The psychological literature on religion shows that there are a number of benefits and costs associated with religion. Therefore, Christians have access to both positively-oriented and negatively-oriented information about their belief in God. While the prevailing research shows that people prefer information that confirms their beliefs, it may be that the type of religious information (i.e., positively- vs. negatively-oriented information) people prefer depends on their experiences associated with a belief in God (e.g., the degree to which the belief is associated with comfort or strain). To test this, Christian and non-Christian participants completed measures of religious comfort and religious strain. Participants then rated their impression of fictitious scientific abstracts that stressed positively-oriented Christian information, negatively-oriented Christian information, and religiously-neutral information about personality. The results showed that a preference for positively-oriented information was predicted by experiences of high religious strain in conjunction with high religious comfort. A preference for negatively-oriented information was positively related to religious strain and negatively related to religious comfort. Exploratory comparisons were also made between Christian and non-Christian participants about their religious experiences and preferences for Christian information. This study shows that people’s experience with religion influences the type of information they prefer about Christianity.

“And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart”
(Jeremiah 29:13, New King James Version)

The Scriptures are a primary source to learn about God and Christianity, but there are also many secular sources that provide information about Christianity. This is particularly true in the field of psychology, which calls for research investigating psychological phenomenon associated with religion1 (see Baumeister, 2002; Sedikides, 2010). This literature shows that religion is associated with many positive outcomes, such as physical and mental health (George, Ellison, & Larson, 2002), happiness (Myers, 1992), and a sense of meaning in life (Steger & Frazier, 2005). It has also been associated with negative outcomes, such as racial intolerance (Hall, Matz, & Wood, 2010) and low intelligence (Lynn, Harvey, & Nyborg, 2009).

In short, an array of secular sources provides both positively- and negatively-oriented information about Christianity. This is important because the type of information people use to understand Christianity will likely influence their perception of Christianity. However, it may be particularly challenging to find balanced information. For example, Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, and Busath’s (2007) findings that people were particularly aggressive after reading a passage from the Bible, in which God sanctioned the Israelites to destroy people who had brutally raped and beaten a woman, was highly publicized in major media outlets (e.g., ABC news); whereas, research showing that priming God increased prosocial behavior (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007) was discussed in smaller, more specialized outlets (e.g., a Psychology Today blog; Saad, 2009). Furthermore, positive outcomes associated with religion are often inferred as causes, not consequences of a belief in God, such that a belief in God is attributed to a mere psychological phenomenon. This pattern has left some psychologists to question: “why, then, does religion persist
in the face of Darwinian theory and evidence, scientific facts, secular arguments, and name-calling?" (Sedikides, 2010, p. 3).

Because secular information about Christianity is mixed with positively- and negatively-oriented messages and because the availability of these messages can be somewhat slanted, people may have to search for information that encourages or affirms their belief in God. It may be, though, that the type of information people prefer (i.e., positively-oriented vs. negatively-oriented) is influenced by their experiences associated with their belief in God. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate how individual differences in religious comfort and religious strain as markers of the religious experience predict a preference for positively-oriented and negatively-oriented information about Christianity.

**Comfort and Strain in Religion**

In a recent special issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, the belief in God was ascribed to a psychological need to attribute pleasure and pain to a source (Gray & Wegner, 2010), a need to feel a sense of control (Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, & Nash, 2010), and as a coping mechanism to deal with existential anxiety (Vail, Rothschild, Weise, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2010). Elsewhere, Batson and Stocks (2004) suggested that religion serves as an avenue to fulfill basic psychological needs (e.g., to establish social relationships, develop self-esteem, and understand the nature of reality). Taken together, this body of work suggests that a belief in God is merely an adaptive psychological mechanism (see Buss, 2002).

