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Understanding Varieties of Religious Types: A Latent Profile Analysis of U.S. National Data

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Religion and spirituality are multidimensional features of adult life, yet most research examines individual dimensions in isolation rather than as components of a greater whole. This study uses a person-centered approach to identify distinct profiles of religion and spirituality and to examine how these profiles differ across sociodemographic and psychological characteristics in a national sample of U.S. adults. Data come from the Refresher sample of the Midlife in the United States study. Latent profile analysis was used to identify patterns of religion and spirituality across six dimensions: religious service attendance, private religious practice, religious identification, subjective spirituality, daily spiritual experience, and religious coping. Sociodemographic characteristics, personality traits, and optimism were then compared across profiles. A six-profile solution provided the best fit, identifying groups labeled highly religious, spiritually oriented religious, organizationally religious, moderately engaged, disengaged identifiers, and nonreligious. Profiles differed meaningfully across sociodemographic characteristics, including age, race/ethnicity, gender, and education, as well as across personality traits and optimism. These findings underscore the substantial heterogeneity in how religion and spirituality are lived and expressed. By identifying distinct constellations of religion and spirituality within individuals, this approach moves beyond variable-centered analyses and provides a more holistic framework for understanding religion and spirituality as lived configurations connected to broader psychological and social processes.

Keywords: religiosity/spirituality, latent profile analysis, person-centered methods, religious/spiritual types

Religion and spirituality (RS) are complex constructs, consisting of multiple overlapping dimensions that represent the lived experience of an individual. For many Americans, experiences of RS inform the decisions they make and how they view themselves and the world, find and create meaning, cope with adversity, and engage with others (Pargament, 1997; C. L. Park, 2005, 2007). Psychology has recognized this critical domain of human experience since the distant work of James (1902/1996), although the discipline has faced challenges in attempts to study these sometimes ineffable phenomena. Considerable effort has been devoted to conceptualizing and measuring RS phenomena, now largely recognized to be multidimensional, albeit with limited consensus as to what the dimensions are or how they should be studied. Consequently, RS is often investigated in fragments or dichotomies, and traditional variable-centered approaches (i.e., comparing how two or more constructs are related) struggle to capture multiple co-occurring dimensions within individuals.

Person-centered methods such as latent profile analysis (LPA) provide a means for understanding how different dimensions of RS

combine within individuals to form different “types.” This study takes an integrative approach using data-driven LPA and places it in the context of the field’s history and theories. The strengths of a population-level approach are brought to the inquiry, thereby allowing examination of demographic heterogeneity in the observed profiles. Capitalizing on the strengths of the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study, the profiles are further illuminated by consideration of various psychological characteristics. Foundational work conceptualizing and typologizing RS is first reviewed below, followed by a look at contemporary studies of RS.

RS as Multidimensional

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James (1902/1996) distinguished personal from institutional religion and emphasized the many ways individuals experience their religion. Over a century later, scholars of the psychology of RS have devoted significant attention to understanding its multidimensionality. Whereas disagreement may

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Midlife in the United States data sets are publicly accessible via the Midlife in the United States portal (<https://midus.colectica.org>) and the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (<https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/ICPSR/search/studies?q=midus>). Statistical scripts, analytic outputs, and additional online materials are available at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/>

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exist about what those dimensions are, decades of theory and measurement work have emphasized behavioral, experiential, cognitive, and functional domains of RS. These domains are reflected in constructs such as public religious participation (e.g., service attendance), private practice (e.g., prayer or meditation), religious identification, spiritual experience, religious motivations, and religious struggles (e.g., Fetzer Institute & National Institute on Aging Working Group, 1999; Hill & Pargament, 2003; Idler et al., 2003). Similar distinctions are captured in Saroglou's framework of the "Big Four" religious dimensions—believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging—which represent cognitive, emotional, moral, and social aspects of religious life across cultures (Saroglou, 2011; Saroglou et al., 2020). Empirical research has, however, struggled to model the ways these dimensions co-occur, with most research being variable-centered and focused on isolated facets rather than configurations of RS dimensions within individuals.

Traditional variable-centered approaches generally break RS into its constituent parts to examine the predictive role of each component, as in multiple regression (Musick, 1996) and structural equation models (Koenig, Hays, et al., 1997). Such methods assume a single homogeneous population and model distinct dimensions as independent, additive influences rather than interdependent aspects of a unified system (Klemmack et al., 2007). As more complex relationships using correlated dimensions of RS are modeled with such methods, issues of multicollinearity arise (Koenig, Hays, et al., 1997), thereby obscuring the diversity of RS experiences and reinforcing a simple low to high continuum (Pearce et al., 2013). Thus, a holistic, multidimensional picture of RS is missing.

Contemporary Empirical Typologies

To address these limitations, researchers began adopting person-centered methods such as LPA to identify subpopulations characterized by distinct RS configurations. LPA captures the empirical clustering of multiple RS dimensions within individuals, yielding meaningful profiles (Bounds et al., 2024; Bravo et al., 2016; N. S. Park et al., 2013). Thus, rather than categorize people as more or less religious, they are categorized as being RS in *different ways*. This methodological turn speaks to earlier conceptual advances recognizing RS's complexity.

Nonetheless, few studies have sought to identify broad RS profiles, and limitations have been evident with regard to samples, measures, and analyses. For instance, Klemmack et al. (2007) identified six clusters of RS in a sample of older adults using limited indicators (organizational involvement, nonorganizational involvement, intrinsic religiousness). N. S. Park et al. (2013) examined more varied RS indicators (service attendance, prayer, religious coping, daily spiritual experience) in a nationally representative sample of adults, generating profiles that differed mainly in intensity (e.g., high, moderate, low religiousness, nonreligious). Arguments have been made, however, that RS cannot be summarized with one variable or index, nor does it fall neatly on a continuum from low to high (Hall, 1997). Needed are nuanced combinations of RS dimensions emphasized in prior theory and qualitative work (Ammerman, 2007; Hall, 1997; McGuire, 2008). More recent work demonstrates the value and flexibility of person-centered methods, often focusing on specific populations or constructs, such as religious orientation (intrinsic-extrinsic-quest) among Christian college students (Bravo et al., 2016), formerly religious individuals (McLaughlin et al., 2022), mindfulness

(De Souza Marcovskis & Miller, 2023), or "spiritually grounded character" (using indicators of personal spirituality and character strengths in their LPA). Many studies have also focused on the RS of adolescents and emerging adults (e.g., Nadal et al., 2018; Pearce et al., 2013; Salas-Wright et al., 2012). Missing is work on RS profiles in the general U.S. adult population.

