GUMILYOV JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY
ISSN (Print) 3080-1702. ISSN (Online) 3104-4638

IRSTI 04.51.59
Scientific article

https://doi.org/10.32523/2616-6836-2026-155-2-183-189

# SOCIOLOGICAL MEASUREMENTS OF RELIGIOSITY AND THEIR INTERPRETATION IN THE MEDIA SPACE: A METHODOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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**Abstract.** In the contemporary sociology of religion, the issue of measuring religiosity has become increasingly relevant due to the growing use of international comparative studies, indices, and statistical indicators. However, the interpretation of such data in the media space is often accompanied by the oversimplification of complex sociological categories and the reduction of religiosity to individual indicators of religious practice, which may lead to distorted perceptions of religious reality.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the theoretical and methodological foundations of measuring religiosity and to identify the specific features of interpreting relevant data in the contemporary media environment. Particular attention is paid to the scholarly views of Abulfaz Suleymanli regarding the interpretation of statistical data on religiosity. The study also focuses on distinguishing between religious practice, religious identity, and cultural religiosity.

The methodological framework of the research is based on theoretical analysis of scholarly literature, as well as comparative and critical-analytical approaches. The theoretical basis is formed by contemporary concepts in the sociology of religion, particularly Grace Davie's theory of "believing without belonging."

The findings demonstrate that religiosity is a multidimensional social phenomenon that cannot be adequately measured solely through indicators of institutional participation in religious life. The study reveals that a low level of attendance at religious institutions does not necessarily indicate the irreligiosity of a society, since religious identity and cultural forms of religiosity may persist beyond formal religious practice. The research substantiates the need to consider cultural, historical, and social contexts when interpreting empirical data. The scientific and practical significance of the study lies in advancing methodological approaches to the study of religiosity and improving the use and interpretation of sociological data in both academic and public discourse.

**Keywords:** religiosity; sociology of religion; media space; sociological measurements; data interpretation; religious identity; believing without belonging; sociological indices; media discourse; methodological analysis; secularization; public perception.

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**Received: 09.06.2025; Revised: 15.06.2026; Approved: 27.06.2026; Available online: 30.06.2026**

**Introduction**

Modern society is increasingly characterized by processes of quantitative measurement of social phenomena. The tendency to express complex social processes in numerical indicators has become one of the defining features of the digital era and encompasses virtually all spheres of social life – including the economy, politics, culture, education, healthcare, interpersonal trust, and the spiritual domain. In the global information space, various international indices, rankings, and statistical indicators are actively disseminated, reflecting levels of trust, happiness, democracy, corruption, quality of life, social stability, religiosity, and other social characteristics. Such measurements are gradually becoming not only a tool of scientific analysis but also an important element of media and socio-political discourse, shaping public perceptions of social reality.

However, the growing spread of sociological indices is accompanied by a number of methodological challenges. Within the media environment, complex scientific indicators are often subject to simplified interpretations, lose their original research context, and are transformed into categorical public judgments. As a result, statistical data tend to be perceived as an absolute reflection of social reality, despite the fact that any sociological measurement is the product of a specific methodological construction based on particular indicators, sampling procedures, research approaches, and interpretative models. Such distortions are not neutral: they shape persistent stereotypes about societies, influence political and cultural evaluations, may be used for ideological purposes, and lead to informational biases that extend far beyond the scientific domain. Therefore, the issue of the correct interpretation of sociological measurements acquires not only academic significance but also broad social importance.

This issue is particularly evident in studies of religiosity. In recent years, international and regional media discourse has regularly circulated publications characterizing certain countries as "the most religious" or, conversely, "the least religious societies in the world" (Pew Research Center, 2012). Such conclusions are often based on a limited set of empirical indicators, such as the frequency of attendance at religious institutions, self-assessed levels of religiosity, or specific forms of religious practice. However, in contemporary sociology of religion, religiosity is understood as a far more complex, multi-layered, and culturally conditioned phenomenon, which makes the critical examination of existing methodological approaches an especially important task.

Of particular scholarly interest in this context is the article by Abulfaz Suleymanli (Süleymanlı, 2025), which addresses the problem of interpreting statistical data on the religiosity of Azerbaijani society (CRRC, 2021). The author draws attention to the methodological inaccuracy of equating individual indicators of religious practice with the concept of "non-religiosity" and emphasizes the need to take into account the cultural, historical, and sociological context when analyzing such data. The issue raised by the researcher appears particularly relevant in the context of the contemporary media environment, where statistical indicators are often disseminated outside their original scientific context and take the form of simplified public judgments.