While Christians would likely object to the inference that a belief in God is solely an evolved tool for psychological comfort, the evidence indicates that a belief in God has a number of beneficial outcomes that result, in particular, in psychological comfort. More direct evidence for this is provided by Exline, Yali, and Sanderson (2000) who showed that participants’ feelings that they were forgiven of their sins and loved by God, for example, were unrelated to suicidality and depression, but significantly and positively related to feelings that religion brings meaning and purpose to their lives and makes a significant impact on their lives. Moreover, the idea that a belief in God is associated with comfort is consistent with Scripture, which states that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).

However, religious beliefs and practices are also characterized by struggle. Indeed, Paul describes the Christian life as a struggle, when he writes:

> We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. (2 Corinthians 4:8-12)

In the psychological literature, Exline (2002) identified a number of ways in which a belief in God may be accompanied by social and psychological consequences, such as interpersonal conflicts with non-believers (or believers with different views), negative affect caused by the belief that God is not helping with or protecting one from personal problems, and guilt associated with the failure to meet God’s standards. These outcomes cause religious strain in people’s lives (see Exline, 2002; Exline, et al., 2000).

Religious strain has a number of psychological consequences. Exline et al. (2000) found that religious strain was positively related to depression in both normal and clinical populations, even when controlling for religious comfort. Edmondson, Park, Chaudoir, and Wortmann (2008) found that terminally ill patients’ religious strain predicted increased concern about death that, in turn, increased their depressive symptoms. Harris et al. (2007) found that religious strain predicted trauma symptoms in people who had experienced trauma.

In summary, a belief in God provides religious comfort through a belief in God’s forgiveness, love, and protection (Exline et al, 2000). Psychological comfort may also be a product of a belief in God because it satisfies a number of psychological needs (e.g., control, meaning, and esteem). However, a belief in God can also be accompanied by a number of stressors that induce religious strain in the forms of feelings of fear and guilt, alienation from God, and interpersonal conflicts over religion (Exline et al., 2000). These individual differences that characterize religious experiences...
may play a significant role in how people understand Christianity.

Affirming Beliefs

One of the ways in which these individual differences may influence the way in which people understand Christianity is the type of information they prefer about Christianity. That is, it may be that people whose belief in God is primarily characterized by positive outcomes and psychological comfort may seek positively-oriented sources that affirm their beliefs or experiences in Christianity; whereas, people whose belief in God is primarily characterized by negative outcomes and religious strain may prefer negatively-oriented sources that affirm their beliefs or experiences in Christianity. What’s important to remember is that, while religious comfort and religious strain have been reported to be negatively correlated with each other (Exline et al., 2000), both dimensions may reside in an individual. Thus, these variables may independently or together account for the type of Christian information people prefer.

Previous research shows that people typically interpret information in a biased way (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). People tend to prefer information that affirms their decisions (Mills, 1965a). This is particularly true when people are uncertain about their decision (Mills, 1965b); thus, experiences of religious strain, which may come from uncertainty or challenge to their beliefs, may increase the need for biased information. This is also particularly true when people are primed with existential concerns. For example, Jonas, Greenberg, and Frey (2003) found that participants who were thinking about their death were particularly likely to seek information that affirmed their beliefs. Therefore, a belief in God—ultimately, an existential belief—may also increase the need for biased information.

Taken together, these studies suggest that people typically seek information that affirms their beliefs. In the context of this work, people will likely seek information about God and Christianity that affirms their individual differences in their religious experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to see how religious comfort and religious strain—markers of religious life—influenced preferences for the type of information people prefer to read about Christianity. It was expected that religious comfort would positively predict a preference for positively-oriented Christian information and negatively predict a preference for negatively-oriented information because these preferences may affirm this experience. Conversely, it was expected that religious strain would negatively predict a preference for positively-oriented Christian information and positively predict a preference for negatively-oriented information because these preferences may affirm this experience.

Method

Participants

Data for this study was collected in consecutive semesters across two academic years. During the first semester, participants ($n = 71$) volunteered for this study, which was advertised as investigating how people think, to fulfill partial course credit or extra credit in their psychology classes. They were run in small groups (about 2-12). Students in a religion class also volunteered to complete the study.

