

GENERAL SCIENTIFIC PRINCIPLES FOR THE STUDY OF MATERIALS OF RELIGIOUS CONTENT

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Abstract. In conducting religious expertise (hereinafter *RE*), it is essential to follow the general scientific principles governing the study of materials of religious content (hereinafter *MRC*), which implies adherence to methodological standards. Equally important is recognising the interdisciplinary character of religious studies. Emerging about a century and a half ago in Western Europe as an independent scientific field, religious studies—distinct from theology and atheism—possess their own conceptual framework and employ the methods of other disciplines such as history, sociology, psychology, philology, and cultural studies in providing a secular assessment of religion.

The purpose of conducting *RE* in the Republic of Uzbekistan is to determine, through the authorised body, whether *MRC* contain elements that contradict existing legislation, deviate from religious law, or distort its principles, in order to decide whether to permit or prohibit their production, import, or dissemination within the country. The identification of “deviations from or distortions of religious laws” within *MRC* is resolved through theological research.

Thus, there is an observable harmonisation between secular and religious knowledge, which has yielded positive results in religious-educational and ideological work promoting spiritual and moral values. The aim of this research is to determine, from a methodological standpoint, the extent to which ideological techniques are appropriate in the scientific examination of *MRC* conducted through religious expertise.

Through a comparative analysis of general scientific and theological methods, the study defines the scope of methods acceptable for *RE*, highlights the methodological requirements for both scientific and theological approaches, identifies their distinguishing features, and evaluates the practice of integrating them.

The general scientific principles for studying materials of religious content (*MRC*) were examined comprehensively, leading to the following conclusions:

At the research stage of religious expertise (*RE*), it is necessary to adhere to the methodological requirements of accuracy, focus, and axiological neutrality characteristic of scientific methods. In theological research, however, it is essential to observe the specific methodological traditions of each religion — such as *qiyas* (analogical reasoning) and *taqlid* (emulation) in Islam, and hermeneutics and contextual theology in Christianity, among others. At the final stage of *RE*, the consensus-based conclusions jointly formulated by the religious scholar and the theologian should be duly considered.

Keywords: general scientific methods, theological methods, religious expertise (*RE*), materials of religious content (*MRC*), axiological neutrality, science, ideology.

Introduction. Most scholars of religion point out that the lack of a clearly established methodological framework and conceptual apparatus in religious expertise (hereinafter *RE*)

remains the primary factor hindering the effectiveness of examining materials of religious content (hereinafter *MRC*). An important prerequisite for improving *RE* is the training of highly qualified experts — religious scholars and theologians — who possess both the methodological competence specific to their fields and the ability to apply innovative analytical tools and techniques that ensure the timely and high-quality preparation of expert conclusions.

Research in this area has long been an urgent necessity, offering both the means to address the theoretical and practical challenges of *RE* and an opportunity to share Uzbekistan's accumulated experience in this field with the broader international scholarly community.

At the new historical stage of Uzbekistan's development, the elaboration of a methodology for religious expertise (*RE*) is connected with the priority directions of the state policy of Uzbekistan: the scientific study of the cultural heritage of Islam and the promotion of its role in the development of Central Asian civilisation through innovative methods; the early prevention and counteraction of the spread of extremist and terrorist ideologies disguised as religious doctrines through the training and retraining of qualified personnel in this field; the development and implementation of proposals aimed at improving the methodological and practical foundations in this sphere. The relevance of fulfilling these tasks is reflected in the decrees and resolutions of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev, in the resolutions of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, in the Charter of the Committee on Religious Affairs under the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, [Lex.uz, 2022] and other normative and legal documents. Over nearly thirty years of *RE* practice in the Republic of Uzbekistan, numerous organisational changes have taken place. At the new historical stage of Uzbekistan, it is time to address a fundamental issue — the development of a scientific and methodological framework, methods and approaches for studying *MRC*, and the resolution of practical problems, including the formation of a methodological basis for expert studies of religion, the standardisation of terminology, and the training of specialists in the field of religious expertise. The efficiency and quality of solving these problems have a direct impact on the pace of implementation and the results of the activities outlined in the "Roadmaps" in the field of state-religious relations and religious policy of Uzbekistan.