The present article is based on the scientific formulation of the problem proposed by Abulfaz Suleymanli and examines it within the broader theoretical and methodological context of contemporary sociology of religion. The scientific views of the aforementioned researcher appear to be well-founded and have made a significant contribution to shaping the problem field and the analytical perspective of the present study, further informing its development. The theoretical foundation of the study is the concept of Grace Davie's "believing without belonging" (Davie, 1994), according to which a decline in institutional participation in religious life does not necessarily indicate a loss of religious identity or spiritual beliefs.

**Theoretical and methodological foundations of the study of religiosity**

In contemporary sociology of religion, religiosity is regarded as a multidimensional and socially constructed phenomenon encompassing institutional, cultural, symbolic, and individual-value components. In contrast to earlier approaches that associated religiosity primarily with regular participation in religious practices, current research emphasizes the need for a comprehensive analysis of religious identity, spiritual beliefs, cultural traditions, and everyday forms of symbolic behavior.

The classical theory of secularization, which became widely influential in the second half of the twentieth century, was based on the assumption that processes of modernization, urbanization, rationalization, and scientific and technological development would lead to a gradual decline in the role of religion in social life. Within this

paradigm, the level of religiosity in society was often measured through institutional indicators: attendance at religious institutions, participation in rituals, frequency of prayer, and the degree of involvement in formal religious life.

However, the further development of the sociology of religion has demonstrated the limitations of this approach. As Peter L. Berger (Berger, 1999) noted, modernization did not lead to the disappearance of religion but rather transformed the forms of its social existence. Religion continued to maintain a significant place in collective identity, cultural memory, and the moral frameworks of society. As a result, contemporary sociology of religion has gradually shifted its research focus from exclusively institutional religiosity to the study of cultural and symbolic forms of religious experience.

Of particular importance for the analysis of the present issue is Grace Davie's concept of "believing without belonging" (Davie, 1994). According to this concept, a decline in institutional participation in religious life does not necessarily indicate a decline in belief, spirituality, or religious self-identification. An individual may not regularly attend religious institutions while at the same time maintaining stable religious beliefs, spiritual values, and a cultural affiliation with a particular religious tradition.

Grace Davie's concept has particular explanatory significance in relation to post-Soviet societies, where religiosity for a long historical period has existed primarily in cultural, familial, and symbolic forms. In such societies, religion is often expressed not so much through regular institutional participation as through family rituals, mourning and festive practices, moral norms, everyday language, and forms of collective memory.

An important contribution to the analysis of this issue is also the approach of José Casanova (Casanova, 1994), who views religion as a public social phenomenon that continues to play a significant role even within secular societies. The researcher emphasizes that secularization does not imply the complete disappearance of religion, but rather involves a transformation in the ways it is present within the social structure. Religion may retain its influence through cultural norms, social values, and symbolic mechanisms of social integration.

**Methodological Problems of Interpreting Religiosity in the Media Space**

One of the key challenges in contemporary studies of religiosity is not only the methodology of sociological measurement itself, but also the specific ways in which statistical data are subsequently interpreted within the media space. In the context of the digitalization of the information environment, sociological indicators increasingly take the form of public rankings and simplified comparative characteristics primarily oriented toward mass perception. This gives the study of the methodological foundations of such measurements particular relevance.

One of the key problems in contemporary studies of religiosity is not only the methodology of sociological measurement itself, but also the features of the subsequent interpretation of statistical data within the media space. In the context of the digitalization of the information environment, sociological indicators increasingly take the form of public rankings and simplified comparative characteristics primarily oriented toward mass perception.

Meanwhile, such an interpretation represents an example of conceptual simplification. Sociological categories such as "irregular religious practice," "low level of institutional participation," "cultural religiosity," and "secular lifestyle" are not identical concepts and reflect different levels of analysis of social reality.

This type of interpretation becomes particularly problematic in relation to societies with a pronounced cultural form of religiosity. In post-Soviet countries, religion for a long time existed primarily outside the institutional sphere, being preserved in family traditions, symbolic practices, moral norms, and everyday forms of spiritual culture. In such conditions, the direct transfer of Western models for measuring institutional religiosity does not always allow for an adequate interpretation of the specific nature of a society's religious consciousness.