During the second semester, data was collected ($n = 149$) in two introductory biology courses, two introductory physics labs, and two introductory chemistry courses. Participants willing to participate, signed consent forms and completed the materials. Those that indicated they needed to fulfill credit or earn extra credit for their psychology courses were granted credit.

Since we were using similar stimuli in an ongoing study in the second semester and we had collected data the previous year, we included items at the end of the packet of materials, asking whether participants had participated in similar studies or had previously seen the materials used in this study. Those who indicated that they had participated or seen the materials were dropped from the analyses ($n = 3$). One participant’s data was excluded because he did not answer this question and did not complete two of the outcome measures.

Participants ($n = 2$) were also excluded because they did not complete multiple items (4 and 9 of 20 questions, respectively) on the individual difference in religious experience measure, and one participant was excluded because her religious strain score was greater than 3 standard deviations from the mean.

Participants who failed to answer only one ($n = 10$) or two ($n = 1$) items in the individual difference measure were kept in the analyses. Participants included in the analyses ($N = 213$, 132 female, $M_{\text{age}} = 19.32$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.83$, 91.1% Caucasian) identified themselves as Christian
(n = 176), Buddhist (n = 1), Atheist (n = 8), Agnostic (n = 20), or “other” (n = 7)². One participant did not indicate his religion.

Materials and Procedure

Participants in this study completed a packet that contained demographic information, measures of religious comfort and religious strain, and impression ratings of a positively-oriented Christian abstract, a negatively-oriented Christian abstract, and a neutral-control abstract.

Religious comfort and religious strain were measured using Exline et al.’s (2000) scale, which is constructed of 20-statements about one’s current experience with religion. For each statement, participants indicated the extent to which they were currently having these experiences by rating their responses on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 3 (extremely). The first seven items loaded onto one factor assessing religious comfort (Cronbach’s α = .93). Example items included “feeling that God has forgiven you for sins,” “trusting God to protect and care for you,” and “feeling loved by God.” The remaining items are made up of three factors measuring alienation from God (e.g., “feeling abandoned by God” and “feeling that your faith is weak” measure religious strain; Cronbach’s α = .79), fear and guilt (e.g., “fear of God’s punishment,” and “belief that sin has caused your problems;” Cronbach’s α = .71), and religious rifts (e.g., “bad memories of past experiences with religion or religious people” and “disagreement with a family member or friend about religious issues;” Cronbach’s α = .72) that together assess religious strain (Cronbach’s α = .76). This single measure of religious strain is consistent with Exline et al.’s (2000) use of the scale.

To assess a preference for the type of information they prefer about Christianity, participants rated three scientific-looking abstracts. These abstracts were formatted to look like abstracts that could be found in any psychology journal. Each of the abstracts was formatted slightly different, but they all contained the same basic features (i.e., a large-font title, authors with their affiliations, and a summary of the work). The order of the abstracts was counterbalanced in the packet participants received, and the packets were randomly assigned to participants.

The positively-oriented Christian information abstract was titled “Christian Beliefs Cause Happiness, Meaning, and Prosperity.” Below the title, the abstract read:

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.

The negatively-oriented Christian information abstract was titled “Christians Do Not Practice What They Preach: Religious Beliefs Foster Racial Intolerance.” Below this title, the abstract read:

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 (ARITS). 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.

The neutral-control orientation abstract was titled “Synergetic Personalities Predict Success in Work, School, and Interpersonal Relationships.” Below this title, the abstract read:
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 synergenetic personality. To examine this, college students and community members were given a valid and reliable personality test that identifies synergetic personalities. The results showed that synergenetic 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 synergenetic causes people to be successful.

