

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND THE PERCEPTION OF RELIGIOUS INFORMATION

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Abstract

The way people receive, interpret, and respond to religious information is not uniform; it is shaped substantially by stable individual differences in personality, cognition, and motivation. This article reviews the psychological literature on how individual-psychological characteristics relate to the perception of religious content. Drawing on the Five-Factor Model of personality, dual-process theories of cognition, the intrinsic–extrinsic and quest orientations of religiousness, the need for cognitive closure, and attachment theory, it argues that religious information is filtered through a person's dispositional traits and cognitive style rather than absorbed passively. Traits such as agreeableness and conscientiousness predict openness to conventional religious messages, openness to experience predicts a more exploratory and symbolic reading, and an analytic cognitive style is associated with greater skepticism toward supernatural claims. The article concludes that a person-centered, interactionist account best captures the perception of religious information and outlines implications for religious education, interfaith communication, and future research.

Keywords: *psychology of religion, personality traits, cognitive style, religious orientation, perception, individual differences*

Religion is one of the most pervasive features of human culture, and religious information scriptural texts, sermons, doctrines, rituals, and moral teachings reaches individuals through countless channels. Yet the same message can produce



dramatically different reactions in different people: one listener experiences a sermon as deeply moving and self-evidently true, another finds it unpersuasive, and a third reinterprets it symbolically. These differences are not random. Contemporary psychology of religion holds that the perception of religious information is a constructive process governed in large part by stable individual-psychological characteristics (Saroglou, 2010). Understanding these characteristics helps explain why belief, doubt, conversion, and religious disaffiliation are distributed as they are across populations.

This article examines the relationship between individual psychological characteristics and the perception of religious information. By “perception” we mean the full process by which a person attends to, encodes, interprets, evaluates, and emotionally responds to religiously framed content. The central thesis is that this process is systematically moderated by personality traits, cognitive style, motivational orientation, and emotional-attachment history. The article first outlines the theoretical framework, then reviews evidence from four domains personality traits, cognitive style, religious motivation, and emotional attachment before discussing integrative implications and directions for research. The study of individual differences rests on the premise that people possess relatively stable, measurable psychological characteristics that shape behavior across situations. When these characteristics meet religious stimuli, the result is an interaction between person and message. Allport’s (1950) early work already distinguished mature from immature forms of religious sentiment, foreshadowing the idea that the psychological structure of the person determines the quality of religious perception. Modern accounts formalize this insight through trait, cognitive, and motivational models.

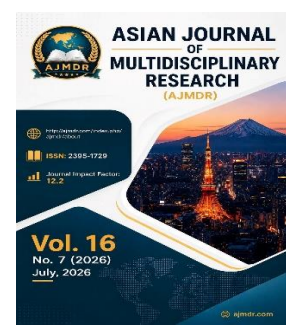
Two broad theoretical positions frame the discussion. The first, a dispositional



view, treats religious perception as an expression of enduring traits: people high in certain characteristics are predisposed to accept, seek, or reject religious information. The second, an interactionist view, emphasizes that traits express themselves differently depending on cultural and situational context (Entringer et al., 2023). This article adopts the interactionist position, arguing that individual characteristics set probabilistic tendencies that culture and context then channel.

The Five-Factor Model-openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism- provides the most widely used framework for relating personality to religiousness. Saroglou's (2002, 2010) meta-analyses established a consistent pattern: agreeableness and conscientiousness are the traits most reliably associated with religiousness. People high in these traits tend to value cooperation, social harmony, duty, and self-control, and therefore find the prosocial and normative content of most religious traditions congenial. Such individuals are inclined to perceive religious teachings as trustworthy guidance and to accept conventional interpretations.

Openness to experience shows a more nuanced relationship. It correlates only weakly with traditional, doctrinal religiousness but more strongly with spirituality, mysticism, and a symbolic, questioning approach to religious material (Saroglou, 2010). Highly open individuals are more likely to perceive religious information as metaphor to be explored rather than literal fact to be accepted, and they are overrepresented among seekers who move between traditions. Extraversion relates modestly to the social and communal dimensions of religious life, predicting engagement with worship as a shared, emotionally warm activity. Neuroticism shows inconsistent effects: emotional instability can motivate a turn toward religion for comfort, yet it can also color the perception of religious content with anxiety and guilt (Entringer et al., 2023).

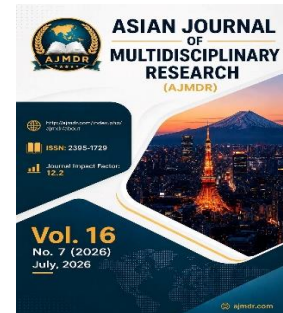


Importantly, these associations are bidirectional and culturally moderated. Longitudinal evidence indicates that traits shape religiousness and that religious involvement, in turn, subtly reinforces traits such as agreeableness, and that the strength of these links depends on how central religion is in a given society (Entringer et al., 2023). Thus personality does not determine religious perception in isolation but interacts with the surrounding religious climate.

Beyond broad traits, the way a person habitually processes information strongly conditions how religious claims are evaluated. Dual-process theory distinguishes intuitive, fast, automatic thinking from analytic, slow, deliberative thinking. Gervais and Norenzayan (2012) reported that experimentally promoting analytic thinking reduced self-reported religious belief, and that individuals with a dispositionally analytic style expressed weaker belief in supernatural agents. Their interpretation is that many religious intuitions arise naturally from System 1, and that analytic reflection can override these default intuitions.