It is precisely this issue that is addressed by Professor Abulfaz Suleymanli (Süleymanlı, 2025) in his analysis of media-based interpretations of statistical data on the religiosity of Azerbaijani society. The professor emphasizes that the widespread use of categories such as "the least religious society" or "a country without religion," without taking into account the methodological specifics of the research, creates a distorted picture of social reality and leads to the substitution of scientific analysis with media-driven simplifications.

Empirical data further confirm the need for such cautious interpretation. According to the Pew Research Center study "The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity" (2012) (Pew Research Center, 2012), in Azerbaijan, 70% of Muslims report praying several times a day, 21% observe all five obligatory daily prayers, and 43% fast during the month of Ramadan. At the same time, 64% of respondents state that they never attend a mosque, and only

about 1% do so weekly. According to data from the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2013), no more than 3–3.5% of adult citizens of the country participate in Friday prayers on a weekly basis; the level of participation in collective religious rituals decreased from 13.2% in 2008 to 5.6% in 2013. Such a combination of a high level of individual religious practice (prayer, fasting) with a low level of institutional participation (mosque attendance) serves as a clear empirical confirmation of the applicability of Grace Davie's concept of "believing without belonging" (Davie, 1994) to Azerbaijani society, while simultaneously demonstrating the methodological limitations of reducing religiosity to mosque attendance indicators.

Similar methodological challenges are also characteristic of regional research practices: in a dissertation study by F.B. Fayzieva (Fayzieva, 2019), devoted to mechanisms for improving the effectiveness of applied sociological research in Uzbekistan, it is shown that insufficient consideration of cultural-contextual factors and methodological foundations of measurement significantly reduces the scientific validity and practical effectiveness of research.

In our view, one of the key problems of contemporary sociological measurement lies in the attempt to represent complex cultural and spiritual processes through universal quantitative indicators. However, religiosity is among those social phenomena that require not only statistical measurement but also a deep cultural-contextual analysis.

**Conclusion**

The analysis shows that contemporary sociological measurements of religiosity face a number of serious methodological and interpretative limitations. In the context of the global proliferation of statistical rankings and indices, religiosity is increasingly represented through simplified quantitative indicators, which are often perceived as an absolute reflection of social reality. However, such an approach does not always take into account the complex, multidimensional, and culturally conditioned nature of religiosity as a social phenomenon.

As the analysis of Abulfaz Suleymanli's position (Süleymanlı, 2025) shows, the interpretation of individual indicators – such as the frequency of attendance at religious institutions or subjective self-assessment of religiosity – as a direct measure of a society's "non-religiosity" is methodologically limited. This issue is particularly relevant in post-Soviet societies, where religiosity is often preserved in the forms of cultural identity, family traditions, symbolic practices, and everyday spiritual experience.

In this context, Grace Davie's concept of "believing without belonging" (Davie, 1994; 2007) provides a deeper interpretation of contemporary forms of religiosity that extend beyond purely institutional participation. A decline in formal religious practice does not necessarily indicate a decline in religious consciousness, spiritual beliefs, or cultural religious affiliation.

Moreover, the study shows that the media interpretation of sociological data is often accompanied by the simplification of scientific categories, loss of context, and conflation of different analytical concepts. As a result, complex sociological indicators are transformed into categorical public labels that shape a distorted perception of social reality.

In this regard, there is a need to revise existing approaches to measuring religiosity. A promising direction is the development of more comprehensive and context-sensitive research models that combine quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. Of particular importance are comparative interdisciplinary studies that take into account the cultural, historical, and civilizational characteristics of different societies.

Thus, in contemporary societies, religiosity requires analysis not only as an institutional practice but also as a form of cultural memory, symbolic identity, and everyday social experience. Only such a multidimensional approach can provide a more objective and scientifically grounded understanding of religious processes in the modern world.

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## ДІНИЛІКТІҢ СОЦИОЛОГИЯЛЫҚ ӨЛШЕМДЕРІ ЖӘНЕ ОЛАРДЫ МЕДИАКЕҢІСТІКТЕ ТҮСІНДІРУ: МЕТОДОЛОГИЯЛЫҚ ТАЛДАУ

**Аңдатпа.** Қазіргі дін социологиясында діндарлықты өлшеу мәселесі халықаралық салыстырмалы зерттеулер, индекстер және статистикалық көрсеткіштердің кеңінен қолданылуына байланысты ерекше өзектілікке ие болып отыр. Алайда мұндай деректерді медиакеңістікте түсіндіру көбінесе күрделі социологиялық категорияларды жеңілдетумен және діндарлықты діни тәжірибенің жекелеген көрсеткіштеріне дейін қысқартумен қатар жүреді, бұл діни шындық туралы бұрмаланған түсініктердің қалыптасуына әкелуі мүмкін.

