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**Christians and the Irreligious: What is Associated with Religious Bias Between Groups?**

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I have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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### **Abstract**

With the tremendous rise in the prevalence of atheism and agnosticism in the U.S. in the past several years, it becomes more important than ever to assess intergroup relations between the Christian majority and the rapidly increasing atheist and agnostic minority. This study assesses personal factors that correlate with various levels of participant desire to affiliate with Christians (Progressive Protestants, Conservative Protestants, and Catholics) and the unaffiliated (atheists and agnostics) within a convenience sample. Participant factors studied included political conservatism, agreeableness, openness, social dominance orientation, and religious commitment. While low desire to affiliate is a poor representative of all forms of discrimination, conservative Protestants were found to be the target group the sample was least likely to affiliate with, affirming a type of discrimination that exists against Conservative protestants in the sample. Future research may investigate more religious groups and more participant factors so as to uncover more relevant predictors of discrimination on the basis of affiliation.

*Keywords:* desire to affiliate, Christians, Catholics, atheists, agnostics, social dominance orientation, agreeableness, openness to experience, conservatism, religious commitment, fundamentalism

**Christians and the Irreligious: What is Associated with Religious Bias Between Groups?**

*“Religion is not just incongruent with morality but in essential ways incompatible with it.”*

*-Christopher Hitchens (2003)*

*“The fool hath said in his heart, ‘There is no God’. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good.” -Psalm 14:1 (King James Version)*

Religious prejudice and bias, along with many of the associated behaviors accompanying it, is a problem in societies and a major driver of societal discord in societies where different groups need to coexist. While religious intolerance is condemned by many, it is still prevalent in the United States; religious bias is the third-leading motivation for hate crimes in the U.S. (Department of Justice, 2020). Instances such as disparate hiring practices upon the basis of religion indicate that religious intolerance, even in non-violent forms, is still alive and well within the U.S. (Stewart & Lozano, 2009; Yemane, 2020). Further, in mainstream U.S. media, there is blatant religious bias (Powell, 2011). However, when discussed in the news, particularly on the right, the presentation of religious unification tends to be that the U.S. populace rallies around their identity as a “Christian America”, confronting opponents such as Muslims that, accordingly to some, oppose the very existence of the U.S. and seek its destruction (Powell, 2011).

In addition to anti-Muslim propaganda, many Christians have rallied around the opposition of another perceived threat: a rapidly increasing rise in those who profess no faith in God or religion. These individuals may be classified as atheists, who profess a belief that there exists no God or gods, and agnostics, who suspend judgement on the existence of God or gods.

Atheists and agnostics are stereotyped in a variety of ways by religious individuals, but predominately in a negative way (Harper, 2007). There are many ways to classify and describe various non-religious individuals, but the terms “atheist” and “agnostic” are broad enough to sufficiently encompass most non-religious individuals (Harper, 2007).

### ***The Rise of the Nones and Decline of Christianity in the U.S.***

Atheists and agnostics are rapidly growing in prevalence in the U.S. population. Sometimes colloquially referred to as the ‘Nones’, atheists and agnostics make up 29% of the U.S. population as of 2021, up from only 16% in 2007 (Smith, 2021). This population increase drastically increases the importance of studying intergroup perceptions of atheists and agnostics. This increase in disbelief cooccurred with a large drop in the Christian population, which fell from 78% of the U.S. population in 2007 to only 63% in 2021 (Smith, 2021) As approximately 1% of the U.S. population each year abandons Christianity and joins the unaffiliated, it is understandable why many Christians may sound an alarm. While in 2007, there were just under five Christians to every one atheist or agnostic, now Christians just barely outnumber them two to one.

These declines in the prevalence of U.S. Christianity are happening in both Protestantism and Catholicism, but particularly notably in Protestantism. The term ‘Protestant’ encompasses all who describe themselves as “Christian”, including Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and other denominations started after the Reformation, but excludes the various Catholic and Orthodox churches, as well as more recent groups such as the Latter-Day Saints or the Jehovah’s Witnesses, as well as those who profess faith in Christ but reject the label “Christian” (Smith, 2021). The prevalence of American Protestantism has declined 12% over the period from 2007

to 2021, from 52% of the population of the U.S. in 2007 to a mere 40% in 2021, while Catholicism has decreased 3%, from 24% to 21% of the U.S. population in the same timeframe (Smith, 2021).

