



RESEARCH METHODS IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

<https://doi.org/10.57033/mijournals-2026-4-0292>

Aziza SAIDOVA

Psychologist of the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan

E-mail: saidovaaziza985@gmail.com

Received: 10-05-2026

Accepted: 28-05-2026

Published: 09-06-2026



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.
Submitted for open access publication
under the terms and conditions of the
Creative Commons Attribution
(CC BY) license
(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Abstract. *The article provides an analytical overview of the research methods used in the psychology of religion. It traces the evolution of methodology from the questionnaires and personal documents of the discipline's founders to modern psychometric, experimental, qualitative, neuroscientific, and mixed-methods designs. The principle of the exclusion of the transcendent is discussed as the methodological foundation of the field. Particular attention is given to widely used measurement instruments, such as the Religious Orientation Scale, the Centrality of Religiosity Scale, the Duke University Religion Index, and measures of religious coping, as well as to the problem of their cultural adaptation for Muslim populations. The strengths and limitations of each group of methods are compared, and ethical issues specific to research on religious beliefs are examined. The author concludes that methodological pluralism and cultural sensitivity are necessary conditions for the development of the psychology of religion in Uzbekistan.*

Keywords: *psychology of religion, research methods, questionnaire, psychometrics, experiment, qualitative research, mixed methods, cultural adaptation.*

INTRODUCTION

Every science is only as reliable as its methods. This general rule applies with special force to the psychology of religion, because the phenomena it studies are among the most intimate and difficult to observe. Faith, prayer, the sense of God's presence, repentance, or spiritual doubt take place in the inner world of a person and are often expressed in a language that resists precise definition. How can such realities be studied scientifically without either reducing them to something else or abandoning the standards of empirical research?

This question has accompanied the discipline from its very beginning.

Over more than a century, researchers have developed a wide range of approaches, and today the psychology of religion uses practically the entire methodological arsenal

of modern psychology. At the same time, it faces specific difficulties: the diversity of religious traditions, the sensitivity of the topic for respondents, and the risk that instruments created in one culture will not work in another (Hill, 2005:44). The purpose of this article is to analyze the main groups of research methods used in the psychology of religion, to evaluate their possibilities and limitations, and to consider the conditions for their application in the Uzbek context.

METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The methodological foundation of the discipline is usually associated with Théodore Flournoy's principle of the exclusion of the transcendent. According to this principle, the researcher makes no judgments about the objective existence of the objects of faith. The psychologist studies beliefs, experiences, and behavior as psychological facts, while the question of their ultimate truth remains outside the competence of empirical science (Wulff, 1997:43). This neutrality does not mean indifference. It is a condition that allows scientists holding different worldviews to evaluate each other's findings.

A second foundational issue is the choice between nomothetic and idiographic strategies. The nomothetic approach looks for general regularities across large samples, whereas the idiographic approach seeks a deep understanding of individual cases. James's *Varieties* is a classic example of the idiographic tradition, while modern survey research is predominantly nomothetic. Hood, Hill, and Spilka emphasize that both are legitimate and that the field loses a great deal when it limits itself to only one of them (Hood et al., 2009:38).

Cultural psychologists have added a third consideration. Belzen argues that religious phenomena are always mediated by specific cultural forms of life, and methods must therefore be sensitive to the meanings participants themselves attach to their practices (Belzen, 2010:41). A question about "church attendance," for example, means little to a Muslim respondent, whose religious practice is structured around daily prayers, fasting, and the communal Friday prayer.

Early Methods: Questionnaires and Personal Documents

The first empirical studies relied on two main sources of data. Edwin Starbuck distributed detailed questionnaires asking respondents to describe their religious development and experiences of conversion, and then systematized the answers

statistically (Starbuck, 1899:16). For its time this was a bold step, since it demonstrated that even the most personal religious events could be compared across individuals.

William James, by contrast, worked mainly with personal documents: autobiographies, letters, diaries, and the testimonies of saints and mystics.

James openly acknowledged that he selected the most vivid and extreme cases, reasoning that the essential features of a phenomenon show themselves most clearly in its intense forms (James, 1902:45). Critics later noted that such a selection limits generalization. Yet the method of personal documents has not lost its value, and modern narrative and biographical approaches, which analyze life stories and spiritual autobiographies, are its direct descendants.