For each abstract, participants indicated their preference for the articles ostensibly associated with each of the abstracts by rating four items. One item read “I think this article sounds interesting.” The second item read “I want to read this article.” The third item read “I think this research is important for people to know about” Each of these statements was accompanied by a rating scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). The last item read “My general impression of the articles [sic] is …”. It was accompanied by a rating scale that ranged from 1 (very unfavorable) to 10 (very favorable). Item reliability analysis showed that the four individual items for the positively-oriented Christian abstract (Cronbach’s α = .93), negatively-oriented Christian abstract (Cronbach’s α = .90), and neutral-control abstract (Cronbach’s α = .90) abstract were internally reliable. Therefore, a single abstract rating index for each abstract was computed by averaging the four items together.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary Analyses

To assess whether there was an overall preference for one or more of the abstracts, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted on the three abstract rating indexes. This analysis revealed a significant difference in how participants rated the abstracts, $F(1.85, 391.76) = 6.36, p = .003$. Paired $t$-tests showed that participants rated the negatively-oriented Christian abstract ($M = 5.27, SD = 2.05$) lower than the positively-oriented Christian abstract ($M = 5.70, SD = 2.08), $t(212) = 2.34, p = .020$, and the neutral-control abstract ($M = 5.82, SD = 1.72$), $t(212) = 3.56, p < .001$. There was no difference in participants’ ratings of the positively-oriented Christian abstract and the neutral-control abstract, $t < 1$, ns.

These analyses indicate that the largely Christian sample was biased against the negatively-oriented information about Christianity. Since there was no difference in the ratings of the positively-oriented Christian abstract and the neutral—albeit positive—abstract, it is not clear whether this is a bias against negatively-oriented information about Christianity or a preference for any positively-oriented information over negatively-oriented information.

Correlation analyses were also conducted among the key variables. As seen in Table 1, religious comfort and religious strain were significantly correlated with each other ($p = .002$), such that greater comfort found in religious
experiences was associated with less strain found in religious experiences. Also shown in Table 1 and as expected, the experience of religious comfort was positively related to the positively-oriented Christian abstract rating ($p < .001$) and negatively related to the negatively-oriented Christian abstract rating ($p < .001$); whereas the experience of religious strain was unexpectedly not significantly related to the positively-oriented Christian abstract rating ($p = .445$), but positively related to the negatively-oriented Christian abstract rating ($p = .003$). Neither religious comfort nor religious strain predicted a preference for the neutral control abstract.

The correlation analyses suggest that the degree to which the general bias against negatively-oriented information about Christianity or preference for positively-oriented information about Christianity depends on one’s experience with religion. Moreover, since religious comfort and religious strain were negatively and significantly correlated, the interaction may explain a significant amount of variance for these preferences. Regression analyses were conducted to assess for this possibility.

**Regression Analyses**

To further examine how individual differences in religious experience predict a preference for the type of information one prefers about Christianity or preference for positively-oriented information about Christianity depends on one’s experience with religion. Moreover, since religious comfort and religious strain were negatively and significantly correlated, the interaction may explain a significant amount of variance for these preferences. Regression analyses were conducted to assess for this possibility.

The enter method was used to predict the preference for the positively-oriented Christian abstract rating. Religious comfort was centered and entered as the predictor variable in the first step. Religious strain was not entered in the first step because it was not significantly correlated with the positively-oriented Christian abstract rating (see Table 1). Religious comfort and the interaction between religious comfort and religious strain were centered and entered in the second step.

The first model with religious comfort accounted for a significant amount of variance, $R^2 = .22$, $R^2_{Adj} = .21$, $F(1, 211) = 58.19$, $p < .001$. The second model that added the interaction also accounted for a significant amount of variance, $R^2 = .23$, $R^2_{Adj} = .23$, $F(2, 210) = 31.71$, $p < .001$; moreover, it accounted for a significant change in the variance accounted for above the first model, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $\Delta F(1, 210) = 4.52$, $p = .039$. Thus, the second model was used, showing that religious comfort ($B = 1.15$, $SE = 0.15$, $\beta = 0.47$) significantly and positively predicted a preference for the positively-oriented Christian abstract, $t = 7.77$, $p < .001$, and there was a significant interaction between religious comfort and religious strain, $B = 0.72$, $SE = 0.35$, $\beta = 0.13$, $t = 2.08$, $p = .039$.