The Present Study

This inquiry uses data from the nationally representative MIDUS study that includes a rich battery of measures to investigate RS profiles that are both externally valid and conceptually rich. The first objective is to use LPA to uncover patterns of RS beyond simple high/low categorizations into nuanced profiles reflecting how multiple dimensions cluster within individuals. Six theoretically grounded indicators—service attendance, private practice, religious identification, subjective spirituality, daily spiritual experience, and religious coping—were selected to capture several domains central to RS scholarship, including behavioral, experiential, cognitive, and functional aspects of religious and spiritual life (e.g., Fetzer Institute & National Institute on Aging Working Group, 1999; James, 1902/1996; Stark & Glock, 1968). Importantly, these indicators extend beyond simple attitudes or beliefs to capture multiple modes through which RS is expressed in everyday life. Service attendance and private practice reflect public and private behavioral practices; religious identification captures identity, belonging, and commitment to a belief system; subjective spirituality reflects self-perceived spirituality and its salience; daily spiritual experience taps the experiential domain through everyday awareness of the transcendent; and religious coping represents the functional dimension by assessing how individuals draw on RS resources to manage stress and adversity (Fetzer Institute & National Institute on Aging Working Group, 1999; Idler et al., 2003; Pargament, 1997; Underwood & Teresi, 2002). Together, these indicators span multiple domains of RS and therefore provide a comprehensive basis for identifying latent profiles that reflect distinct constellations of religious and spiritual engagement.

The second aim is to understand *who occupies these different profiles* in relation to sociodemographic and psychological characteristics. Age, race/ethnicity, gender, and education are used to capture sociodemographic differences across profiles. Among the many psychological variables available in MIDUS, Big Five personality and optimism were selected because they represent broad, relatively stable dispositions that shape how individuals interpret experiences, relate to others, and approach meaning in life (Carver & Scheier, 2014; Steger et al., 2008). As such, they provide a useful lens for interpreting the kinds of people who are drawn to different configurations of RS engagement. A large body of literature has examined links between RS and personality traits (e.g., Saroglou, 2002), suggesting that personality may influence the ways individuals approach and express RS more than the reverse (Saroglou, 2010). Similarly, optimism has been consistently associated with religiosity and meaning-making (e.g., Krause, 2003; Vitorino et al., 2018) but has also been shown to vary across different forms of RS engagement (Salsman et al., 2005; i.e., optimism is more strongly associated with intrinsic and experiential forms of RS but not extrinsic involvement). Examining these psychological characteristics across RS profiles therefore provides insight into the broader dispositions and outlooks associated with different constellations of religious and spiritual life.

Method

Transparency and Openness

Primary analyses, statistical scripts, and other relevant files for this study are available at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/YSD2C> (Baker et al., 2026b) for verification and reuse. MIDUS data sets are open access and publicly available via the MIDUS portal (<https://midus.colectica.org>) and the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (<https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/ICPSR/search/studies?q=MIDUS>). Data were analyzed using R, Version 4.5.1 (R Core Team, 2025), and Mplus, Version 8.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). Although this study's design and analyses were not pre-registered, we have adhered to open science practices by ensuring accessibility to all materials and results.

Data and Sample

Data come from the MIDUS Refresher sample (2011–2014; $N = 3,577$; Ryff, Almeida, Ayanian, Binkley, Carr, Coe, Davidson, Grzywacz, Karlamangla, Krueger, Lachman, Love, Mailick, et al., 2025), a national probability sample of noninstitutionalized, English-speaking adults aged 25–74 recruited via random-digit dialing, plus a Black oversample from Milwaukee, Wisconsin ($n = 508$; 2012–2013; Ryff, Almeida, Ayanian, Binkley, Carr, Coe, Davidson, Grzywacz, Karlamangla, Krueger, Lachman, Love, Mailick Seltzer, et al., 2025). The present analyses included all participants from these samples with available data on at least one RS indicator; LPAs were estimated using full-information maximum likelihood, which retains cases with partially missing indicators, yielding a final analytic sample of $N = 2,872$. Missingness on the RS indicators was minimal; among the analytic sample, approximately 98% of participants provided data on all six indicators. The rationale for using the Refresher sample rather than the Core sample is that the former has an age range that includes younger participants and represents a more contemporary cohort in which to examine religiosity, and comprehensive measures of RS were not included in the baseline assessment of the Core sample.

Measures

RS

Six dimensions of RS were included in profile identification: service attendance, private religious practice, religious identification, subjective spirituality, religious coping, and daily spiritual experience. *Service attendance* is a behavioral measure that assesses participants' community engagement and formal religious participation by asking how often they attend RS services from *once a day or more* (1) to *never* (6). *Private religious practice* (Koenig, Parkerson, et al., 1997) is another behavioral measure that, in contrast to service attendance, assesses private expressions of RS. Participants were asked how often they engaged in three items: "pray in private," "meditate or chant," and "read the Bible or other religious literature" from *once a day or more* (1) to *never* (6). *Religious identification* (Brim et al., 2017; Garfield et al., 2001; Rossi, 2001) includes seven items assessing the degree to which participants identify as religious and the importance of religion in their lives (e.g., "How religious are you?" and "How important is religion in your life?") from *very* (1) to *not at all* (4). Similarly, *subjective spirituality* (Brim et al., 2017; Garfield et al., 2001; Rossi, 2001) is assessed using

