

## Basic Religious Beliefs and Personality Traits

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**Objective:** Spiritual beliefs can help people find meaning of life ,and can also influence their feelings, behaviors and mental health. The present research studied the relationship between basic religious beliefs (Human, Existence and God) and five personality factors: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness.

**Method:** One hundred seventy eight students of Islamic Azad University in Torbat-jam were randomly selected and completed the basic religious beliefs and NEO Questionnaires.

**Results:** Data showed that basic religious beliefs have a significant negative correlation with neuroticism ( $r=-0.29$ ) ,and a significant positive relationship with extraversion( $r=0.28$ ),openness( $r=0.14$ ),agreeableness ( $r=0.29$ ),and conscientiousness ( $r=0.48$ ). Also, the results of the regression analysis showed that basic religious beliefs can anticipate neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness, but they cannot anticipate the openness factor significantly.

**Conclusion :** The findings of this study demonstrate that basic religious beliefs have a positive relationship with good characteristics that help people resolve the challenges of their lives and identity crisis . Thus, the results of this study support the idea of Religious Cognitive–Emotional Theory that religiosity is correlated with positive personality traits.

**Key words:** *Cognition, Personality Inventory , Religion*

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Studies show that religion and spirituality have important effects on the quality of human's life and meanings (1). Life meaning also is important for psychological and physical health and well-being. Researchers have only recently looked at the presence of life meaning and the search for life meaning as separate constructs ( 2). In their study, they found that the presence of meaning was positively associated with life satisfaction, happiness, and positive affect and negatively associated with depression and negative affect, whereas the search for meaning overall had the opposite pattern of correlates. However, the search for meaning was positively associated with well-being, greater life satisfaction, more happiness, and less depression among those who already had substantial meaning in their life. A growing body of literature suggests that people often turn to religion when coping with stressful events (3). As researchers seek to understand individual differences in people's psychological resilience to life stressors, both personality traits and spirituality/religiousness (S/R) have emerged as important predictors of sustained well-being in the face of adversity (3-5).

For this reason, many psychologists have considered the effects of human spirituality on the various dimensions

of human life . Although many researchers have focused on the relationship between religiosity or spirituality and mental health, they found a positive relationship between spirituality and mental health(6-11). Also some studies identified particular spiritual risk factors such as feeling of anger toward God, conflicts with congregation and clergy and spiritual doubts and confusion for poorer mental well- being (12).

In recent decades, many psychotherapists used religious and spiritual concepts in psychotherapy. These religious interventions are being used with different types of psychotherapy theories, including the Behavior Therapy (13), Psychoanalytic Therapy(14), Existential –Humanistic Therapy (15), Gestalt Therapy(16), Adlerian Therapy (17), Person-Centered Therapy(18), Rational–Emotive Therapy(19), and Cognitive Therapy (20,21). To assist psychotherapists in understanding their patients'

religiousness, Richard and Bergin (22) have suggested assessing religiousness at a broad level .

Rajaei(1) used spirituality in psychotherapy and proposed a new method of psychotherapy called Religious Cognitive - Emotional Therapy (RCET). According to RCET, it is very important for human beings to find the meaning of life. Further, this theory suggests that spiritual beliefs can help people find it and sense its power on their feelings, behaviors and mental health (1).Rajaei (1,20,23) mentioned three basic religious beliefs : Human being (self and others) , Existence, and God . In one research, Rejaei and others (23) found that basic religious beliefs have a negative relationship with identity crisis, and a positive relationship with general health. Also, the effectiveness of psychotherapy based on religious intervention have been examined in many studies. Based on the data of those studies, this form of psychotherapy is effective and can improve psychological health.

Although there are many studies about the relationship between religiosity, spirituality and mental health, there is little research on religion itself and the relationship between religiosity and personality. In one study, Hennigsgaard & Arnau (۲۴) found that in univariate level, all religiosity and spirituality variables demonstrated significant association with the Big Five Traits, excluding the extrinsic orientation . However, Extrinsic orientation, in conjunction with quest orientation and the intrinsic orientation, demonstrated a significant association with the Big Five Traits at the multivariate level.

