga appears to offer a relatively accessible and low-demand means of coping with bodily discomfort, emotional distress, and life transitions without requiring explicit engagement with religious doctrine or spiritual identity. The absence of explicitly spiritual motivations at the point of entry into yoga practice thus reflects a preference for practices perceived as instrumental, non-prescriptive, and adaptable to personal needs. In this sense, yoga operates as a hybrid practice situated between health and self-care, rather than as an expression of explicit spiritual or religious seeking.

When considering changes following yoga practice, some participants reported no alteration in their religious attitudes, consciously distinguishing yoga from their faith. A subset of these individuals emphasized that yoga is *"different from religion,"* describing it as a form of *"exercise"* or a *"teaching/philosophy,"* and therefore indicated that their religious outlook remained unaffected. These findings suggest that, in Türkiye as well, yoga is often perceived as distinct from religious elements, occasionally associated with abstract or spiritual concepts, yet without explicit religious references [25]. As an example, one participant expressed his views as follows: *"I have never considered myself a mu'min (pious Muslim) in the conventional sense. My practices of prayer, fasting, or my outlook on pilgrimage have never aligned with the framework of religion as traditionally defined. In this respect, I would describe myself as relatively more secular. Accordingly, although I identify as Muslim, my distance from those practices meant that yoga did not have an effect in that regard. However, I can state quite clearly that if I had also been Muslim in that conventional sense, someone who performs the five daily prayers, observes fasting, and so forth, I would most likely still have engaged in these yoga practices."* (P7).

The absence of religious change reported by some participants can be understood in relation to their pre-existing religious positioning and the interpretive frameworks through which yoga was experienced. Individuals who already defined themselves as distant from religious practices or who explicitly categorized yoga as a physical or philosophical activity tended to maintain a clear conceptual boundary between yoga and religion. For these participants, yoga was incorporated into daily life as a pragmatic tool for well-being rather than as a practice with existential or transcendent implications. Consequently, yoga did not challenge, expand, or reconfigure their religious attitudes, as it was not interpreted through a religious or spiritual lens. This finding suggests that change following yoga practice is not an automatic outcome of participation itself but is contingent upon individuals' prior religious orientations and symbolic repertoires. In this sense, stability in religious attitudes reflects not resistance or disengagement, but a coherent integration of yoga into an already established worldview.

However, surprisingly, the majority of participants reported different post-yoga experiences regarding religion. Some individuals reported that recognizing similarities between yoga and their faith led to a deepening of their religious beliefs, while another group stated that their engagement in yoga coincided with an increase in their participation in religious practices. One participant (P16), for example, stated: *"I practice the Sun Salutation series during my own sessions. Why wouldn't I pray? It's the same. Is it really difficult just to perform the ablution, and do it? This practice had a significant influence on me starting to pray; it motivated me tremendously in that regard."* Similarly, another participant (P5) highlighted the resonance between yoga and Islamic notions such as *tevekkül*, explaining: *"They called it 'tevekkül.' The same thing exists in yoga. Praying to the universe, praying to Allah…these are very similar. So, my belief in God has now reached a very firm ground."* On the other hand, several participants described a transformation that unfolded outside the

[25] Antony, ""It's Not Religious, But It's Spiritual."

boundaries of religion and was instead experienced as spiritual in a non-religious sense. For instance, one participant (P11) noted that, despite not believing in God, she felt *"immersed in a spiritual flow"* following yoga sessions. Two others (P6 and P12) likewise reported a sense of *"inner closeness"* to a creative force, even though they did not identify with any religion. This shift is exemplified further in P11's reflection: *"I have never really been a religious person since high school. However, something might have shifted with yoga. Every individual seeks something to hold on to, some form of belief. The meditations may have enabled me to connect with the universe and send messages to it, allowing me to experience a spiritual flow."* Additionally, one participant (P10) explicitly reported that she developed a belief in a higher power only after beginning yoga practice.

These findings suggest that the widely held assumption that practices such as yoga distance individuals from religion in the Turkish context is overly simplistic and, in many cases, misleading. As evidenced in the present study, participants did not initially engage in yoga with a religious or spiritual search; nevertheless, over time, the practice contributed to the development of more positive attitudes toward God, a higher power, or religious participation. This pattern resonates with earlier studies conducted in Western contexts that report similar outcomes [26]. For instance, one study, named *Development of Specific Aspects of Spirituality during a 6-Month Intensive Yoga Practice*, demonstrated that yoga instructor trainees who began the program with low levels of spirituality and religious orientation exhibited significant increases in both dimensions after six months of intensive practice. Notably, individuals who initially identified as neither religious nor spiritual exhibited marked gains in spirituality, and even showed increases in religious orientation, suggesting that yoga may serve as an entry point not only into spiritual sensitivity but also into renewed engagement with religious beliefs and practices among those without prior religious identification. In the Turkish context, the present findings show a related trajectory: several participants described awakening spiritual curiosity, developing a belief in a higher power, or re-engaging with religious practices after beginning yoga, indicating that yoga can foster both religious and nonreligious forms of spiritual development.