There is a large and growing coalition of Christian individuals who believe that the U.S. was once a Christian nation but is no longer (Cox & Piacenza, 2015). Among Christians who believe that the U.S. has lost its Christian identity, 68% of believe this is a bad thing (Cox & Piacenza, 2015). The belief that the U.S.'s Christian identity is no more could easily fuel action against those perceived to have participated in its demise.

### *Anti-None discrimination*

Atheists are among the most loathed groups in the United States (Edgell et al., 2006). Common stereotypes against atheists include the labels that they are “arrogant”, “evil”, “ignorant”, and “shallow” (Niemann et al., 1994). According to a 2014 study of U.S. voters, a hypothetical presidential candidate’s atheism would dissuade 53% of voters from voting for them (Lipka, 2014). Atheism damaged a hypothetical candidate’s likelihood of receiving a vote even more than if the candidate never held formal office, was a homosexual, had engaged in an extramarital affair, or was over 70 years old (Lipka, 2014). This bias was even stronger among conservatives, with 70% of Republicans stating that disbelief in God would make them less likely to support a presidential candidate (Lipka, 2014). In contrast, only 42% of Democrats expressed that atheism would make them less likely to support a presidential candidate, while 49% claimed it wouldn’t affect their judgment of the candidate (Lipka, 2014).

Previous research into discrimination against atheists has suggests that prejudice against them is largely based in moral discrepancy. Gervais and colleagues (2011) found that those who

jointly believed in God and believed that belief in God's monitoring of their behavior made people act better strongly predicted distrust in atheists. Gervais (2013) further found that distrust towards atheists, a group united by belief that there is no God and nothing else, is largely based upon an uncertainty in their moral conduct among those believe God's watchful eye is necessary for morality. Atheists, are perceived as "moral wildcards" who are less predictable in their ethical decisions and actions than theists (Gervais, 2013). Additional research findings affirm that Christian discrimination against atheists often along the basis of both perceived and real disparate moral values (Simpson & Rios, 2016, 2017).

### *Is there any discrimination against Christians?*

While attitudes against atheists and agnostics are rather well-documented in the literature, discrimination against Christians in the U.S. is harder to find. Almost half of the U.S. population is convinced that discrimination against Christians is just as serious as against other marginalized groups, such as Blacks and other minorities (Cox & Piacenza, 2015). Among Republicans, 74% believe that Christians face severe discrimination, while only 45% of Independents and 34% of Democrats agree (Cox & Piacenza, 2015). Among white evangelical Protestants, 77% believe discrimination against Christians rivals that of other groups, while white mainline Protestants, White Catholics, Black Protestants, and Hispanic Catholics are less likely to assent to this claim, with only 50-54% agreement (Cox & Piacenza, 2015). To the contrary, among Nones the statement that anti-Christian discrimination rivalled that of other groups only was affirmed by approximately 20% of respondents (Cox & Piacenza, 2015). These findings indicate that many Christians, particularly White conservative Protestant Christians, are very convinced of severe discrimination against them, while agnostics and atheists are less convinced.

### ***Types of Factors Leading to Religious Bias***

There are a variety of factors that can lead to religious bias. One kind is a societal factor. Societies can be stratified in such a way as to promote bias. All persons living in the same society, however, do not demonstrate equal levels of religious bias. Therefore, there must be variance as to why there is a difference in bias between individuals.

There is also a kind of factor that may be called “target characteristics.” Those who are religiously biased tend to distinguish among types of religious groups to discriminate against. Therefore, there must be a distinction among potential individuals discriminated against (potential “targets”) that elicits a discriminatory response towards those who hold some religious beliefs, but not others.

Last, there are also some kinds of factors that may be personal risk factors towards religious bias. Some of these personal factors are already well-established in the bias and intolerance literature. These include various personality traits, social dominance orientation, and right-wing authoritarianism (Ekehammar et al., 2004; Hamer et al., 2019; Ho et al., 2015; Nilsson & Jost, 2020).

### ***Religious Bias***

This largely exploratory study seeks to investigate personal risk factors and target characteristics that could lead to religious bias among the following groups: progressive Protestants, conservative Protestants, Catholics, agnostics, and atheists. Religious bias, in this study, is operationalized as the absence of desire to affiliate. While lack of desire to affiliate



certainly does not encompass the totality of active bias, it does provide a kind of indirect measure of bias for the participants in the study.