To interpret the interaction, medians were computed for religious comfort ($Med = 2.00$) and religious strain ($Med = .69$), and median splits were performed, such that those with scores at or below the median were categorized as low in religious comfort ($n = 112$) and religious strain ($n = 100$) and those with scores greater than the median were categorized as high in religious comfort ($n = 101$) and religious strain ($n = 113$; see Baumeister, 1990, for a discussion on using median splits with continuous data). A 2 Religious Comfort (high vs. low) × 2 Religious Strain (high vs. low) ANOVA revealed a main effect for Religious Comfort, $F(1, 209) = 43.12$, $p < .001$, showing that those high in religious comfort ($M = 6.61$, $SD = 1.97$) preferred the positively-oriented Christian abstract more than those low in religious comfort ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.84$). There was no difference in the preference for the positively-oriented Christian abstract between those high ($M = 5.63$, $SD = 2.20$) and low ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.96$) in religious strain $F < 1$, ns. The interaction was marginally significant, $F(1, 209) = 3.31$, $p = .070$. In short, these findings largely replicate the regression analysis. More important was the interpretation of the interaction (see Figure 1). While the preference for the positively-oriented Christian abstract was always greater for those high in comfort than for those low in comfort, regardless of the level of religious strain, the effect amongst those high in religious strain across high and low religious comfort was greater ($d = 1.14$) than for those low in religious strain across high and low religious comfort ($d = .67$). Thus, the greatest preference for the positively-oriented Christian abstract was from those who were both high in religious comfort and high in religious strain, but the lowest preference for the positively-oriented Christian abstract came from those high in religious strain and low in religious comfort. In short, these data suggest that the degree to which people high in religious strain prefer positively-oriented Christian information depends on the degree of religious
comfort they feel, such that people who are strained by their religious experience seek information that affirms Christianity only if they are comforted by their religion, as well.

Regression analysis performed on the preference for the negatively-oriented Christian abstract rating was computed by centering and entering religious comfort and religious strain in the first step, and religious comfort, religious strain, and the interaction of these variables were centered and entered in the second step. The first model with religious comfort and religious strain as predictor variables accounted for a significant amount of variance, $R^2 = .08$, $R^2_{Adj} = .08$, $F(2, 210) = 9.59$, $p < .001$. The second model that added the interaction also accounted for a significant amount of variance, $R^2 = .09$, $R^2_{Adj} = .08$, $F(3, 209) = 7.25$, $p < .001$, but it did not account for a significant change in the variance accounted for above the first model, $\Delta F(1, 209) = 2.43$, $p = .120$. Therefore, the first model without the interaction term was used, showing that religious comfort ($B = -.51$, $SE = .16$, $\beta = -.21$) significantly and negatively predicted a preference for the negatively-oriented Christian abstract, $t = 3.15$, $p = .002$, and religious strain ($B = .70$, $SE = .31$, $\beta = .16$) significantly and positively predict a preference for the negatively-oriented Christian abstract, $t = 2.29$, $p = .023$.

Taken together, these analyses show that the preference for positively-oriented and negatively-oriented information about Christianity depended on participants’ experience with religion. More specifically, the general preference for the positively-oriented Christian abstract was primarily driven by those who paradoxically feel strain in their religious experience in conjunction with the feeling of comfort by their religion. The preference for negatively-oriented information about Christianity was primarily driven by those who experience little religious comfort and by those who experience great religious strain.

