

The Scientific Study of Religion: Measuring Religiosity

A major problem faced by all social scientists is trying to measure concepts that have no clear “ruler.” How can we quantify such things as “prejudice” or “social integration”? A similar challenge is faced when trying to measure how “religious” an individual is. A person who believes in God may not attend religious services. Are they religious? What about a person who attends services without believing in God? Religion is a multi-dimensional concept consisting of behaviors, experiences, beliefs, and social or cultural traditions.

In this learning module you will use quantitative data from the Association of Religion Data Archives to explore different ways to measure religion.

If you find yourself lost at any point, look to the instructions on the right.

Open your web browser and go to the homepage for the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA).

Let’s take a look at some different measures of religion by exploring the QuickStats section of the ARDA.

You’ll notice that there are several different categories of statistics provided to you. For example, some of the variables (i.e. questions) reflect religious attitudes while others measure religious behavior. Take a look at some of the different ways to measure a person’s religiosity. Let’s begin by looking at religious *behaviors*.

1. What percent of people say that they pray “several times a day”?

Click on the “Patterns” tab.

2. What percent of women say they pray “several times a day”?

3. How about men?

Open your web browser.

Go to
www.thearda.com

Click on QuickStats in the main toolbar.

Find the “Frequency of Prayer” measure and click on it.

Click on the “Patterns” tab.

Prayer is a religious behavior, but it is often a private behavior. Let's take a look next at a measure of *public* religious behavior.

Go back to the QuickStats menu and find the **religious service attendance** measure.

4. What percent of people say that they attend religious services several times a week?

5. How does the percent attending several times a week vary by the religious affiliation of the person? Describe:

6. Do you see any trends in religious service attendance?

Now that we have taken a look at some measures of religious behavior, let's take a look at religious belief.

7. What percent of people "Absolutely" believe in Heaven?

Go back to the QuickStats Menu.

Find the "Religious Service Attendance" variable.

Click on the "Patterns" tab.

Click on the "Over Time" tab.

Go back to the "QuickStats" menu.

Find the "Belief in Heaven" question.

8. How does belief in Heaven differ between races?

Go back and pick another measure of religious **belief** that interests you.

9. What question did you choose?

10. Describe what the data shows about this measure. What percent of people fall in a particular category? Does it differ by gender, race, or some other factor? Has the belief changed over time?

Another dimension of religion and religiosity is experiential. Let's now look at some measures of religious experiences.

11. What percent of people say that they "feel guided by God in the midst of daily activities" many times a day?

Click on the "Patterns" tab.

Go back to the "QuickStats" menu.

Click on the "Patterns" tab.

Click on the "Over Time" tab.

Go back to the "QuickStats" menu.

Find the "Guided by God" question.

12. Are there any interesting patterns of this experience by gender, race, or some other factor?

A person may not look very religious on measures of belief, behavior, or experiences but they may still identify with some religious tradition. Hence, another way to measure a person's religiosity is by whether or not they describe themselves as part of some religious group.

13. Using the "religious preference" measure, find out what percent of people **do not** have a religious preference.

14. Describe any trends you see in the population's religious preference over time.

You have now explored some common ways to measure the different dimensions of religion and religiosity. The next step is to see how much these different dimensions are related to each other. For example, how many people who are high on measures of religious belief are also high on measures of religious behavior? While we would expect some correlation, there are likely those that are religious according to one measure but not another.

Let's go back to the prayer question we looked at earlier.

Go to the "Patterns" tab.

Click on the "Patterns" tab.

Go back to the "QuickStats" menu.

Find the "Religious Preference" question.

Click on the "Over Time" tab.

Go back to the "QuickStats" menu.

Find the "Frequency of Prayer" question.

Click on the "Patterns" tab.

15. What percent of those who do not claim a religious preference (i.e. “None”) say that they pray more than one time a day?

16. Are there people with a religious preference who never pray?

17. Scroll down some more and find the table for church attendance. Describe the two measures. Are they perfectly related or are there those that might be considered religious by one measure but not the other?

Go back to the QuickStats menu and choose one of the religious belief questions (e.g. belief in Heaven, God, Angels, Jesus). Take a look at the “Patterns” tab to see how attendance at religious services is related to the belief.

Go back to the “QuickStats” menu.

18. Describe the table. What percent of people attend without believing? What percent believe without belonging?

As you can see, religion is a complex concept to measure. It consists of different dimensions that may be correlated somewhat but are not perfectly association with each other. Using different measures can sometimes provide very different answers as to a person’s or society’s religiosity.