This naturally raises the question of why yoga may elicit such spiritual or even religious awakening or revitalization. Although participants initially began yoga for physiological and psychological reasons, the religious and spiritual transformations they later reported appear to be triggered by the experience of breathwork, meditation, and bodily awareness during practice. These elements seem to facilitate a sense of transcendence[27], which in turn may enable participants to experience feelings comparable to religious experiences even when performed for secular purposes[28]. Secondly, religion is widely recognized as an effective impulse-regulation system, functioning largely through internalized feelings of guilt and conscience.[29] In some participants (e.g., P5 and P16), the religious and spiritual changes observed after yoga practice may also be explained by the emergence of feelings of guilt. These individuals reported that while they maintained a disciplined and consistent routine in their yoga practice, they did not demonstrate the same level of commitment to their religious rituals. As a result, the sense of guilt that arose from this discrepancy appears to have motivated them to increase their engagement in religious worship.

In the third theme, the majority of participants reported that institutional religion holds a negative view of yoga. According to them, this adverse perspective primarily stems from believers themselves. Misconceptions and prejudices among religious adherents contribute to the unfavorable stance toward yoga within religious circles. One participant illustrated this situation as follows: "*We are criticized. I am a yoga instructor at a municipality. During International Yoga Day, our event with women was shared on the page.*

[26] Büssing et al., "Development of Specific Aspects of Spirituality during a 6-Month Intensive Yoga Practice"; Park et al., "Why Practice Yoga?", 887.

[27] Helané Wahbeh et al., "A Systematic Review of Transcendent States Across Meditation and Contemplative Traditions," *EXPLORE* 14/1 (January 1, 2018), 19–35.

[28] Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi - Michael Argyle, *The Psychology of Religious Behaviour, Belief and Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 82-83.

[29] Beit-Hallahmi - Argyle, *The Psychology of Religious Behaviour, Belief and Experience*, 176-177.

Below, everyone wrote, 'Instead of doing yoga, pray!'" (P10). Another factor perceived to shape this negative outlook is the apparent conflict between certain practices and discourses of yoga and religious norms. As another participant explained: *"I don't think they view it very positively. For example, in religion, men and women do not pray together in the same space; men are in front, and women are behind. Yoga does not have such distinctions at all"* (P9).

Participants who perceived institutional religion as holding a positive view of yoga generally emphasized its *"relaxation function,"* described yoga as a form of *"science"* or *"exercise,"* and noted its *"similarities with religion."* For example, one participant stated: *"Never. I think it is acceptable because it has nothing to do with religion. Yoga is often confused with religion and even regarded as a religion. It is definitely not. Yoga is actually a science"* (P5). Finally, some participants argued that yoga and religion do not *"violate"* each other and are *"not comparable,"* suggesting that they considered institutional religion's stance toward yoga to be neutral. One participant expressed this perspective as follows: *"I don't think it is prohibitive or encouraging, nor that it takes sides. But in Islam, intention is always very important. Our intention matters"* (P16).

Within Christian theology, the question of whether Christians can practice yoga has been debated, with some considering it incompatible with Christianity, while others regard it as acceptable.[30] Similarly, it can be argued that within Islamic belief, the spread of yoga has prompted theological discussions on its permissibility. According to the present study, participants, who were predominantly raised within an Islamic cultural context in Türkiye, generally perceived institutional religion as holding a negative view of yoga. However, as noted in the previous section, most participants developed more positive attitudes toward religion following their engagement in yoga practice. Although this may initially appear contradictory, some participants clarified that the negative stance toward yoga is attributed not to religion itself, but primarily to the attitudes and interpretations of religious adherents. This distinction helps explain why several participants nonetheless reported the development of more positive attitudes toward religion or God following their engagement in yoga practice. Moreover, participants' perception that resistance to yoga originates from traditional or institutional frameworks, rather than from individual belief, appears to enable them to maintain or even cultivate favorable religious attitudes over time. By differentiating between externally perceived religious discourse and their own lived religious or spiritual experiences, participants were able to reconcile perceived opposition with personal transformation. This interpretive separation seems to function as a cognitive and emotional buffer,[31] allowing individuals to engage in yoga without experiencing it as a direct challenge to their religious identity.