Purpose and objectives. The purpose of the study is to determine the range of general scientific methods acceptable for religious expertise (*RE*) and to provide a methodological assessment of the practice of combining scientific and theological approaches in the examination of materials of religious content (*MRC*). To achieve this purpose, the following objectives were addressed: the requirements for both the scientific and theological methods were established, and the distinctive features of the scientific and theological approaches were identified.

Method. The study employed a comparative analysis of general scientific and theological methods. In analyzing the scientific approach to the study of materials of religious content (*MRC*), a logical procedure was applied to justify the use of the principles of unambiguity, focus, and axiological neutrality in relation to the functions, aims, and objectives of religious expertise (*RE*). In analyzing the theological approach to the study of *MRC*, a logical procedure was applied to substantiate the use of specific methods developed within particular religious doctrines. To demonstrate the appropriateness of considering the agreed opinions of the religious scholar and the theologian at the final stage of *RE*, the application of the principles of rationality, objectivity, and intersubjectivity was justified (intersubjectivity meaning the expert's ability, in

the study of MRC, to take into account, compare, contrast, and reconcile their own and others' viewpoints on objects and events)

Analysis and discussion. In the process of searching for an appropriate methodology for analyzing materials of religious content (MRC) during the conduct of religious expertise (RE), we established that the absolutisation of the socio-political approach, which was practised during the atheistic period of national history, distorted the spiritual essence of religion and cast doubt on its moral purity, selflessness, and other values. In this regard, such an approach is not of interest to our research. After the Republic gained independence, and especially in the era of the New Uzbekistan, religion—primarily Islam—has come to play an important role in the social and spiritual life of society. Its significance is largely ensured by the extensive body of MRC containing religious and educational content directed towards the study of the values of Islam and its cultural heritage. It is widely represented in the collections of works of the Centre for Islamic Civilization in Uzbekistan, the international research centers named after Imam al-Bukhari, Imam al-Termizi, and Imam al-Maturidi under the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, as well as in the publications of the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan and the Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, and in the materials of international scientific and practical conferences and seminars organized by these institutions with the support of UNESCO, ICESCO, and IRCICA.

In relation to the study of materials of religious content (MRC), the research identified four main approaches: the concrete-historical, the philosophical, the theological, and the axiological (from *axiology* — the doctrine of values). The latter traces its origins to the ideas of the philosophers of the Baden School of Neo-Kantianism. Developing the concepts of Hegel's classical philosophy, they considered values in relation to the absolute value — God. Such an understanding of values led to the development of only their ideal aspect. [Zhilcova, Egorova, Suholet, 1993:30]

The axiological approach to the study of materials of religious content (MRC) has led to a situation in which religious values have become “detached” from their real bearer — the believer. An example of the axiological approach is the axiomatic method. Its distinctive feature lies in the fact that it is based on an axiom and generally accepted postulates, from which conclusions are then logically derived. This method is often used in theology. According to Louis de Broglie, the axiomatic method is incapable of generating new knowledge. [Lui, 1962:179] In our view, this opinion is too categorical. As one of the methods of expanding acquired knowledge, it is used in religious-educational and promotional activities, as well as in the fields of spirituality and enlightenment. [Maxsudov, 2021:84]

The axiological approach is applied in the study of issues related to religious consciousness and national self-awareness, as well as culture and human activity. [Kimsanbayeva, 2020], and also in research conducted in the field of pedagogy [Maxmudova, 2005]. A common feature among them is the attempt to instil in the minds of modern youth the religious values of the medieval period, as well as to provide recommendations for shaping the spiritual and moral upbringing of young people based on religious philosophy and Islamic law [Rahmanova, 2004]. In addition to the implicit positive evaluation of medieval pedagogical methods, sometimes even the translated titles of dissertation studies contain moral judgements (“right-wrong”), which are unacceptable within a scientific approach. [Ajrapetova, 2017]. We share the viewpoint of P. Abdullahanov, who stated that “there are social phenomena that possess a certain value only within a specific historical epoch.” [Abdullahanov, 1992:144].