Psychometric and Survey Methods

The most widespread group of methods in contemporary research consists of standardized questionnaires and scales. Their development was stimulated by the recognition that religiosity is multidimensional. Glock and Stark proposed distinguishing belief, practice, experience, knowledge, and consequences (Glock & Stark, 1965:20), and this idea opened the way for instruments measuring each dimension separately.

Among the most influential tools is the Religious Orientation Scale of Allport and Ross, which distinguishes intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for religious involvement (Allport & Ross, 1967:436). Batson later supplemented it with a Quest scale measuring openness to existential questions and doubt (Batson et al., 1993:166). Although these scales have been criticized for conceptual ambiguity, they remain a point of reference in hundreds of studies.

More recent instruments aim at brevity and cross-cultural applicability. The Centrality of Religiosity Scale, created by Huber and Huber, measures the importance of religious meanings in personality through five core dimensions: intellect, ideology, public practice, private practice, and experience (Huber & Huber, 2012:714). The Duke University Religion Index, consisting of only five items, has been widely used in health research because it can easily be included in large surveys (Koenig & Büssing, 2010:79). For the study of stress and illness, Pargament and colleagues developed the RCOPE, a detailed measure of positive and negative religious coping strategies, together with its short version, the Brief RCOPE (Pargament et al., 2000:522; Pargament et al., 2011:55). An extensive collection of such instruments, with information on their reliability and validity, was compiled by Hill and Hood (Hill & Hood, 1999:3).

The advantages of psychometric methods are obvious: they make it possible to collect data from large samples, to test statistical relationships, and to compare results across studies. Their limitations are equally important. Self-report scales depend on respondents' honesty and self-knowledge, and they are vulnerable to social desirability, which is particularly strong when the topic is religion. Moreover, most instruments were developed in Christian, mainly Protestant, contexts. The Psychological Measure of Islamic Religiousness created by Abu-Raiya and colleagues illustrates how this problem can be addressed by constructing tools grounded in Islamic concepts of belief, practice, and ethics (Abu-Raiya et al., 2008:296).

For Uzbekistan, where very few validated religiosity scales exist in the Uzbek language, the careful translation and adaptation of such instruments is a clear priority.

Experimental Methods

For a long time experiments were considered almost impossible in the psychology of religion, since researchers cannot ethically manipulate people's faith. Nevertheless, creative designs have made it possible to test causal hypotheses. One of the best known is the "Good Samaritan" study by Darley and Batson. Seminary students were asked to prepare a short talk, some of them on the parable of the Good Samaritan, and then to walk to another building, where on the way they encountered a person in apparent distress. Whether they stopped to help depended much more on how much they were in a hurry than on the content of the talk or their religious orientation (Darley & Batson, 1973:107).

More recent experiments often use priming techniques. In a study by Shariff and Norenzayan, participants who had been implicitly exposed to words related to God behaved more generously in an anonymous economic game than those in a control group (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007:806).

The strength of the experimental method lies in its ability to establish cause-and-effect relationships. Its weaknesses include the artificiality of laboratory conditions and the fact that short-term manipulations can hardly reproduce the depth of real religious life. Critics also point out that a number of priming effects have proved difficult to replicate, which calls for caution in interpreting them.

Qualitative Methods

Qualitative methods have gained considerable recognition in the field over the last three decades. They include in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation,

and the analysis of narratives and texts. Their main aim is to understand religious experience from the perspective of the believer and in the believer's own words.

Among specific approaches, interpretative phenomenological analysis is particularly suitable for studying religious and spiritual experiences, because it focuses on how individuals make sense of significant events in their lives (Smith et al., 2009:3). Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke, offers a flexible procedure for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning in interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006:79). Such methods are especially useful when a phenomenon is new or poorly understood, for instance when studying how young people in post-Soviet societies construct their religious identity.

The limitations of qualitative research are well known: small samples, difficulties of generalization, and the dependence of interpretation on the researcher's own position. Reflexivity, transparency of analysis, and triangulation help reduce these risks.

Physiological and Neuroscientific Methods

A relatively new direction is the study of the physiological and neural correlates of religious activity. Using brain imaging, Newberg and his colleagues examined experienced meditators and praying nuns and reported changes in the activity of brain areas associated with spatial orientation and attention (Newberg et al., 2001:6). Other studies measure heart rate, blood pressure, and stress hormones during prayer or ritual.