In the final theme, the study aimed to understand why participants gravitated towards yoga rather than the established practices of institutional religion, prevalent in their cultural environment, and to explore the reasons for their preference for yoga over these practices. Participants identified the primary reason for favoring yoga as the perceived shortcomings of institutional religion. According to them, factors included the generally *"negative public image"*, the perception among younger, more secularly educated generations that religious rules are overly *"strict"*, and *"the failure of religion to adapt to modern life"*. One participant expressed: *"In Islam, there is the practice of animal sacrifice, whereas in yoga, there can be a vegan approach or other aspects. I don't know what the real difference is, but religion feels somewhat intimidating to me. Its rules are very rigid and frightening"* (P6). Another participant stated: *"In my view, the greatest dilemma of traditional religions is their inability to renew themselves"* (P14).

The second most frequently cited reason for preferring yoga over institutional religious practices relates to its perceived advantages. Participants highlighted that yoga is *"more flexible," "encourages self-reflection,"* and *"focuses on the inner world."* According to them, yoga allows individuals to turn inward and engage with their inner experiences, whereas institutional religion is seen as providing *"insufficient spiritual fulfillment"* and *"hindering personal development"*. One participant explained their preference for yoga as follows: *"In religion, there are specific times; for instance, after the call to prayer, you are expected to perform*

[30] Bradley Malkovsky, "Some Thoughts on God and Spiritual Practice in Yoga and Christianity," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 30/1 (January 1, 2017).

[31] Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (California: Standford University Press, 1968), 3.

certain practices at those times, at least at a basic level. What I found relieving about yoga was that there was no such obligation. I could practice whenever I wanted, not necessarily early in the morning or late at night" (P1).

Finally, participants identified religious individuals as the third reason for their preference. They expressed discomfort with the *"formalistic"* behaviors of religious practitioners, perceived *"deficiencies in their understanding of religion"*, and frustration with the way they *"impose their beliefs on others."* As a result, participants reported turning to yoga instead of engaging in institutional religious practices. One participant's statement is particularly illustrative of this perspective: *"Praying has been something assigned to us since childhood. We were sent to Qur'an courses from a young age. After a while, people become tired of coercion; you cannot make someone love something by forcing it"* (P9). Beyond these three main reasons, a small number of participants also mentioned motivations such as *"trying something new"* or *"seeking a form of physical activity"* for practicing yoga.

The participants' statements suggest that their search for alternative practices stems not from dissatisfaction with religion itself, but from discomfort with a form of institutional religiosity that appears disconnected from individual needs and personal meaning. Participants indicated that contemporary representations of religion (its public image, formalistic structure, and emphasis on outward compliance rather than inner transformation) failed to address their existential concerns and emotional struggles. As a result, they turned to practices such as yoga to fulfill unmet psychological, spiritual, and self-development needs. Similar dynamics have been observed in previous research. For example, Kinnaman's study with young Christians showed that disengagement from institutional religion often reflects dissatisfaction with forms perceived as rigid, irrelevant, or unresponsive to contemporary concerns rather than the rejection of faith itself.[32]

In this sense, yoga functions less as a substitute belief system and more as a compensatory practice that addresses gaps left by institutional religious frameworks, particularly in relation to emotional regulation, personal autonomy, and inner transformation. Within the Turkish context, where religion continues to carry strong cultural and symbolic significance, the turn toward yoga may thus be understood as a selective reorientation rather than a rupture or an attempt to meet enduring existential, physical, and psychological needs through practices perceived as more adaptable, less judgmental, and more aligned with individual life trajectories. Taken together, these findings suggest that institutional religion may lose its appeal not because belief has weakened but because its institutional expression fails to address the needs of modern individuals that practices like yoga appear better positioned to meet.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how individuals practicing yoga in Türkiye perceive institutional religion, with particular attention to their motivations for turning to yoga, the role of yoga in their religious lives, and their perceptions of institutional religion's approach to yoga. The findings demonstrate that participants did not initially engage in yoga as part of a spiritual or religious search. Instead, yoga was primarily adopted for psychological and physiological reasons, such as stress reduction, emotional regulation, physical well-being, and coping with life transitions.