This finding must be treated with caution. Large pre-registered replications have failed to reproduce the experimental effect, and cross-cultural studies show that the link between analytic thinking and disbelief is weaker or absent in less secular societies (Ståhl, 2021). The relationship therefore appears to be real but modest and context-dependent, reflecting cultural learning as much as cognition. Nonetheless, the broader point stands: people who habitually scrutinize claims tend to perceive supernatural information more skeptically, whereas people who rely on intuition more readily accept it. Cognitive science of religion further argues that certain intuitive biases such as attributing agency and purpose to events make religious ideas cognitively “natural” and easy to perceive as true, especially for intuitive thinkers.

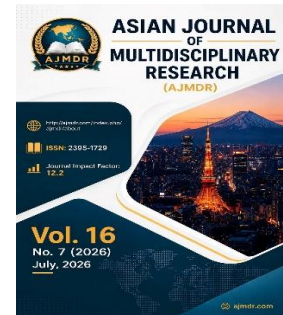
Individuals differ not only in how they think but in why they engage with



religion, and these motives filter perception. Allport and Ross distinguished an intrinsic orientation, in which religion is an ultimate end lived for its own sake, from an extrinsic orientation, in which religion serves external goals such as status, comfort, or social belonging. Intrinsically oriented people tend to perceive religious information as personally meaningful and internally integrated, whereas extrinsically oriented people attend selectively to content that serves their instrumental needs. Batson later added the quest orientation, describing individuals who approach religion as an open-ended search that welcomes doubt and complexity; such people perceive religious information as an invitation to inquiry rather than a set of fixed answers.

Motivational needs also shape perception. The need for cognitive closure a preference for firm answers and discomfort with ambiguity predicts a more literal and dogmatic reception of religious information, because clear doctrines satisfy the desire for certainty (Saroglou, 2002). People high in this need are drawn to unambiguous, authoritative religious messages and resist interpretations that leave questions open, while those low in the need tolerate and even value ambiguity. Related work on authoritarianism links a preference for order and submission to authority with the acceptance of conventional religious teaching. Together, these motivational variables explain why the same doctrine is perceived by one person as reassuring truth and by another as an oversimplification.

Emotional dispositions and early relational experience form a further layer of individual difference. Attachment theory, applied to religion by Kirkpatrick (2005), proposes that people often perceive God through the template of their early attachment relationships. Individuals with secure attachment histories tend to perceive the divine as a reliable, loving figure and to receive religious information about a benevolent God as consonant with their expectations. Those with insecure



histories may either compensate seeking in religion the security they lacked or perceive religious authority figures with the same anxiety or avoidance that marks their human relationships.

Affective traits shape perception as well. People prone to positive emotion and gratitude more readily perceive religious content as uplifting and are more receptive to messages of grace and hope, whereas those prone to anxiety may fixate on themes of judgment and sin. Emotionally salient religious information is also better remembered and more persuasive, so a person's characteristic emotional tone helps determine which elements of a religious message are noticed and retained. This underscores that the perception of religious information is never purely cognitive; it is embedded in the emotional and relational life of the individual.

Taken together, the evidence supports an interactionist, person-centered model of religious perception. No single characteristic determines how a person receives religious information; rather, traits, cognitive style, motivation, and emotion combine, and their expression is moderated by culture and context. A conscientious, agreeable, intuitive person with a high need for closure living in a religious society is disposed to perceive traditional religious teaching as trustworthy and true. An open, analytic person low in the need for closure is more likely to perceive the same teaching as one interpretive option among many, or to reject its literal claims. Neither reception is a simple matter of intelligence or virtue; each reflects a coherent psychological profile.

These findings have practical implications. Religious education and communication are more effective when they take the audience's psychological diversity into account offering clear, structured teaching to those who need certainty while leaving room for exploration for those with a quest orientation or high openness. In interfaith and secular-religious dialogue, recognizing that disagreement



often stems from differences in cognitive style and motivation, rather than from ignorance or bad faith, can reduce mutual hostility. For counseling and pastoral care, understanding a person's attachment and emotional profile clarifies how they are likely to hear messages about God, forgiveness, and judgment.

Several limitations temper these conclusions. Much of the research is correlational and cross-sectional, limiting causal inference; samples are frequently drawn from Western, Christian, and student populations, raising questions of generalizability; and self-report measures of both personality and religiousness are vulnerable to bias. Future work should employ longitudinal and experimental designs, expand cross-cultural sampling to include Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and non-Western contexts, and integrate implicit and behavioral measures of religious perception. Neuroscientific and computational approaches may further illuminate how dispositional characteristics bias the real-time processing of religious stimuli.

The perception of religious information is a constructive, individualized process rather than a passive reception of a fixed message. Personality traits especially agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness set broad dispositions; cognitive style determines whether supernatural claims are accepted intuitively or scrutinized analytically; motivational orientation and the need for closure govern whether religious content is embraced as certain truth or approached as open inquiry; and emotional-attachment history colors the felt meaning of that content. These characteristics interact with one another and with cultural context to produce the striking diversity of human responses to the same religious material. A mature psychology of religion, and any practice that seeks to communicate religious ideas responsibly, must therefore begin with the person who is doing the perceiving.



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