DOES RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE SHAPE THE PURSUIT OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE?

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN A PREFERENCE FOR POSITIVELY-ORIENTED RELIGIOUS INFORMATION

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*Personality and Social Psychology Review* (vol. 14, 1) recently devoted an issue to religion, in which relatively positive (e.g., religiosity’s association with self-control\(^1\) and concern for others\(^2\)) and negative (e.g., religiosity’s association with racism\(^3\)) aspects of religion were described. This is a microcosm of the larger body of literature that frames religion or religious beliefs as positive or negative. We were interested in whether people’s experience with religion influences the type of information they prefer to read about religion.

We inferred that because people tend to prefer information that affirms their beliefs, religious people would likely prefer positively-oriented information about their particular religion. Christians, for example, were expected to prefer information that identifies positively-oriented messages about their faith more than non-Christians. However, we were also interested in whether the bias for positively-oriented information depended on their particular religious experience. Research\(^4\,5\) shows that religious experiences are characterized by *religious comfort* (e.g., feeling that God is close and forgives you of your sins) and *religious strain* (e.g., alienation from God and feelings of fear and guilt).

To test this, Christian (\(n = 176\)) and non-Christian (\(n = 36; 77.8\% \text{ atheist or agnostic}\)) participants completed measures of religious comfort and strain. Then, they read and rated their preference for fictional journal-abstracts that stressed positively-oriented information about Christianity, negatively-oriented information about Christianity, and a neutral-control abstract about personality *(see p. 4 of this handout)*. For each abstract, they indicated the degree (1 to 10 with higher numbers indicating greater preferences) to which they (1) thought the article was interesting, (2) wanted to read the article, (3) thought the research was important for people to know about, and (4) their general impression.

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The results showed that Christians preferred the positively-oriented Christian abstract more than non-Christians; whereas, non-Christians preferred the negatively-oriented Christian abstract more than Christians. There was no difference in the preference for the neutral-control abstract between Christians and non-Christians.

Table 1

Abstract Ratings as a Function of Religious Type (Christian vs. Non-Christian)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Type</th>
<th>Positively-Oriented Abstract</th>
<th>Negatively-Oriented Abstract</th>
<th>Neutral-Control Abstract</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>6.04</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>5.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>6.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Subscripts that differ in the same column are significantly different from each other (p < .001).

To further assess the bias for positively-oriented information, a single positive-bias index was calculated by subtracting the negatively-oriented abstract rating from the positively-oriented abstract rating, such that higher numbers indicated a greater preference for positively-oriented information over negatively-oriented information. The mean positive-bias was near the neutral point (M = 0.43, SD = 2.65); Christians (M = 1.04, SD = 2.30) had a higher positivity-bias than non-Christians (M = 1.53, SD = 2.28).

Correlations of religious comfort and religious strain to the positive-bias index revealed that Christians’ experience with religion influenced their preference for positively-oriented information, but did not influence non-Christians’ preference (see Table 2).

Table 2

Individual Differences in Religious Comfort and Religious Strain Correlations with the Positive-Bias Index for Christians and non-Christians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Difference</th>
<th>Christians</th>
<th>Non-Christians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious Comfort (RC)</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Strain (RS)</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RC &amp; RS</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

These data show that religious experiences shape biases for affirming information about religion. Christians prefer information that describes positive information about their faith. Non-Christians, on the other hand, prefer information that describes negative information.
about their faith. Interestingly, the difference between preferences in the positively-oriented abstract rating and negatively-oriented abstract rating amongst Christians ($M_{difference} = 1.03; d = 0.53$) was smaller than this difference for non-Christians ($M_{difference} = 2.53; d = 1.20$). Said differently, Christians had a relatively small preference away from negatively-oriented information when compared to non-Christians, who had a relatively large preference towards negatively-oriented information.

These data also suggest that Christians’ bias for positively-oriented information depends upon the experiences they have with religion. Greater comfort and less strain predict a preference for positive information. Thus, one’s faith does not unequivocally lend one to seek confirming evidence. It does so to the extent that one’s faith is comforting.

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- This work is a reanalysis of data reported in an “in press” paper\(^6\). The paper focuses on the individual differences of religious comfort and religious strain across Christians and non-Christians; whereas, this work compares those experiences between Christians and non-Christians.
- The poster and supporting materials can be found at [http://personal-pages.lvc.edu/kitchens/](http://personal-pages.lvc.edu/kitchens/) under “scholarship.”
- Correspondence concerning this work should be addressed to the first author Michael Kitchens, Ph.D. at kitchens@lvc.edu or 717-867-6197.

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Positive Abstract

“Christian Beliefs Cause Happiness, Meaning, and Prosperity.”

This study examined whether Christian beliefs have benefits. To do this, we systematically examined people who held Christian beliefs and people who held no belief in God. After controlling for several confounding variables (e.g., age, race, IQ, mental health, personality, and more), we found that Christians were significantly more happy, had a greater sense of purpose in life, and were wealthier than people who did not hold any religious beliefs. In short, this study shows that Christians have both psychological and physical benefits that are not experienced by non-believers. This study is important because it controls for several flaws in past work. Therefore, no other alternative explanations can be found for the evidence presented here.

Negative Abstract

“Christians Do Not: Practice What They Preach: Religious Beliefs Foster Racial Intolerance.”

This study examined the effect of religion on racism. To do this, randomly sampled self-professed Christians (n = 573) and self-professed atheists (n = 523) were administered the valid and reliable Assessment for Racial Intolerance Scale (AITS). After controlling for educational background, socio-economic status, and other potentially confounding variables, we found that Christians were significantly less tolerable of other races than atheists. Notably, our sample was representative of all races; therefore, this suggests racial intolerance was not affected by participants’ race or other confounding variables; religious beliefs were the primary cause of racial intolerance. In short, this study showed that Christian beliefs foster a more intolerant attitude for people of other races.

Neutral-Control Abstract

“Synergenetic Personalities Predict Success in Work, School, and Interpersonal Relationships.”

The purpose of this study was to examine whether people's personalities predict success across numerous domains. Specifically, this study examined a little-researched and rare personality type—the synergetic personality. To examine this, college students and community members were given a valid and reliable personality test that identifies synergetic [sic] personalities. The results showed that synergetic personality people had higher GPAs, made more money, held more prestigious jobs, and were happier in their relationships than non-synergenetic personality people. We controlled for several variables in this study to rule out alternative explanations. In summary, these data provide strong evidence that being synergetic causes people to be successful.