Does Religious Experience Shape the Pursuit of Religious Knowledge?

Individual Differences in a Preference for Positively-Oriented Religious Information

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INTRODUCTION

The social psychology literature shows that people prefer information that affirms their attitudes. Thus, it is likely that Christians, for example, may prefer positively-oriented information about their faith more than non-Christians because it affirms their attitude about their faith; whereas, non-Christians may prefer negatively-oriented information about Christianity more than Christians because it may affirm their attitude toward Christianity.

This bias may also depend on the type of experience people have with their faith orientation. Specifically, people’s religious lives are marked by degrees of religious comfort (e.g., feeling loved and forgiven by God) and religious strain (e.g., feeling distant from God and feelings of guilt) that may influence the type of information they prefer about their faith.

The purpose of this study was to examine how preferences for positively-oriented information and negatively-oriented information about Christianity differs between Christians and non-Christians and how experiences with one’s religious-orientation are related to biases for positively-oriented information about religion.

METHOD

Participants reported their religion as either Christian (n = 176), Buddhist (n = 1), Atheist (n = 8), Agnostic (n = 20), or “other” (n = 7) and then completed measures of religious comfort and religious strain.

To assess preferences for the type of Christian information, participants read three artificial, scientific-looking abstracts that emphasized positively-oriented information about Christianity (titled “Christian Beliefs Cause Happiness, Meaning, and Prosperity”), negatively-oriented information about Christianity (titled “Christians Do Not Practice what They Preach: Religious Beliefs Foster Racial Intolerance”) or Christian-neutral information (titled “Synergetic Personalities Predict Success in Work, School, and Interpersonal Relationships”). For each abstract, participants completed four ratings (how much they wanted to read the article, how important the information was, how interesting the article was, and their general impression). These ratings were averaged for each abstract.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion Type</th>
<th>Positive Abstract</th>
<th>Negative Abstract</th>
<th>Neutral Abstract</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian (n = 176)</td>
<td>6.04 (1.91)*</td>
<td>5.01 (1.95)*</td>
<td>5.80 (1.72)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Christian (n = 36)</td>
<td>4.05 (2.41)*</td>
<td>6.58 (2.06)*</td>
<td>5.98 (1.76)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Subscripts in the same column that do not match are significantly different from each other (p < .001).

RESULTS

Results showed that Christians preferred the positively-oriented abstract more than non-Christians, and non-Christians preferred the negatively-oriented abstract more than Christians. There was no difference in the neutral abstract ratings between Christians and non-Christians (see Table 1).

Since the differences between Christians’ and non-Christians’ preferences were for the positively-oriented and the negatively-oriented abstract ratings, respectively, a single positive-bias index was calculated by subtracting the negative-abstract ratings from the positive-abstract ratings.

Correlational analyses showed that Christians’ positivity-bias was related to the kind of experience they had with their faith, but non-Christians’ religious experience was unrelated to a positivity bias (see Table 2).

Also, for Christians, greater religious comfort was related to less religious strain, but there was no relationship between these experiences with non-Christians. (see Table 2)

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Difference</th>
<th>Christians</th>
<th>Non-Christians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious Comfort (RC)</td>
<td>0.36**</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Strain (RS)</td>
<td>-0.20*</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RC &amp; RS</td>
<td>-2.26**</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ** = Significant at the .001 level; * = Significant at the .01 level

CONCLUSION

These analyses show that a bias towards positively-oriented information about one’s faith is influenced by their religion, but for those, who identify themselves as Christians, their bias for positively-oriented information about their faith depends on their experience with religion.

Correspondence concerning this work should be addressed to Michael Kitchens, Ph.D., Lebanon Valley College, 101 N. College Avenue, Annville, PA 17003-1400, kitchens@lvc.edu. This data is a reanalysis of data collected for a manuscript currently under review, and parts of this work are reported in the manuscript.