**Christian and Non-Christian Comparisons**

We had a relatively small ($n = 36$) sample of non-Christians, but for exploratory purposes, we compared Christians’ and non-Christians’ experience with religion. Independent samples $t$-tests showed that Christians ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 0.64$) reported greater religious comfort than non-Christians ($M = 0.65$, $SD = 0.61$), $t(210) = 12.80$, $p < .001$; however, Christians ($M = 0.75$, $SD = 0.45$) did not significantly differ from non-Christians.
It was also of interest to examine differences between these groups in the type of information they preferred. A Christian Identity (Christian vs. non-Christian) × Abstract Orientation (positively-oriented vs. negatively-oriented vs. neutral-control) mixed-model ANOVA was conducted. The results showed that there was no main effect of Christian Identity, $F < 1$, ns, but there was a main effect of Abstract Orientation, $F(1.93, 405.70) = 11.02, p < .001$. This was qualified by a significant interaction, $F(1.93, 405.70) = 41.91, p < .001$ (see Table 2).

Post-hoc analyses using independent samples t-tests showed no difference in the ratings of the neutral-control abstract rating between Christians and non-Christians, $t < 1$, ns. However, Christians rated the positively-oriented Christian abstract higher than non-Christians, $t(210) = 5.59, p < .001$, but they rated the negatively-oriented Christian abstract lower than non-Christians, $t(210) = 4.35, p < .001$.

**Discussion**

This work began with two empirically-based assumptions. First, it was assumed that religious comfort and religious strain are two important markers of religious life. Second, it was assumed that people tend to prefer or seek out information in a biased way—specifically, by preferring information that affirms their beliefs. Based on these tenets, it was expected that religious comfort and religious strain would predict a bias in the type of information preferred to read about Christianity. The data in this study confirmed these expectations.

Overall, religious comfort positively predicted a greater preference for positively-oriented Christian information and negatively predicted a preference for negatively-oriented Christian information; however, this was qualified by an interaction that showed that the greatest preference for this information was from those who experienced both high levels of religious comfort and high levels of religious strain. This suggests that high levels of religious strain drives people to seek positively-oriented information about Christianity, but only if they are also comforted by their religion, as well. Results also showed religious strain predicted a preference for negatively-oriented Christian information, but it was not significantly related to positively-oriented Christian information. Taken together, these data show that religious comfort and religious strain play significant roles in the type of information people prefer about Christianity.

**The Christian and non-Christian Experience**

Because the experiences of religious comfort and religious strain are important markers of religious life, exploratory analyses were used to compare these experiences between Christians and non-Christians. Results showed that Christians reported a greater experience of religious comfort than non-Christians. Because religious comfort is operationally defined, in part, by feelings that God has forgiven your sins, He is close to you, and that He loves you and because most of those who were classified as non-Christian were identified as atheist or agnostic (77.77%), this outcome was expected.

There was no difference in the experience of religious strain between Christians and non-Christians. This may be explained in a couple of ways. First, given that there were a proportionately large number of atheist/agnostics amongst the non-Christian sample, it may be that this null finding represents a relatively absent experience of religious strain amongst those who are largely non-religious in conjunction with a comparatively low experience of religious strain in Christians, who find comfort in their belief in God. This is supported by the fact that both Christians and non-Christians reported a mean level of religious

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Type</th>
<th>Positively-Oriented</th>
<th>Negatively-Oriented</th>
<th>Neutral-Control</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
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<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>

$(M = 0.87, SD = 0.46)$ in religious strain, $t(210) = 1.40, p = .164$. 

$(M = 4.95, SD = 0.68)$ in religious strain, $t(210) = 1.40, p = .164$. 

$(M = 0.87, SD = 0.46)$ in religious strain, $t(210) = 1.40, p = .164$. 

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$(M = 4.95, SD = 0.68)$ in religious strain, $t(210) = 1.40, p = .164$.
strain below 1 (on a 0 to 3 scale). However, while this explanation has merit, it may be somewhat over-simplistic. Instead, this may reflect the fact that the belief in God does not exempt Christians from feeling alienated from God, fear and guilt, and religious rifts. Indeed, the experience of both high religious strain and high religious comfort were significant predictors of positively-oriented information about Christianity. Furthermore, Exline’s (2002) analysis reveals that religious life is often accompanied by numerous social and psychological challenges that cause religious strain. Thus, religious strain is likely an experience associated with Christians, as well as non-Christians.