two items: "How spiritual are you?" and "How important is spirituality in your life?" to which participants indicated their level of agreement from *very* (1) to *not at all* (4). *Religious/spiritual coping* (Fetzer Institute & National Institute on Aging Working Group, 1999) is measured using six items assessing the degree of RS-framed responses to stressors (e.g., "I look to God for strength, support, and guidance" and "I think about how my life is part of a larger spiritual force") from *a great deal* (1) to *none* (4). Finally, participants' *daily spiritual experiences* were assessed using five items that MIDUS adapted from the original 16-item Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale developed by Underwood and Teresi (2002) in response to recommendations from the Fetzer Institute and National Institute on Aging Working Group (1999). The five items ask how often participants subjectively experienced RS in daily life (e.g., "A feeling of deep inner peace or harmony" and "A feeling of strong connection to all of life") from *often* (1) to *never* (4). For each religiosity measure, items were reverse-coded and summed such that higher scores indicate higher frequency or endorsement of each domain.

Sociodemographic Characteristics

To better understand the individuals who fall into each of the identified profiles, sociodemographic characteristics were included: age, gender, race (Black, White, Hispanic, multiracial/other), and educational attainment (high school or less, some college/associates, and bachelor's degree or more).

Psychological Characteristics

For psychological characteristics, measures of personality traits and optimism were included. Personality traits were assessed using the Big Five framework, which captures five broad dimensions of personality—extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience—that represent widely accepted domains of individual differences (John & Srivastava, 1999). Personality traits were measured by asking respondents how much each of 30 self-descriptive adjectives described them from *a lot* (1) to *not at all* (4). Example adjectives for each of the six personality traits are as follows: neuroticism (moody, nervous, worrying); extraversion (outgoing, friendly, talkative); openness to experience (curious, broad-minded, adventurous); conscientiousness (organized, responsible, hardworking); agreeableness (e.g., helpful, warm, caring; Rossi, 2001).

To assess optimism, participants completed the Life Orientation Test (Scheier et al., 1994), rating their level of agreement to three items measuring optimism (e.g., "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best," "I'm always optimistic about my future") and three items measuring pessimism (e.g., "If something can go wrong for me, it will," "I hardly ever expect things to go my way") from *a lot agree* (1) to *a lot disagree* (5). Overall optimism is constructed by calculating the sum of the six items. Items from "optimism" were reverse-coded so that higher scores represent higher levels of optimism.

Analytic Strategy

LPA is a person-centered, finite mixture modeling approach that identifies groups or "profiles" of people based on their responses to multiple continuous indicators. As LPA is sensitive to differences

in variable ranges, all continuous RS indicators were standardized (z -scored; $M = 0$, $SD = 1$) prior to model estimation to place variables on a comparable scale, thus ensuring that indicators with larger variances did not disproportionately influence profile estimation.

Models were estimated using Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) via the MplusAutomation package (Hallquist & Wiley, 2018) in RStudio (Posit Team, 2024), using robust maximum likelihood and full-information maximum likelihood to handle missing data. To determine the optimal number of profiles, models with one to seven profiles were compared on the basis of fit indices, including the Bayesian information criterion and sample size–adjusted Bayesian information criterion, following the recommendations of Nylund et al. (2007). Relative entropy was used as a metric of classification accuracy (entropy $>.80$ is considered high, suggesting clear class separation). Relative fit comparisons using the Lo–Mendell–Rubin (LMR) likelihood ratio test and the bootstrap likelihood ratio test—which evaluate whether a k -profile model fits significantly better than a $k - 1$ profile model—were also assessed (significant p values of $<.05$ indicate support for the additional profile). Finally, parsimony and interpretability guided final model selection. This included evaluating how many participants were assigned to the smallest group, which should not contain fewer than about 5% of the sample (Ferguson et al., 2020), and determining whether the identified profiles represented meaningfully distinct groups. As a robustness check, the sample was randomly divided into two halves, and the LPA was reestimated separately in each subsample to evaluate whether the profile structure replicated.

Profiles are described using the above sociodemographic and psychological distal variables. Distal differences in continuous and categorical variables were examined using the automatic Bolck–Croon–Hagenaars method and the categorical distal outcome analysis auxiliary syntax in Mplus, respectively. The Bolck–Croon–Hagenaars

method compares means across profiles while accounting for classification error without shifting the latent class structure in the analysis (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014). The categorical distal outcome analysis auxiliary syntax implements the Lanza/LMR-style method for examining distal variables across profiles and is better suited to multilevel categorical variables than the Bolck–Croon–Hagenaars method. Both methods return class-specific means/probabilities, omnibus tests, and pairwise comparisons.

Results

Preliminary Analyses and Data Preparation

Descriptive information and correlations between key analytic variables are presented in Table 1. Data were cleaned and prepped for LPA in RStudio, and cases with partial missing data were preserved for analysis in Mplus. Mplus uses full-information maximum likelihood in its parameter estimates when missing data are present, reducing potential bias and providing more accurate estimates of standard errors compared to listwise or pairwise deletion. All RS indicators were transformed to z scores ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$) prior to LPA to avoid scaling issues.