### ***Political Orientation***

Political conservatism is a composite of two views: social conservatism and economic conservatism. Social conservatism is the stable belief in the “preservation of ancient moral traditions of humanity” and tends towards the understanding that “political problems... are religious and moral problems” (Crowson, 2009; Jost et al., 2018; Kirk, 1953, pg. 8; Thórisdóttir & Jost, 2011). Economic conservatism, on the other hand, is more concerned with less involvement of government in citizen’s lives and less regulation of private enterprise (Crowson, 2009). Conservatives and liberals also tend to have different cognitive patterns; conservatives tend to think in a manner ordered towards certainty, dogmatism, and discipline, while liberals tend to think in a manner more open to new ideas and more tolerant of ambiguity and complexity (Jost et al., 2018; Thórisdóttir & Jost, 2011). Political conservatism is negatively correlated with openness in Western countries (Vecchione et al., 2011).

### ***Social Dominance Orientation***

Social dominance orientation (SDO) is a personality trait measuring support individuals give to hierarchal arrangements of certain groups over others based on qualities such as race, sex, and religion (Hamer et al., 2019; Ho et al., 2015; Kleppestø et al., 2019; Nilsson & Jost, 2020). SDO is a strong predictor of outgroup prejudice (Hamer et al., 2019; Ho et al., 2015; Nilsson & Jost, 2020).

### *Agreeableness and Openness to Experience*

The Five-Factor Model of personality, also known as the Big Five, is a personality measure based upon levels of five traits: openness to experience (openness), agreeableness, extraversion, conscientiousness, and neuroticism. Previous literature has established that all the factors of the Big Five, excepting neuroticism, correlate with generalized prejudice, but that all the correlations were mediated through SDO and Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), an ideological attitude that combines the factors of authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism (Ekehammar et al., 2004). The effect of agreeableness on prejudice is mediated through SDO, while openness, extraversion, and conscientiousness are mediated through RWA (Ekehammar et al., 2004).

### *Religious Commitment*

Religious commitment is a measurement of the degree to which religious convictions, values, and activities permeate one's daily life. An individual high in religious commitment participates in their faith community actively, engages in frequent prayer and meditation, and makes their decisions influenced strongly by their religious beliefs and convictions. Individuals low in religious commitment do not participate in a faith community, do not frequently pray or meditate, or have their decisions influenced by their religious beliefs.

### *Hypotheses*

Though this study is largely exploratory, several hypotheses were made. Desire to affiliate with atheists and agnostics will likely correlate with lower religious commitment and lower conservatism.

Since low agreeableness strongly predicts non-cooperativeness in social situations, low agreeableness may correlate with a unilaterally decreased desire to affiliate (Benet-Martinez & John, 1998; John et al., 1992; John et al., 2008). Low agreeableness has previously predicted SDO, and the effect would likely replicate (Ekehammar et al., 2004; Sibley & Duckitt, 2010).

Following previous research, openness to experience will also likely negatively correlate with political conservatism (Vecchione et al., 2011). Conservatism and social dominance orientation (SDO) are likely to be correlated in this sample as well (Beyer, 2020; Nilsson & Jost, 2020).

Desire to affiliate with the groups most similar to the participant should be the highest. This would mean that the desire to affiliate with the three religious and two non-religious groups will correlate significantly in participant evaluation. This is derived from the notion that similarity breeds liking, and thus religious groups deemed most similar to the subject's own religiosity should foster a greater liking for, and resultantly a greater desire to affiliate with, members of that religion (Amodio & Showers, 2005; Byrne, 1969, 1971; Fawcett & Markson, 2010; van Osch & Breugelmans, 2012; Roccas & Schwartz, 1993; Rokeach, 1960).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

There were 151 total responses to the survey. Twenty-six participants who did not complete at least a quarter of the study were removed from analysis. The data of the remaining 125 participants was retained. The study consisted of 59 men, 51 women, 13 non-binary individuals, and 2 who did not specify their gender identity. The mean participant age was 28.42 years ( $SD = 12.32$ ) and the median age was 23 years. Of the sample, there were 16 agnostics, 8

atheists, 2 Buddhists, 24 Catholics, 19 Christians, 2 Jews, 27 who identified with no religion, 2 Satanists, 2 who identified as spiritual but not religious, and 23 who did not disclose their religion. Participants were recruited through flyers posted at Western Washington University and various postings on social media. Participant location was not ascertained.

### **Materials**

After consenting and being presented with free-response demographic questions including age, gender identity, and religious orientation, each participant was asked a series of questions (or “blocks”). Blocks were presented in random order, and each block’s questions were presented in random order (except for Desire to Affiliate, so that participants would not be confused by switching between groups of persons). Each participant was presented with each block.