The primary focus of this work was on biases in the preference for the type of information used to understand Christianity. In the context of Christian and non-Christian comparisons, then, the results showed that the Christians and non-Christians were biased in their preference for both positively- and negatively-oriented information about Christianity, such that non-Christians preferred negatively-oriented information more than Christians, and Christians preferred positively-oriented information more than non-Christians. Both equally preferred neutrally-oriented information, which indicates that the biases were not general biases in the way Christians and non-Christians seek information, but is a particular preference for information about Christianity that affirms their experiences.

Interpretation of this analysis was aided by a careful examination of the means (see Table 2). The mean difference between the positively-oriented and negatively-oriented abstract ratings for the Christian and non-Christian samples, respectively, shows that the Christian sample showed a preference reduction for the negatively-oriented abstract ($M_{\text{difference}} = -1.03$, $d = 0.53$, calculated by subtracting the mean positively-oriented abstract rating from the mean negatively-oriented abstract rating), but non-Christians showed a much larger shift in their preference towards the negatively-oriented abstract ($M_{\text{difference}} = +2.53$, $d = 1.20$). While caution should be used in interpreting this because of the relatively small non-Christian sample, this suggests that Christians and non-Christians have a bias in the type of information they prefer, but the difference between Christians and non-Christians in their bias is largely the result of non-Christians’ preference towards negatively-oriented information. More importantly for the present work, these analyses provide supplemental evidence that one’s experience with religion (e.g., Christian or non-Christian) influences the type of information people prefer about Christianity.

**Theoretical Implications and Practical Applications**

These findings parallel a wide array of research that shows people process information in a biased way (Frey, 1981; Frey & Rosch, 1984; Frey & Wicklund, 1978). In particular, this study supports empirical work showing that people prefer information that affirms previous decisions (Mills, 1965a; 1965b). Research in the field of existential psychology, which largely directs its attention towards psychological phenomenon related to existence, meaning, and spirituality, shows that reminders of death are associated with a preference for information that affirms beliefs (e.g., Jonas, et al., 2003). This suggests that existential information is particularly vulnerable to biased processing. This effect, however, depends on a number of individual differences. For example, intrinsically religious participants (i.e., those who internalize religious beliefs and incorporate them into their lives) that were reminded of their death and given the chance to affirm their religious beliefs did not defend other cherished views of the world; whereas, intrinsically religious participants who were reminded of their death and were not given the chance to affirm their religious beliefs did (Jonas & Fischer, 2006). This indicates that affirming religious beliefs is important for intrinsically religious people because it is an essential component of their worldview. To be sure, Vess, Arndt, Cox, Routledge, and Goldenberg (2009) found that participants classified as religious fundamentalists were more likely to endorse faith-based medical interventions than those not classified as religious fundamentalists in the face of death reminders. Moreover, affirming their belief in faith-based interventions mitigated the need to search for meaning in their lives. Taken together, these studies show that affirming worldviews and religious beliefs is an important part of dealing with existential concerns. The present work contributes to this body of work by showing that individual differences in the types of experiences associated with religion play an important part in the type of information one prefers to use in affirming their beliefs.

Additional theoretical links can be made with self-affirmation theory, which proposes that people affirm important aspects of the self to maintain a sense of self-worth or self-esteem.
(see Spencer, Josephs, & Steele, 1993, for a review). Cohen, Aronson, and Steele (2000) found that participants who had affirmed some aspect of their selves were more willing to be persuaded by counter-attitudinal evidence than participants who had not affirmed some aspect of their selves. Thus, this suggests that affirming one’s beliefs and values is critical to identity, such that those who have affirmed other aspects of the self are willing to examine evidence that does not affirm that belief.