Зерттеудің мақсаты діндарлықты өлшеудің теориялық-әдіснамалық негіздерін талдау және қазіргі медиакеңістікте тиісті деректерді интерпретациялау ерекшеліктерін анықтау болып табылады. Зерттеуде Абульфаз Сулейманлының діндарлық туралы статистикалық деректерді интерпретациялау мәселесіне қатысты ғылыми көзқарастарына ерекше назар аударылады. Сондай-ақ зерттеу аясында діни тәжірибе, діни сәйкестік және мәдени діндарлық арасындағы айырмашылықтарды ажырату мәселелері қарастырылады.

Зерттеудің әдіснамалық негізін ғылыми әдебиеттерді теориялық талдау, салыстырмалы және сыни-аналитикалық тәсілдер құрайды. Теориялық негіз ретінде дін социологиясындағы заманауи концепциялар, ең алдымен Грейс Дэвидің «believing without belonging» («сену, бірақ тиесілі болмау») теориясы алынды.

Зерттеу нәтижелері діндарлықтың көпқырлы әлеуметтік феномен екенін және оны тек діни өмірге институционалдық қатысу көрсеткіштері арқылы ғана адекватты түрде өлшеуге болмайтынын көрсетеді. Діни мекемелерге барудың төмен деңгейі қоғамның дінсіздігін білдірмейтіні анықталды, себебі діни сәйкестік пен мәдени діндарлық формальды діни тәжірибеден тыс та сақталуы мүмкін. Эмпирикалық деректерді

түсіндіру кезінде мәдени, тарихи және әлеуметтік контекстті ескеру қажеттілігі негізделеді. Зерттеудің ғылыми және практикалық маңыздылығы діндарлықты зерттеудің әдіснамалық тәсілдерін дамытуға және социологиялық деректерді ғылыми әрі қоғамдық дискурста қолдану тәжірибесін жетілдіруге бағытталған.

**Негізгі ұғымдар:** діндарлық; дін социологиясы; медиакеңістік; социологиялық өлшемдер; деректер интерпретациясы; діни сәйкестік; сену, бірақ тиесілі болмау; социологиялық индекстер; медиадискурс; әдіснамалық талдау; секуляризация; қоғамдық қабылдау.

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## СОЦИОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ ИЗМЕРЕНИЯ РЕЛИГИОЗНОСТИ И ИХ ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЯ В МЕДИАПРОСТРАНСТВЕ: МЕТОДОЛОГИЧЕСКИЙ АНАЛИЗ

**Аннотация.** В современной социологии религии проблема измерения религиозности приобретает особую актуальность в связи с расширением использования международных сравнительных исследований, индексов и статистических показателей. Однако интерпретация подобных данных в медиапространстве нередко сопровождается упрощением сложных социологических категорий и сведением религиозности к отдельным показателям религиозной практики, что может приводить к искажению представлений о религиозной реальности.

Цель исследования заключается в анализе теоретико-методологических оснований измерения религиозности и выявлении особенностей интерпретации соответствующих данных в современном медиапространстве. Особое внимание уделяется научным взглядам Абульфаза Сулейманлы на проблему интерпретации статистических данных о религиозности. В центре исследования также находятся вопросы разграничения религиозной практики, религиозной идентичности и культурной религиозности.

Методологическую основу исследования составляют теоретический анализ научной литературы, сравнительный и критико-аналитический подходы. Теоретической базой выступают современные концепции социологии религии, прежде всего теория Грейс Дэви «believing without belonging» («верить без принадлежности»).

Результаты исследования показывают, что религиозность является многомерным социальным феноменом и не может быть адекватно измерена исключительно через показатели институционального участия в религиозной жизни. Установлено, что низкий уровень посещения религиозных учреждений не всегда свидетельствует о нерелигиозности общества, поскольку религиозная идентичность и культурные формы религиозности могут сохраняться вне рамок формальной религиозной практики. Обосновывается необходимость учета культурного, исторического и социального контекста при интерпретации эмпирических данных. Научная и практическая значимость исследования заключается в развитии методологических подходов к изучению религиозности и совершенствовании практик использования социологических данных в научном и общественном дискурсе.

**Ключевые слова:** религиозность, социология религии, медиапространство, социологические измерения, интерпретация данных, религиозная идентичность, социологические индексы, медийный дискурс, методологический анализ, секуляризация, общественное восприятие.

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