LPA

Identifying Number of Profiles

Using the six standardized RS indicators, LPA models with one to seven profile solutions were examined. Table 2 provides a summary of the model fit statistics and criteria for these seven different models. Results of the LPA statistics, in conjunction with theoretical interpretability, suggested the six-profile solution as the best fitting model. The information criteria statistics (Akaike information criterion, Bayesian information criterion, sample

Table 1
Bivariate Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Analytic Variables

Continuous variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Service attendance	—													2.77	1.49
2. Private practice	.69	.70												9.37	4.41
3. Religious ID	.72	.69	.92											18.92	6.06
4. Spirituality	.53	.67	.66	.93										6.31	1.72
5. DSE	.34	.46	.36	.48	.90									15.53	3.39
6. Religious coping	.54	.67	.63	.65	.50	.71								17.98	3.90
7. Agreeableness	.13	.22	.19	.26	.40	.26	.79							3.37	0.53
8. Conscientiousness	.05	.06	.07	.12	.20	.17	.32	.69						3.36	0.49
9. Extraversion	.09	.13	.12	.16	.34	.19	.51	.28	.75					3.08	0.59
10. Neuroticism	−.08	−.02	−.02	−.04	−.19	−.14	−.10	−.22	−.18	.72				2.15	0.64
11. Openness	−.03	.03	−.05	.08	.26	.06	.34	.31	.49	−.18	.77			2.95	0.54
12. Optimism	.15	.12	.11	.18	.37	.27	.23	.30	.33	−.45	.30	.82		22.37	4.93
13. Age	.07	.08	.06	.10	.21	.08	.11	.04	.02	−.16	−.02	.13	—	49.57	14.23
Categorical variable														<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender: female														1,551	54
Race/ethnicity: White														2,036	71
Race/ethnicity: Black														347	12
Education: BA or higher														1,296	45

Note. Bolded values along the diagonal of the correlations represent Cronbach's α for composite variables. Religious ID = religious identification; DSE = daily spiritual experience.

Table 2*Fit Statistics for One- Through Seven-Profile Solutions*

K profile	AIC	BIC	aBIC	Entropy	LMR ($p; k - 1$)	BLRT ($p; k - 1$)	Smallest n (%)	Min. probability
1	48,566	48,637	48,599				100	1.00
2	41,314	41,427	41,367	0.88	<.0001	<.0001	46.2	0.96
3	39,059	39,214	39,132	0.87	<.0001	<.0001	22.5	0.92
4	38,483	38,679	38,575	0.86	<.0001	<.0001	14.5	0.82
5	37,717	37,956	37,829	0.85	<.0001	<.0001	14.8	0.86
6	36,975	37,255	37,106	0.91	<.0001	<.0001	7.2	0.88
7	36,252	36,574	36,402	0.95	.8117	<.0001	7.2	0.90

Note. Bold text indicates the model selected as the best fitting model. AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion; aBIC = sample size-adjusted BIC; LMR = Lo-Mendell-Rubin adjusted likelihood ratio test; BLRT = bootstrapped likelihood ratio test; Min. probability = the minimum probability value assignment to one of the classes within the profile solution.

size-adjusted Bayesian information criterion) continued to improve (decrease) with each additional profile, a common occurrence in studies with larger sample sizes (Choi et al., 2020). Declines in these metrics were gradual, with no clear inflection point where improvements sharply diminished. As a result, information criteria alone favored solutions with increasing numbers of profiles, including both the five- and six-profile solutions. However, comparison of the five- and six-profile models indicated that the additional class in the six-profile solution captured a substantively distinct configuration of RS indicators rather than simply subdividing an existing profile. Thus, the added complexity of the six-profile solution was justified by better capturing heterogeneity in the data. Entropy for the six (0.91) and seven (0.95) profile solutions was exceptionally high, indicating very good classification accuracy in both models, highest in the seven-profile model. However, the LMR comparison indicated that the seven-profile solution did not provide a significantly better fit ($p = .812$) than the six-profile solution ($k - 1$). Additionally, the bootstrap likelihood ratio test comparing six versus seven profiles failed to terminate normally, even with increased numbers of random starts and bootstrap draws, consistent with overextraction and unstable solutions (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). Substantive investigation of identified profiles for the six- and seven-profile solutions further suggested that the additional profile in the seven-profile model did not represent a distinct or meaningful group. Although information criteria statistics and entropy alone indicated that the seven-profile solution may be the best fit, the six-profile solution was ultimately selected as the best fitting model based on the significance value of the

LMR comparison, considerations of parsimony, and substantive interpretability.

The six-profile solution was replicated in split-half validation analyses, with highly similar indicator patterns ($r \geq .96$) and class proportions in both subsamples (see the Open Science Framework repository for full outputs at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/YSD2C>). These results provide additional support for the robustness of the six-profile solution across independent subsamples.

Description of Profiles

Labels for the identified profiles were assigned based on the patterns of mean scores on the indicator variables, shown in Table 3 and Figure 1. These labels and a brief description of each profile are as follows:

Profile 1: Highly Religious. By far the largest group, this first profile consisted of 30.4% of the sample ($n = 872$). Mean scores for this profile were high across all indicators and were the highest scores relative to the other profiles on all indicators, hence the label “highly religious.” These individuals demonstrated scores well above the sample average on all six indicators, demonstrating a high commitment and involvement across RS dimensions (personal, experiential, spiritual, organizational, behavioral).

Profile 2: Spiritually Oriented Religious. The second group comprised 13.4% of the sample ($n = 384$). This group was characterized by high mean scores in personal and spiritual domains but only moderate-to-low scores on traditional/organizational domains. Specifically, these individuals scored almost as high as the highly religious profile on spirituality ($M = 7.77$, $z = 0.85$) and daily