In contrast to the axiological approach, the approach based on the principle of historicism and an expanded understanding of philosophy leads to objective conclusions. In the scientific and philosophical literature on the study of the phenomenon of values in relation to Islamic philosophy, the works of well-known domestic philosophers such as A. Valiev, P. Kh. Pulatov, I. M. Muminov, M. M. Khayrullaev, Yu. D. Dzhumaboev, Kh. A. Alikulov, and Kh. A. Shaikhova have systematised the axiological views of Navoi, al-Farabi, al-Biruni, Rumi, al-Fargani, and others. Unlike the European tradition, where philosophy denotes the theoretical study of the foundations of being and thought, Eastern philosophy is oriented toward practical tasks — the search for spiritual foundations and the experiential understanding of the struggle between good and evil.[*kulturologiya*, 1996:76].

The use of hermeneutical procedures within the concrete-historical and philosophical approaches makes it possible to comprehend the deeper meaning of the context — the “key” to understanding the entire text. Observance of the principle of objectivity means that the expert’s perception of the object of religious expertise (RE) must correspond to its true characteristics, independent of personal value orientations or ideological attitudes.

Unlike scientific research, the theological approach is closely bound to the dogmas of faith and does not allow for objective conclusions that can be applied to different religions. This distinction is explained by the Christian theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas, who argued that science and religion differ in their methods of attaining truth: science and philosophy rely on the “truths of reason,” whereas religion is based on the “truths of revelation.” Using the method of harmoniously combining secular and religious knowledge, Aquinas connected the ideas of St. Augustine with the philosophy of Aristotle and presented five proofs of the existence of God. Naturally, these conclusions pertain only to Catholic doctrine.

We agree with the theologian’s observation that, when translating religious texts (in this case, concerning the Catholic faith), “the task of a good translator is to render texts about the Catholic faith while preserving their meaning, yet to adapt the manner of expression to the properties of the target language. It is clear that what is said in literary Latin will turn into awkward narration if explained ‘word for word’ in simpler terms. All the more so, when what is expressed in one language is translated literally into another, it is hardly surprising that various misunderstandings arise.”[*Akvinskij*, 2017:52].

Not only when translating a religious term into other languages, but even when using it in the native language—for example, in the context of different mazhabs of Islam, or in scientific or general usage—preserving its meaning is often impossible. The combination of secular and religious knowledge in such cases does not bring clarity to this problem but, on the contrary, complicates it. As is evident from its name, the expertise conducted by the Committee on Religious Affairs (hereinafter CRA) is of a “religious studies” nature; therefore, the approach and methods used in examining materials of religious content (MRC) should be based on the principles of “religious studies”, not theology, as was required under the regulations in force prior to 14 April 2022.

Methods of religious studies, in contrast to theological ones, possess several characteristics that are essential for any scientific method—such as “axiological neutrality”, “unambiguity” (the internal consistency of the method, i.e., the logical coherence of its various components), and “focus” (the adherence to a defined research goal and the alignment of the method with the achievement of a final scientific result). Previously, the conclusion of religious expertise was defined as “a written document officially confirming the fact of conducting a theological

examination of materials of religious content (MRC) to determine the presence of deviations or distortions from religious canons, required for deciding on the permission (or refusal) for the production, import, and distribution of such materials within the territory of the Republic of Uzbekistan, carried out by the CRA.”[Lex.uz, 2022]. It is evident that the purpose and methods of the experts—a religious scholar and a theologian—when addressing the range of questions before them, do not correspond to the applied methodology or to the obtained result, that is, to the conclusion of the religious expertise (RE). The new definition of the expert conclusion has been supplemented in accordance with international practice and logic. Its purpose is to determine whether the content of the texts in the materials of religious content (MRC) complies or does not comply with the legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan. However, even in this definition, there is no indication of the nature of the research being conducted. Theological expertise, especially when carried out by experts of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Uzbekistan (hereinafter SAMU), is distinguished by exceptional precision, accuracy, and authority throughout the Islamic world. Nevertheless, the “harmonious combination of secular and religious sciences” is applicable, effective, and methodologically justified only at the stage of formulating the expert conclusion of the religious expertise (RE), taking into account the opinion of the theological expert and the research objectives set by them, as well as within the sphere of religious and educational activities. At the research stage, however, it is methodologically correct to separate the approaches and adhere to the methods developed within each respective field of knowledge.