#### ***Desire to Affiliate with Various Religious Groups.***

Twenty items assessed the degree to which participants would choose to affiliate with an individual of a given religious background: progressive Protestant Christian, conservative Protestant Christian, Catholic, atheist, and agnostic. These items were adapted from Klucarova and Hasford (2021), and participants were instructed to respond to these items “not at all”, “slightly”, “moderately”, and “very much”. Example items include “I would like to be friends with an individual who is a progressive Protestant Christian.”, “I would like to affiliate with an individual who is a Catholic.”, “I would like to meet an individual who is an Atheist.”, and “I would prefer to stay away from an individual who is an Agnostic” (reverse-scored).

***Conservatism.***

Twelve items assessed the degrees to which participants exhibited support of conservatism. This scale was adapted from Everett (2013). Participants were presented with a series of politically charged words and asked for their opinions about each (“I do not support this at all”, “I slightly support this”, “I moderately support this”, “I support this strongly”). Items that loaded onto social conservatism included “traditional marriage”, “abortion” (reverse-scored), and “patriotism”. Items that loaded onto economic conservatism included “limited government”, “fiscal responsibility”, and “welfare benefits” (reverse-scored).

***Abbreviated Big Five Personality Assessment.***

Eighteen items assessed the personality factors of openness and agreeableness. The items in this block were adapted from BFA-44 (Benet-Martinez & John, 1998; John et al., 1992; John et al., 2008). The scale was altered to present four options to participants (“This does not describe me.”, “This slightly describes me.”, “This moderately describes me.”, or “This describes me very much.”). Examples of the nine agreeableness items include “Is helpful and unselfish with others”, “Has a forgiving nature”, and “Tends to find fault with others” (reverse-scored). Examples of the nine openness items include “Is original, comes up with new ideas”, “Is ingenious, a deep thinker”, and “Has few artistic interests” (reverse-scored).

***SDO-16.***

The block assessed SDO. Participants were asked to rate a series of 16 statements, developed by Ho and colleagues (2015) as follows: “I do not agree.”, “I slightly agree.”, “I moderately agree.”, and “I very much agree.” Examples of these statements include “Some

groups of people are simply inferior to other groups.”, “We shouldn’t try to guarantee that every group has the same quality of life.”, and “Group equality should be our ideal.” (reverse-scored).

### ***Religious Commitment Inventory-10.***

This block assessed the degree to which various individuals were religiously invested. They were asked to assess a series of statements about themselves from Worthington and colleagues (2003) on a scale of “This does not describe me.”, “This slightly describes me.”, “This moderately describes me.”, or “This describes me very much.” Examples from this block include “I often read books and magazines about my faith.”, “Religious beliefs influence all my dealings in life.”, and “I spend time trying to grow in understanding of my faith.”

### ***Excluded Measures***

In sections with asking questions about specific religious groups, there was an additional series of four questions about “the spiritual, but not religious.” These questions, four in total, were excluded from analysis. Additionally, questions regarding participant extraversion (eight items in total) were asked in the Big Five Personality and removed from consideration. Another block asked about whether a religious groups contained people like the participant was removed from analysis. These items were excluded from analysis for the brevity.

### **Procedure**

The survey was posted on social media and linked via QR code on physical flyers posted around the Western Washington University campus. The consent form indicated that any identifiers would be removed from the data. Participants had to be at least 18 years of age, and

we obtained their informed consent. SONA participants received class credit for participating, and other participants were entered into raffles for one of two \$50 gift cards to Amazon, distributed via email if the participants wished to enter.

## Results

### *Reliability Measures.*

Each subscale was analyzed for reliability using Cronbach's Alpha. See Figure 1 for an exhaustive list of all subscales and their reliability. Each subscale, excepting openness, had an acceptable reliability or better ( $\alpha > .70$ ). The nine items on the openness subscale had questionable reliability ( $\alpha = .64$ ).