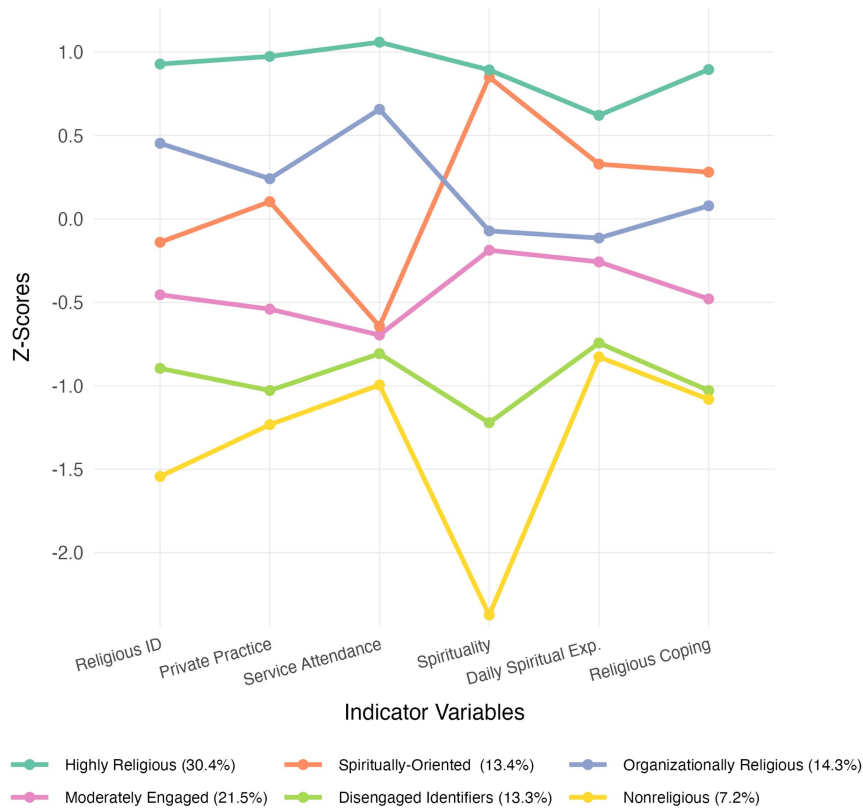
Table 3*Profile Sizes and Mean Scores of Latent Profiles on Religiosity Indicators*

	Profile 1: Highly religious	Profile 2: Spiritually oriented	Profile 3: Organizationally religious	Profile 4: Moderately engaged	Profile 5: Disengaged identifier	Profile 6: Nonreligious
Religiosity indicator	M (z)	M (z)	M (z)	M (z)	M (z)	M (z)
Service attendance	4.35 (1.06)	1.81 (−0.64)	3.75 (0.66)	1.73 (−0.70)	1.56 (−0.81)	1.28 (−1.0)
Private practice	13.67 (0.97)	9.83 (0.10)	10.44 (0.24)	6.99 (−0.54)	4.84 (−1.03)	3.94 (−1.23)
Religious ID	24.55 (0.93)	18.08 (−0.14)	21.67 (0.45)	16.17 (−0.46)	13.50 (−0.90)	9.57 (−1.54)
Spirituality	7.84 (0.89)	7.77 (0.85)	6.18 (−0.07)	5.98 (−0.19)	4.21 (−1.22)	2.22 (−2.37)
DSE	17.64 (0.62)	16.65 (0.33)	15.15 (−0.12)	14.66 (−0.26)	13.01 (−0.74)	12.73 (−0.83)
Religious coping	21.58 (0.90)	19.08 (0.28)	18.29 (0.08)	16.11 (−0.48)	13.97 (−1.03)	13.77 (−1.08)
N (%)	872 (30.4)	384 (13.4)	412 (14.3)	617 (21.5)	381 (13.3)	206 (7.2)

Note. Service attendance: 1 = never; 6 = once a day or more. Religious ID = religious identification; DSE = daily spiritual experience.

Figure 1

Line Graph of Standardized Mean Scores on Each Indicator Variable for the Six-Profile Solution



Note. Standardized means are weighted using posterior probabilities to account for classification uncertainty. Religious ID = religious identification; Daily Spiritual Exp. = daily spiritual experience. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

spiritual experience ($M = 16.65$, $z = 0.33$) and had the second-highest scores in spirituality, daily spiritual experience, and religious coping. Scores for religious identification ($M = 18.08$, $z = -0.14$) and private practice ($M = 9.83$, $z = 0.10$) were relatively moderate, both close to the sample mean. Despite having high scores in spiritual and personal domains, this profile showed a sharp departure from the first profile in service attendance, which was much lower than the previous profile and well below the sample mean ($M = 1.81$, $z = -0.64$). Based on the pattern of scores, these individuals seem to value and utilize the internal, affective, and coping-oriented aspects of RS, showing a strong personal experience with their RS, without being heavily involved in the organizational/institutional aspects. Therefore, this group was given the label “spiritually oriented religious.”

Profile 3: Organizationally Religious. Profile 3 comprised 14.3% of the sample ($n = 412$). Patterns of means for this group depicted a profile very much the inverse of Profile 2. Where the previous profile showed elevated personal/spiritual scores and lower organizational scores, this profile was characterized by high organizational involvement and identification and moderate levels of personal spirituality. Service attendance ($M = 3.75$, $z = 0.66$), private practice ($M = 10.44$, $z = 0.24$), and religious identification ($M = 21.67$, $z = 0.45$) in this profile were the second highest,

following the highly religious profile, whereas scores in spirituality ($M = 6.18$, $z = -0.07$), daily spiritual experience ($M = 15.15$, $z = -0.12$), and religious coping ($M = 18.29$, $z = 0.08$) were below both the previous two profiles. Although these individuals still identify as spiritual, experience some kind of spirituality in their daily lives, and use their religion to cope to some degree, these are not the pillars of their religious experience. Rather, strong ties to institutional or communal expressions of religiosity suggest a traditional, probably denominational form of religious engagement that we label “organizationally religious.”

Profile 4: Moderately Engaged. The second largest group, Profile 4, comprised 21.5% of the sample ($n = 617$). For each RS dimension, the scores of this group were lower than the previous three profiles and fell below the sample means. However, scores were still distinctly higher than the two final profiles. This profile was most similar to the organizationally religious group in the domains of spirituality ($M = 5.98$, $z = -0.19$) and daily spiritual experience ($M = 14.66$, $z = -0.26$), whereas it was closer to the spiritually oriented group on indicators like service attendance ($M = 1.73$, $z = -0.70$) and religious identification ($M = 16.17$, $z = -0.46$). Despite being less religious and spiritual than the previous profiles, these individuals still hold a RS identity but do not actively engage much in community or private religious practices nor lean heavily

on religion to make decisions. This profile represents a middle ground between the more religiously engaged profiles and the largely disengaged profiles and is thus labeled “moderately engaged.”