The study also shows that sustained yoga practice was, for many participants, accompanied by an increased interest in religion and, in some cases, a renewed engagement with religious beliefs and practices. Importantly, this development occurred even though participants largely perceived institutional religion as holding a negative stance toward yoga. The findings, therefore, challenge the widespread assumption in the Turkish context that yoga necessarily distances individuals from religion. Rather than leading to religious disengagement, yoga practice appears to coexist with, and in some cases support, heightened religious interest. In this sense, yoga did not function as an alternative belief system, but rather as a practice that indirectly facilitated renewed religious engagement.

[32] David Kinnaman, *Beni Kaybettin: Genç Hristiyanlar Neden Kiliseyi Terk Edip İnancı Sorguluyorlar?*, trans. Serra Gök (İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 2022).

Participants' views of institutional religion were shaped largely by perceptions of rigidity, moral judgment, and a lack of emotional responsiveness. These perceptions were frequently directed not at belief itself, but at the formal structures, prescriptive rules, and public representations associated with institutional religion. At the same time, participants often distinguished between institutional religion and personal faith, allowing them to maintain or develop positive attitudes toward religion even when they perceived institutional approaches to yoga as restrictive or dismissive.

Taken together, the findings indicate that yoga practitioners in Türkiye do not position themselves in simple opposition to religion. Instead, they negotiate their relationship with institutional religion in complex ways, combining pragmatic engagement with yoga and selective re-engagement with religious beliefs or practices. By focusing on these negotiated positions, the study demonstrates how yoga practice can influence religious attitudes without constituting a spiritual search in itself, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between contemporary practices and institutional religion within a predominantly religious cultural context.

7. Limitations & Future Directions

This study is limited by its qualitative design and the scope of its sample. The research was conducted with 16 yoga practitioners, all of whom had completed or were currently pursuing university education, and the sample was predominantly female. Given the limited number of male participants, thematic saturation was not achieved regarding male yoga practitioners' views on institutional religion; therefore, findings related to male participants should be regarded as preliminary and exploratory rather than conclusive. Overall, the findings primarily reflect the perspectives of a relatively educated, urban, and predominantly female group of yoga practitioners.

Besides, drawing on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made for future research. These recommendations aim to extend the current findings and address the methodological and conceptual limitations inherent in qualitative, small-sample research designs:

1-Further research should investigate larger and more diverse samples to determine whether the patterns identified in this study reflect broader trends among yoga practitioners in Türkiye. Such studies may also explore regional, generational, or socio-cultural differences that shape individuals' engagement with yoga and religion.

2-Gender imbalance constitutes an important limitation of the present study. The limited number of male participants limited the ability to systematically examine potential differences between women's and men's perspectives on yoga and institutional religion. Accordingly, the findings were not analyzed through a comparative gender-based framework, and interpretations primarily reflect the experiences articulated by female participants. The difficulty in reaching male participants appears to be related to the comparatively lower visibility and participation of men in yoga practices. Future research conducted with a more balanced gender distribution would be essential to determine whether there are meaningful differences between women's and men's motivations for practicing yoga, their religious trajectories, and their perceptions of institutional religion.

3- Future research should address the gender imbalance observed in the present study by focusing specifically on male yoga practitioners. Given that the limited number of male participants restricted the depth of analysis regarding gendered experiences, phenomenological studies concentrating solely on men would provide a more detailed understanding of how male practitioners experience yoga and relate it to institutional religion. Such studies could explore whether men's motivations for engaging in yoga, their experiences during practice, and how yoga influences their religious attitudes differ from those of women. Addressing this gap would contribute to a more balanced and comprehensive account of yoga practice and its relationship with institutional religion in the Turkish context.

4-Longitudinal studies are needed to more clearly trace the long-term interaction between yoga practice and changes in religious or spiritual attitudes. This approach would allow researchers to observe whether

the observed transformations remain stable, deepen over time, or shift in response to life events and contextual factors.

5-Spiritual practices such as yoga and their influence on individuals' religiosity should be examined through diverse methodological approaches and within the framework of various theoretical perspectives in the psychology of religion. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods may provide a more comprehensive understanding of these complex processes.

6-Comparative studies could examine differences between yoga practitioners who identify as religious, spiritual but not religious, or non-believers, to better understand how yoga is interpreted across distinct belief orientations. Such comparisons may help clarify whether yoga serves similar or divergent functions across these groups.

7-The findings indicate that some participants perceive institutional religion as rigid, formalistic, or emotionally distant, pointing to an important area for further examination in future research.

Finansman/ Grant Support
Yazar(lar) bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.
The author(s) declared that this study has received no financial support.
Çıkar Çatışması/ Conflict of Interest
Yazar(lar) çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir.
The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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