These methods provide data that do not depend on self-report. Their interpretation, however, requires great caution. The discovery that a certain brain region is active during prayer says nothing about whether the experience is merely a product of the brain or a response to a transcendent reality. Here the principle of the exclusion of the transcendent is once again essential, since it protects researchers from drawing metaphysical conclusions from physiological data.

Mixed Methods and Ethical Considerations

Because each group of methods has its own strengths and weaknesses, many researchers now combine them. Mixed-methods designs integrate quantitative and qualitative data within a single study, for example by using a survey to identify general tendencies and then conducting interviews to understand the meanings behind them (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018:5). In the psychology of religion, this strategy helps to overcome the long-standing opposition between measurement and understanding.

Ethical issues deserve special attention. Religious beliefs belong to the most sensitive categories of personal information. Researchers must guarantee voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality, avoid questions that believers may perceive as offensive, and refrain from any form of proselytism or anti-religious propaganda during data collection. In a multi-confessional society, it is also advisable to discuss research instruments with representatives of religious communities and with specialists in theology, so that the questions are formulated correctly and respectfully.

CONCLUSION

The methods of the psychology of religion have developed from individual questionnaires and personal documents into a broad and diverse set of tools. Psychometric scales allow religiosity to be studied on large samples; experiments test causal relationships; qualitative methods reveal the meaning of religious experience for the believer; neuroscientific techniques explore its bodily correlates; and mixed-methods designs combine these advantages.

None of these methods is sufficient on its own.

The analysis allows us to conclude that the future development of the psychology of religion depends on methodological pluralism, consistent adherence to the principle of the exclusion of the transcendent, and cultural sensitivity. For researchers in Uzbekistan, the most urgent tasks are the adaptation and validation of international instruments for Uzbek-speaking populations, the creation of new measures grounded in the Islamic and national cultural tradition, and the wider use of qualitative and mixed designs in studying the religious life of young people.

REFERENCES

1. Abu-Raiya, H., Pargament, K. I., Mahoney, A., & Stein, C. (2008). A psychological measure of Islamic religiousness: Development and evidence for reliability and validity. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 18(4), 291–315.
2. Allport, G. W., & Ross, J. M. (1967). Personal religious orientation and prejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 5(4), 432–443.
3. Batson, C. D., Schoenrade, P., & Ventis, W. L. (1993). *Religion and the individual: A social-psychological perspective*. Oxford University Press.
4. Belzen, J. A. (2010). *Towards cultural psychology of religion: Principles, approaches, applications*. Springer.
5. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.

6. Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
7. Darley, J. M., & Batson, C. D. (1973). "From Jerusalem to Jericho": A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 27(1), 100–108.
8. Glock, C. Y., & Stark, R. (1965). *Religion and society in tension*. Rand McNally.
9. Hill, P. C. (2005). Measurement in the psychology of religion and spirituality: Current status and evaluation. In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (pp. 43–61). Guilford Press.
10. Hill, P. C., & Hood, R. W., Jr. (Eds.). (1999). *Measures of religiosity*. Religious Education Press.
11. Hood, R. W., Jr., Hill, P. C., & Spilka, B. (2009). *The psychology of religion: An empirical approach* (4th ed.). Guilford Press.
12. Huber, S., & Huber, O. W. (2012). The Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS). *Religions*, 3(3), 710–724.
13. James, W. (1902). *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature*. Longmans, Green, and Co.
14. Koenig, H. G., & Büssing, A. (2010). The Duke University Religion Index (DUREL): A five-item measure for use in epidemiological studies. *Religions*, 1(1), 78–85.
15. Newberg, A., d'Aquili, E., & Rause, V. (2001). *Why God won't go away: Brain science and the biology of belief*. Ballantine Books.
16. Pargament, K. I., Koenig, H. G., & Perez, L. M. (2000). The many methods of religious coping: Development and initial validation of the RCOPE. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 56(4), 519–543.
17. Pargament, K., Feuille, M., & Burdzy, D. (2011). The Brief RCOPE: Current psychometric status of a short measure of religious coping. *Religions*, 2(1), 51–76.
18. Shariff, A. F., & Norenzayan, A. (2007). God is watching you: Priming God concepts increases prosocial behavior in an anonymous economic game. *Psychological Science*, 18(9), 803–809.
19. Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. SAGE Publications.
20. Starbuck, E. D. (1899). *The psychology of religion: An empirical study of the growth of religious consciousness*. Walter Scott.
21. Wulff, D. M. (1997). *Psychology of religion: Classic and contemporary* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.