In another study, Alminhana and Moreira- Almeda (25) showed that high religiousness is associated with low psychotics and high agreeableness and conscientiousness . Applying Eysenck's model of personality to spirituality, Maltby and Day (26) suggest that it is extraversion that accounts for most variance ( between 9 % and 14% ) in spirituality scores . According to piedmont (27), spiritual transcendence represents a broad based motivational domains of comparable breadth to those constructs contained in the Five- Factor Model and ought to be considered a potential sixth major dimension of personality . Considering the literature of spirituality, religiosity and the human main traits, the aim of this study is to find the relationship between basic religious beliefs ( Human, Existence and God) proposed in Religious Cognitive–Emotional Theory(1), and Five Personality Factors (neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness) .

## Materials and Method

We used the cross-sectional method (descriptive/correlational design ) in the present study.

## Participants

Sample consisted of 178 students of the Islamic Azad University in Torbat – Jam (104 males,74 females). Using a cluster- sampling technique, the subjects were selected from the undergraduate students of different disciplines at Torbat-Jam University. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 31( Mean= 22.2 years , SD=2.21). All participants completed paper – and – pencil versions of the BRBQ and NEO questionnaire.

## Measures

The basic religious beliefs questionnaire (1,23) and NEO Questionnaire (28,29)were used for data collection.

The Basic Religious Beliefs Questionnaire ( BRBQ). This questionnaire was made by Rajaei and colleagues in 2009 ,and includes 50 items in three subscales of religious beliefs, human , existence and God. The BRBQ was made based on religious Cognitive–Emotional Theory. Each item asks subjects to rate their opinions about their religious beliefs on a scale of 1(strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) . In one study on 440 university students, Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the total score was 0.96, and the reported acceptable reliability for BRBQ (23).

The NEO questionnaire was first made by McCrae and Costa in 1985 and included 181 items to investigate the big five of personality.The revised version of this questionnaire was presented in 1992 and included 240 items. A shorter version of this questionnaire (The five – factor inventory) was later designed. This inventory consisted of 60 items based on the factor analysis of scores of NEO personality inventory performed in 1986. Answering these items is possible through the 5- degree Likert scale (28,29).

This questionnaire has been normalized in Iran by Groosi (30) and validity of this questionnaire came out to be 0.83 , 0.75 , 0. 80 , 0.79 ,for factors C, A, O, E and N, respectively using test- retest method on 208 students with a three - month interval.

Correlation coefficient and regression analysis were used to analyze data.

## Results

Table 1 demonstrates correlations between the three categories of basic religious beliefs (human, existence and God ) and five personality traits .

Data in Table 1 demonstrated that basic religious beliefs have a significant negative correlation with neuroticism ( $r = -0.29$  ), and a significant positive relationship with extraversion( $r = 0.28$ ), openness( $r = 0.14$  ) , agreeableness( $r = 0.29$  ) , and conscientiousness ( $r = 0.48$ ). As the data demonstrated, openness has

the lowest and conscientiousness has the highest correlation with basic religious beliefs.

Table 2 illustrates the regression analyses of predictor variables ( Basic Religious Beliefs ) for predicting criterion variables ( Big Five Traits ) .

Data in table 2 demonstrate that basic religious beliefs ( Human, Existence, God ) can explain different variance of five personality traits, neuroticism(R2=0.08), extraversion(R2=0.07), openness(R2=0.02), agreeableness(R2=0.07) and conscientiousness (R2=0.23).

The results of regression analysis showed that basic religious beliefs can anticipate neuroticism , extraversion , agreeableness and conscientiousness traits, but it cannot anticipate openness significantly.

### Discussion

Based on data analysis, the basic religious beliefs have the most positive correlation with conscientiousness factor of personality . People with the conscientiousness trait are conscientious, careful, reliable, hard working and well organized. Therefore, one can conclude that religious people have more of these positive traits and are more responsible and have greater achievements in their life than others. The findings of this study are consistent with McCullough, Tsang and Brion (31) who found that conscientiousness in adolescence is uniquely related to higher religiousness in early adulthood. And our findings also support the results of the study of McCullough and Willoughby (32) which showed that religion can promote self – control and can

facilitate self – monitoring; and that these concepts tend to be associated with conscientiousness.