Profile 5: Disengaged Identifiers. Profile 5 comprised 13.3% of the sample ($n = 381$) whose scores on all RS indicators were lower than the previous four profiles (about 1 *SD* below the averages of the total sample). This group closely resembles the least RS profile, Profile 6, with regard to service attendance ($M = 1.56$, $z = -0.81$), private practice ($M = 4.84$, $z = -1.03$), daily spiritual experience ($M = 13.01$, $z = -0.74$), and religious coping ($M = 13.97$, $z = -1.03$). However, this profile departed from Profile 6 on spirituality ($M = 4.21$, $z = -1.22$) and religious identification ($M = 13.50$, $z = -0.90$). In these dimensions, Profile 5 indicates that RS still hold some importance and significance in their lives, even though they show very little engagement with either organizational or personal aspects of RS, do not experience a strong sense of the divine in their daily lives, and do not prioritize RS in making decisions and coping. This group may represent individuals who are largely disengaged from RS but still retain a RS identity and the accompanying values to some degree. We label this profile “disengaged identifiers,” accordingly.

Profile 6: Nonreligious. The final profile, also the smallest, comprising 7.2% of the sample ($n = 206$), was defined by consistently low scores across all six religiosity indicators, the lowest of all profiles. Members of this group report attending religious services almost never ($M = 1.28$, $z = -1.0$) and almost never engage in private practices like prayer, meditation, and reading religious literature ($M = 3.94$, $z = -1.23$). They report very little to no

religious identification ($M = 9.57$, $z = -1.54$) or spirituality ($M = 2.22$, $z = -2.37$), experience the divine in their daily lives rarely to never ($M = 12.73$, $z = -0.83$), and use religious coping strategies rarely to never ($M = 13.77$, $z = -1.08$). This profile represents a group that is largely disengaged from RS, both organized religious aspects and more personal spiritual aspects.

Understanding the Profiles

Upon settling on the six-profile solution and evaluating and labeling each profile based on the pattern of means across the six religiosity indicators, differences between the profiles on sociodemographic and psychological characteristics were examined. Table 4 presents means and proportions of distal variables across profiles (full pairwise comparison results for all distal variable analyses are available in the Open Science Framework repository at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/YSD2C>).

Sociodemographic Characteristics

Differences between profiles were first examined in sociodemographic characteristics: age, gender, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment. Omnibus equality of means tests for all sociodemographic variables were statistically significant, indicating that at least one pair of profiles differed significantly in each case.

Profiles by age indicated that the more religiously engaged profiles were older, and the less religiously engaged profiles were younger. Significant differences in age were mainly observed between these two less RS profiles and the other four profiles.

Table 4

Distal Personality, Optimism, and Sociodemographic Characteristics by Religiosity Profile

Distal variable	Profile 1: Highly religious	Profile 2: Spiritually oriented	Profile 3: Organizationally religious	Profile 4: Moderately engaged	Profile 5: Disengaged identifier	Profile 6: Nonreli- gious	χ^2	Sig.
Continuous (BCH)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)		
Age	52.73 (0.49)	52.88 (0.74)	51.38 (0.79)	51.22 (0.61)	49.06 (0.80)	47.70 (1.06)	33.15	<.001
Agreeableness	3.53 (0.02)	3.49 (0.03)	3.29 (0.03)	3.35 (0.02)	3.16 (0.03)	3.13 (0.04)	200.85	<.001
Conscientiousness	3.44 (0.02)	3.41 (0.03)	3.31 (0.03)	3.32 (0.02)	3.27 (0.03)	3.30 (0.04)	50.59	<.001
Extraversion	3.21 (0.02)	3.17 (0.03)	2.99 (0.03)	3.07 (0.03)	2.91 (0.03)	2.96 (0.04)	88.66	<.001
Neuroticism	2.05 (0.02)	2.23 (0.04)	2.20 (0.04)	2.19 (0.03)	2.20 (0.04)	2.13 (0.05)	31.21	<.001
Openness	2.96 (0.02)	3.10 (0.03)	2.86 (0.03)	2.98 (0.02)	2.83 (0.03)	2.99 (0.04)	54.55	<.001
Optimism	23.74 (0.16)	22.41 (0.29)	22.29 (0.26)	21.89 (0.22)	20.88 (0.29)	20.89 (0.34)	127.66	<.001
Categorical (DCAT)	%	%	%	%	%	%	χ^2	Sig.
Gender							144.92	<.001
Female	65.9	66.4	46.9	49.5	40.1	35.5		
Male	34.1	33.6	53.1	50.5	59.9	64.5		
Race/ethnicity							112.36	<.001
NH White	62.5	64.9	74.2	76.3	81.6	80.5		
NH Black	18.3	15.5	12.0	8.7	5.2	4.1		
Hispanic	4.3	2.2	2.5	3.5	3.4	3.1		
Multiracial/other	14.9	17.4	11.4	11.4	9.9	12.4		
Education							27.96	.002
≤High school	23.8	24.9	23.6	23.9	25.2	28.7		
Some college/associates	32.5	37.0	27.4	31.1	26.7	19.6		
BA or higher	43.7	38.1	49.0	45.0	48.1	51.7		

Note. Sig. = significance; BCH = Bolck–Croon–Hagenaars method for continuous distal outcomes; SE = standard error; DCAT = categorical distal outcome analysis in Mplus; NH = non-Hispanic; BA = bachelor's degree.

In terms of gender, proportions of females differed significantly across profiles, with the spiritually oriented profile having the highest proportion (66.4%) and the nonreligious the lowest (35.5%). That is, profiles with high emphasis on personal/spiritual aspects had higher proportions of females than profiles that were either less religious in general or religious with an emphasis on organizational/institutional components.

Race/ethnicity showed significant differences across profiles. The highly religious (62.5% White, 18.3% Black) and spiritually oriented (64.9% White, 15.5% Black) profiles were the most racially/ethnically diverse, whereas the disengaged identifiers (81.6% White, 5.2% Black) and nonreligious (80.5% White, 4.1% Black) profiles were significantly more homogenous.