Specifically related to this work, identity research shows that examining one’s belief in God is an integral part of developing identity. Hunsberger, Pratt, and Prancer (2001) found that scores measuring the most mature stage of identity development (i.e., achievement scores) were positively related to seeking information that confirms and threatens religious beliefs; whereas, scores measuring the most immature form of identity development (i.e., diffusion scores) were negatively related to seeking information that confirms and threatens religious beliefs. In short, this work suggests that examining religious beliefs is important for mature identity development.

One of the challenges to examining religious beliefs, though, is that interest in religious education declines during critical identity development years (Francis, 1987). Another challenge identified by the present work is that one’s experience with religion biases the preference for a balanced examination of one’s beliefs.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Given that the present work has illustrated the important role that one’s experiences associated with their belief in God in the form of religious comfort and religious strain play in directing their attention towards positively- or negatively-oriented information about Christianity, future research should further understand these two variables. One of the limitations in this study, for example, was that it did not establish the direction of the relationship between religious comfort/strain and bias towards the type of Christian information preferred. The procedure of the study suggests that pre-existing comfort and strain predicted participants’ bias; however, it may be that consistent preferences for positively- or negatively-oriented information facilitate experiences of comfort and strain. There are obvious challenges in establishing that direction. For example, brief exposures to positively- or negatively-oriented information systematically manipulated by the experimenter may not be powerful enough to produce religious comfort or religious strain in the lab. Likewise, it would be difficult to systematically manipulate religious comfort and religious strain to assess the effect on biased processing.

A related direction for future research should consider the causes of religious comfort and religious strain. To my knowledge, the existing literature primarily examines the consequences of these experiences, but little work has been done on causes. Again, challenges arise in determining the cause of obviously complex experiences. These challenges, though, should not prevent researchers from directing attention to these important questions.

Finally, a number of important comparisons were made between Christians and non-Christians that further supported the hypothesis that people’s experience with religion biases their preference for information about Christianity; however, our sample was limited by a relatively small number of non-Christians. While the effect sizes are substantial, future research is needed to examine comparisons between Christian and non-Christian samples.

**Conclusion**

Learning about God and Christianity is an important step in developing a mature identity and a mature faith in God. Christians have an abundant opportunity to learn about God and Christianity through the Bible and secular sources. Indeed, part of living in the world as a mature Christian is the challenge of facing negatively-oriented information about the Christian life. While negatively-oriented findings should not be dismissed solely on the basis of an unflattering picture, they should be viewed in the context of (a) properly interpreting the findings and (b) in light of positive outcomes associated with the Christian life. This study underscores the importance of individual differences in religious comfort and religious strain in influencing biases in the type of information people prefer to use in learning about Christianity.

**Notes**

1. I use the term *religion* because psychology broadly addresses relationships between psychological outcomes and religion, but the focus of this article is on Christianity. Therefore, the terms may be seen as somewhat interchangeable; although, much of the past work cited often does not specifically address Christianity.
2. Some participants identified their religion as “other,” but then clarified by writing in the space provided a denomination (Roman Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, and Coptic Orthodox). We considered these as Christian participants in this paper, so the number of Christians reported in participants section includes them, and analyses of Christian data include them as Christians.

3. The one participant who did not indicate his religion was not included in these analyses.

References


Authors

Michael B. Kitchens (Ph.D., University of Mississippi) is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Lebanon Valley College in Annville, PA. Dr. Kitchens teaches introductory psychology, introductory and advanced research methods, as well as courses in his specialty of social psychology and emotion. His research interests are in processes of the self (e.g., identity, self-awareness, and self-control), social rejection, emotional intensity, and the application of psychology to religion, political philosophy, and public policy.

Mary Katherine E. Mitchell, Ashley E. Collins, Mariela A. Horna, Tanisha M. Rine, and Anh N. Tran are senior psychology majors and members of Dr. Kitchens’ Social-Emotion Lab at Lebanon Valley College.