Data analysis also implies that basic religious beliefs have positive correlations with agreeableness ( good-natured, soft-hearted, selfless, sympathetic, forgiving characteristics ) extraversion ( sociable, fun- loving, affectionate, talkative, and Joiner characteristics). These characteristics can be positive, and help people to arrange effective relationships with others, and this, can lead to better mental health. The results of this study are also consistent with Saroglou (33) and Lodi-Smith and Roberts (34). By using meta-analysis, both studies showed that the Big Five correlates with religious involvement, and concluded that among the Big Five dimension of personality, agreeableness and conscientiousness have the most reliable correlations with religiousness. On the other hand, in contrast with the results of this study, McCullough, Tsang and Brion (31) found no significant correlation between these basic religious beliefs and extraversion.

Openness reflects, in part, a willingness to consider new ideas , as well as to question one's values and beliefs, and therefore some might expect a negative relation between openness and religiousness. However, in this study there was a low but positive correlation between basic religious beliefs and openness, but the correlation coefficient was not high. However, McCullough, Tsang and Biron (31) reported a positive significant correlation between religiousness and openness .

**Table 1: Correlations Between Basic Religious Beliefs and Five personality Traits .**

Basic Religious Beliefs	Five personality traits				
	N	E	O	A	C
Human	-0.33**	0.26**	0.16	0.32**	0.45**
Existence	-0.20**	0.21**	0.13	0.25**	0.40**
God	-0.25**	0.30**	0.07	0.22**	0.45**
Total	-0.29**	0.28**	0.14*	0.29**	0.48**

\* P<0.05 \*\* P< 0.01

**Table 2: Summary of Regression analyses for predicting Five Personality Traits**

Predictor Variable	B	SEB	β	R	R <sup>2</sup>
Basic Religious Beliefs	Neuroticism				
	-0.098	6.94	0.29**	0.29	0.085
	Extraversion				
	0.069	4.76	0.28**	0.28	0.07
	Openness				
	0.028	4.18	0.14	0.14	0.02
Agreeableness					
0.07	4.79	0.29**	0.29	0.07	
Conscientiousness					
0.11	4.59	0.48**	0.48	0.23	

\* P<0.05 \*\*P< 0.01

Finally, the relationship between basic religious beliefs and neuroticism was found to be negative. It means that religious people should be more calm, at ease, relaxed, secure and comfortable, while the neurotic people are worried, nervous, high-strung, insecure and self-conscious. By reviewing 49 studies using meta-analysis, Ano and Vasconcelles (3), concluded that positive forms of religious coping were positively associated with positive psychological outcomes such as life satisfaction and happiness, and negatively associated with negative outcomes, such as anxiety and depression. These findings all show that religiosity is associated with positive emotional states and well-being.

### Limitations

Due to cross-sectional and correlational nature of the data in this study, some usual limitations in methodology are to be noted. For example, correlational design restricts etiological claims. In addition, it is important to note that association of basic religious beliefs and personality trait was not high. For instance, regression analyses showed that only 0.08% of the variance neuroticism, 0.07% extraversion, 0.02% openness and 0.07% agreeableness were explained by basic religious beliefs. Therefore, using other research methods, investigation of the relations of these variables in future studies is recommended.

Furthermore, we should consider that participants of this study were only selected from university students. Thus, we should consider this as a limitation when generalizing the findings to other populations.

### Conclusion

In sum, based on the findings of this study we can conclude that religiousness and in the other words, trust in God, and the consequences of such a belief, provides some one with relaxation, decreased the life-span stress and more adjustments with the daily hassles and ultimately with positive personality traits, such as, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness. basic religious beliefs have a positive relationship with good characteristics that help people resolve the challenges of their lives and identity crisis. These findings are consistence with the Religious Cognitive – Emotional Theory, which indicates that basic religious beliefs can help people find the meaning of life and resolve their identity crisis.(1).

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