Profiles differed significantly in level of education attainment, though the patterns are more complex than the previous variables, with no clear gradient from more to less RS profiles. The highest proportion of individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher was in the nonreligious profile (51.7%), whereas the lowest was in the spiritually oriented profile (38.1%). However, the nonreligious group also had the highest percent of individuals with a high school diploma or less of any profile (28.7%). The spiritually oriented profile showed the least education of any profile, whereas the organizationally religious group ($M = 49.0\%$) had the highest of the religious profiles (excluding nonreligious).

Psychological Characteristics

Results from the distal analysis of personality traits are displayed in Figure 2. Of these traits, the biggest differences between profiles were observed in agreeableness, with a clear gradient from the more religious to less religious profiles. The highly religious had the highest average agreeableness ($M = 3.53$) and nonreligious the

lowest ($M = 3.13$). For conscientiousness, the highly religious ($M = 3.44$) and spiritually oriented ($M = 3.41$) profiles showed the highest mean scores, significantly higher than the four other profiles. Similarly, highly religious ($M = 3.21$) and spiritually oriented ($M = 3.17$) were highest in extraversion, statistically higher than all the other profiles. For neuroticism, the highly religious had the lowest scores ($M = 2.05$), significantly lower than every other profile except for the nonreligious ($M = 2.13$). Finally, for openness, the spiritually oriented group showed the highest scores ($M = 3.10$), significantly higher than all five other profiles, and disengaged identifiers the lowest ($M = 2.83$), significantly lower than all other profiles except organizationally religious ($M = 2.86$).

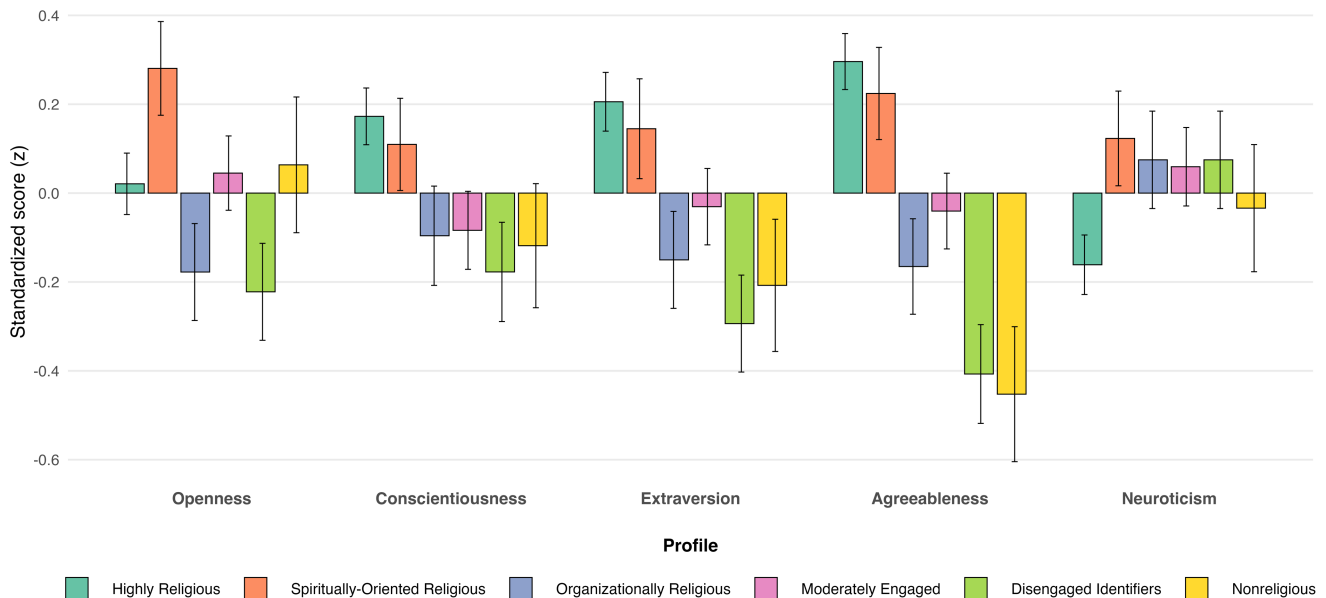
Profiles differed meaningfully in optimism scores, with the highly religious profile being the most optimistic ($M = 23.74$), significantly higher than the other five, and the disengaged identifiers ($M = 20.88$) and nonreligious ($M = 20.89$) profiles the least. Optimism in the disengaged identifiers and nonreligious groups was significantly lower than in all other profiles.

Discussion

This study sought to identify multidimensional profiles of RS and to describe these profiles in terms of sociodemographic and psychological characteristics. LPA using a nationally representative U.S. sample revealed six distinct profiles, which varied on socio-demographic and psychological measures, reflecting diverse ways that multiple RS dimensions co-occur within individuals. The profiles—highly religious, spiritually oriented religious, organizationally religious, moderately engaged, disengaged identifiers, and nonreligious—reveal heterogeneity beyond the simple “religious–nonreligious”/level-based continuum. Findings demonstrate that RS in contemporary American life is best understood not as varying

Figure 2

Big Five Personality Differences Across Religious/Spiritual Profiles



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

degrees of single constructs but as qualitatively different constellations of belief, practice, and experience.