E. Ibragimov rightly considered[Ibragimov, 2014:21-22] the application of general scientific principles to religious studies research to be justified: “Religious studies have undergone a long and difficult path before forming their own categorical apparatus, a distinctive approach different from theology and atheism, and a secular evaluation of religion.” At the same time, “secular” does not mean “atheistic”. E. Elbakyan also maintains that “religious studies, as an independent branch of scientific knowledge, arise within the paradigm of classical science, for which objectivity and impartiality are the most important criteria of scientific validity.” [Edronova, 2013:15].

One of the main characteristics of the scientific method in conducting religious expertise (RE) is the consistency among its various components, its internal coherence — that is, the “unambiguity of the method”. Applied to the methodology of examining materials of religious content (MRC), this means its ability to reflect only those properties of the text that are determined by the purpose of the RE, as indicated by its very name. If, in addition to these properties, other unrelated characteristics are reflected — for example, theological elements not connected to religious studies — then the methodology cannot be considered unambiguous, even though it may be partially reliable. Other properties that characterise the scientific method include:

- focus of the method, adherence to a specific research objective and orientation toward achieving the final scientific result — the expert conclusion;
- determinacy of the method(causality), establishing the causes of the emergence or manifestation of phenomena in accordance with objective laws rather than subjective opinions of the author of the MRC. For example, on some websites publishing MRC during the COVID-19 pandemic, one could find explanations for the decline in infection rates not through sanitary

measures, vaccination, social distancing, or mask-wearing, but through the recitation of certain surahs or the drinking of “consecrated” water from churches;

–clarity of the method, the content of the method must be simple and understandable;

–effectiveness of the method, its scientific productivity, its ability to yield reliable results and achieve the intended research outcome;

–fruitfulness of the method, its capacity to produce, alongside the primary outcome, additional results of significant importance;

– heuristic nature of the method (from the word “Eureka” — “heureka”, meaning “I have found it!”), the ability to discover new results as experience accumulates in a given field of activity. Effective heuristic programs can, in the process of work, collect supplementary information and engage in self-learning;

–economy of the method, achieving the scientific result with minimal expenditure of resources, effort, and time.

Specific methods, tools, and procedures include the ideographic method, which describes the individual features of unique historical facts and events; document analysis, which involves the examination of sociometric data as well as computer-assisted content analysis and computer-processed interviewing. Both qualitative and quantitative content analysis of texts and other information carriers are related to the concept of media content. This term entered scientific usage at the end of the twentieth century and refers to the content of materials transmitted through the mass media and the Internet. Its main forms are as follows: a) audio communication, such as radio and podcasts, which is based on auditory perception; b) visual communication, both static (photography) and dynamic (video); c) kinesthetic communication, which involves interaction through movements, gestures, facial expressions, and feedback, including written correspondence; and d) digital communication, which refers to the electronic exchange of information, data, or messages, for example, posts on social networks or online media.[Abduraimova, 2024:30-32]

The application of the scientific method in conducting religious expertise (RE) requires the presence of all the above-mentioned characteristics of the method. We agree with the use of general scientific methods in conducting RE, particularly the concrete-historical and the extended philosophical approach in accordance with the tradition of Eastern philosophy, and with the necessity for the expert to apply the principles of verifiability, , rationality, systematism, intersubjectivity (the ability of a person in the process of communication to consider, compare, contrast, and reconcile their own and others’ viewpoints on objects and events), and axiological neutrality when carrying out RE.

Conclusions and recommendations. The analysis of the general scientific methods used in religious studies led to the conclusion that, in conducting RE, it is advisable to apply the concrete-historical and the extended philosophical approach consistent with the tradition of Eastern philosophy, while taking into account the main requirements of the scientific method—unambiguity, focus, and axiological neutrality. In theological research, it is appropriate to use specific methods developed within the context of particular religious doctrines, such as qiyas (analogical reasoning) and taqlid (emulation) in Islam, and hermeneutical and contextual theological methods in Christianity, among others. At the final stage of RE, consideration of the agreed opinion of the religious scholar and the theologian ensures consensus in the preparation of the expert conclusion.

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