Profiles of Religious and Spiritual Life

The results support longstanding theoretical claims that RS is multidimensional and expressed through diverse configurations rather than a single continuum of involvement (Hall, 1997; Idler et al., 2003). At one end, the highly religious type shows broad, integrated engagement across all dimensions of RS, whereas at the other, the nonreligious type reflects uniform disengagement from both organized religion and personal spirituality. Between these poles, four additional profiles reveal the diversity of RS experience in U.S. adults. The emergence of internally and organizationally religious groups represents distinct emphases within religious life—one grounded in personal experience and spiritual meaning and the other in communal and institutional participation. These profiles echo classic distinctions between personal and institutional RS (e.g., Hill & Pargament, 2003; James, 1902/1996), though they should not be seen as opposites but as alternative expressions that highlight different routes through which RS is lived. The remaining two profiles capture more attenuated expressions of RS: Moderately engaged individuals show modest involvement across domains, still identifying as religious and valuing their spirituality but engaging only occasionally in practice or communal aspects. In contrast, disengaged identifiers retain religious and spiritual identity even as behavioral and experiential elements largely fall away. For them, RS may function less as an active framework of meaning and more as a lingering aspect of self-definition or cultural belonging, echoing broader patterns in which individuals maintain religious identification even as behavioral or experiential engagement declines (Lim et al., 2010; Van Tongeren et al., 2021). Together, these six types depict a diverse RS landscape where multiple, coexisting ways of being RS reflect how individuals integrate (or disengage from) institutional, personal, and experiential aspects of the sacred.

Patterning of Profiles

Sociodemographic Characteristics

Profiles also varied across sociodemographic characteristics in ways that differ when considering configurations rather than single dimensions. Age differences were modest: The two least engaged profiles were, on average, younger than the other four profiles, suggesting age primarily relates to wholesale disengagement rather than to the specific form one's RS takes. Although age differences were modest, the somewhat younger age of the least engaged profiles is broadly consistent with evidence that younger cohorts in the United States tend to report lower levels of religious involvement and affiliation (Bengtson et al., 2015). With regard to gender, women were overrepresented in the spiritually oriented and highly religious types, whereas men made up the majority of the organizational or disengaged forms. This is congruent with longstanding evidence that women report higher levels of religious involvement than men (Francis, 1997) but suggests that women may also prefer forms of RS that place greater emphasis on personal or experiential facets, as prior work indicates that women favor less rigid or dogmatic RS expression than men (Schnabel, 2018). Greater representation of Black adults in the more engaged, coping-oriented profiles aligns with work depicting

Black Americans as more RS than their White peers and with a stronger emphasis on religious coping (Baker et al., 2026a; Chatters et al., 2008; Taylor & Chatters, 2010). Educational differences were nonlinear and complex: The nonreligious profile included the highest shares at both the highest and lowest education levels, the organizationally religious showed the highest portion of a BA or more among the engaged types, and the spiritually oriented tended to have the lowest education overall. The juxtaposition between the internally and organizationally religious types on education is surprising, given previous work showing that adults with higher education are less likely to hold traditional beliefs and more likely to identify as "spiritual" (McFarland et al., 2011; Shahabi et al., 2002). The present findings tell a different story, underscoring that sociodemographic factors map onto profiles of RS in ways not captured by simple *more-versus-less* analyses of individual indicators.

Psychological Characteristics

In terms of personality traits, the highly religious and spiritually oriented profiles scored higher than the other profiles in agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extraversion, with the biggest differences in agreeableness, consistent with variable-centered work (Saroglou, 2002). Notably, the fact that the highly and spiritually oriented types were higher in these traits than the other profiles but did not differ from each other suggests that such tendencies may characterize only those who deeply integrate or internalize rather than are merely involved in RS. The highly religious were lower in neuroticism than all other types except the nonreligious, suggesting that full engagement and full disengagement may provide greater psychological coherence, whereas intermediate types may experience more uncertainty or struggle associated with higher neuroticism (Wilt et al., 2017). Openness was uniquely elevated in the spiritually oriented profile, reinforcing the idea that highly experiential and spiritual forms of RS attract individuals inclined toward curiosity and complexity, whereas more institutional or identity-based forms may appeal to those with less openness to novelty (Saroglou, 2002; Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008). As in neuroticism, the highly and nonreligious profiles were equivalent in openness, again suggesting that how one is RS may be more important than if one is RS in understanding associations with other characteristics. Optimism followed a clear gradient, highest in the highly religious and lowest in the disengaged identifiers and nonreligious, aligning with previous positive associations between optimism and RS and findings that those with more integrated RS (i.e., high in both spiritual and religious domains) are the most optimistic (Vitorino et al., 2018). Together, these findings reveal that psychological characteristics differ not simply by degree of RS but by the *form* through which RS is expressed.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of the present study warrant mention. Although MIDUS provides unusually rich RS measures, the indicators do not encompass all relevant domains, such as mystical experience or specific beliefs. The cross-sectional design precludes conclusions about change or causality, positioning this work as an exploratory foundation for future longitudinal inquiry. Finally, despite the use of a heterogeneous, national sample, the cultural and denominational range is constrained to predominantly

Judeo-Christian contexts; RS profiles may differ in other cultural or religious settings.

Future work should examine how these profiles predict and interact with outcomes such as well-being, coping, and health across time and contexts. In particular, research should examine how these profiles function in the context of stress and adversity, for example, whether profiles emphasizing inward, experiential spirituality (e.g., spiritually oriented) confer comparable protective benefits to more traditional, organized engagement. Another key direction for future work is to explore change and dynamics over time—both within person and across generations. So doing will be critical for explicating cultural and generational changes in RS: Are Americans becoming less RS, or are the forms RS takes just changing? Similarly, longitudinal examination of RS within-person could reveal whether individuals remain stable in their RS type or transition across profiles, illuminating processes of RS struggle or transformation, as illustrated by recent person-centered work linking RS struggle and well-being (Lee et al., 2025). Identifying antecedents and consequences of such trajectories of change offers promising directions.

Conclusion

For most Americans, RS are vital elements of the human experience, though expressed in diverse ways. This study offers a comprehensive empirical portrait of that diversity, identifying six distinct constellations of belief, practice, and experience, with unique sociodemographic and psychological characteristics. Moving beyond unidimensional conceptions, the findings show that Americans engage the sacred through multiple configurations shaped by both structure and disposition, providing rich opportunities for subsequent inquiry. Recognizing this heterogeneity deepens our understanding of RS as a dynamic and multifaceted aspect of life, one that continues to shape meaning, identity, and resilience in contemporary society.

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