**Figure 1: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability of Survey Subscales**

Subscale	Number of Items	$\alpha$ Value
Desire to Affiliate with Progressive Protestant	4	.78
Desire to Affiliate with Conservative Protestant	4	.84
Desire to Affiliate with Catholic	4	.81
Desire to Affiliate with Atheist	4	.78
Desire to Affiliate with Agnostic	4	.76
Political Conservatism	12	.86
Agreeableness	9	.77
Openness	9	.64
SDO-16	16	.91
Religious Commitment Scale	10	.95

### *Correlations between Desire to Affiliate Measures and Participant Variables.*

Participant agreeableness ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ) correlated with all desire to affiliate measures, except desire to affiliate with conservative Protestants (Progressive Protestants:  $r(121) = .30$ ,  $p < .01$ ; Catholics:  $r(120) = .34$ ,  $p < .01$ ; Atheists:  $r(121) = .24$ ,  $p < .01$ ; Agnostics:  $r(120)$

= .30,  $p < .01$ ). This largely confirmed the hypothesis that agreeableness correlated with a desire to affiliate with all religious groups, with the notable exception of conservative Protestants.

Openness correlated positively with desire to affiliate with atheists ( $r(121) = .21, p < .05$ ) and agnostics ( $r(120) = .28, p < .01$ ), but did not correlate significantly with the other desire to affiliate measures.

Social dominance orientation correlated positively with desire to affiliate with conservative Protestants ( $r(119) = .30, p < .01$ ) and negatively predicted desire to affiliate with atheists ( $r(119) = -.56, p < .01$ ) and agnostics ( $r(118) = -.60, p < .01$ ).

Political conservatism ( $M = 2.41, SD = 0.61$ ) correlated with desire to affiliate with conservative Protestants ( $r(122) = .65, p < .01$ ) and Catholics ( $r(122) = .52, p < .01$ ). Political conservatism negatively correlated with desire to affiliate with atheists ( $r(122) = -.29, p < .01$ ) and agnostics ( $r(121) = -.27, p < .01$ ). Religious commitment correlated with desire to affiliate with conservative Protestants ( $r(122) = .56, p < .01$ ) and Catholics ( $r(121) = .49, p < .01$ ), but negatively correlated with desire to affiliate with agnostics ( $r(121) = -.27, p < .01$ ) and atheists ( $r(122) = -.34, p < .01$ ). These findings supported the hypothesis that the non-religious were less conservative than the religious in this sample and that the non-religious would be lower in religious commitment.

As predicted, desire to affiliate between the three religious groups correlated significantly, and desire to affiliate with atheists and agnostics correlated significantly across all religious groups.

### ***Correlations among Participant Variables.***



Political conservatism ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ) significantly correlated with SDO ( $r(120) = .43$ ,  $p < .01$ ), religious commitment ( $r(121) = .65$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and age ( $.32$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This supports the hypothesized link between conservatism and SDO. Notably, political conservatism did not correlate with openness, rejecting the hypothesis that the two were linked.

Openness ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = 0.45$ ) negatively correlated with SDO ( $r(120) = -.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and religious commitment ( $r(120) = -.25$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

SDO ( $M = 1.73$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ) correlated with religious commitment ( $r(119) = .53$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and age ( $r(120) = .36$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Agreeableness negatively correlated with SDO ( $r(120) = -.44$ ,  $p < .01$ ), supporting the hypothesized link between the two.

Correlations between within the various desire to affiliate measures were omitted for brevity. See Figure 2 for a full list of mean values for all the measures among all groups. See Figure 3 for a list of mean values for political conservatism, agreeableness, openness, SDO, and religious commitment across the main participant religions.

**Figure 2: Desire to Affiliate and Participant Characteristics across Entire Sample**

Measure	N	Mean	SD
Desire to Affiliate with Progressive Protestant	123	2.65	.71
Desire to Affiliate with Conservative Protestant	123	2.30	.88
Desire to Affiliate with Catholic	122	2.69	.80
Desire to Affiliate with Atheist	123	3.01	.70
Desire to Affiliate with Agnostic	122	3.02	.68
Political Conservatism	124	2.44	.62
Agreeableness	122	2.91	.52
Openness	122	2.81	.46
Social Dominance Orientation	120	1.74	.61
Religious Commitment	122	2.02	.93

Note: Maximum score for all measures = 4, minimum score = 1.

**Figure 3: Participant Characteristics by Participant Religious Groups**

<b>Religious Affiliation</b>		<b>Conservatism</b>	<b>Agreeableness</b>	<b>Openness</b>	<b>SDO</b>	<b>Religious Commitment</b>
<b>Agnostic</b>	Mean	1.88	3.04	2.86	1.15	1.31
	N	15	15	15	15	16
	SD	0.36	0.38	0.40	0.14	0.52
<b>Atheist</b>	Mean	2.01	3.47	2.83	1.14	1.19
	N	8	8	8	8	8
	SD	0.44	0.28	0.47	0.15	0.25
<b>Catholic</b>	Mean	3.22	2.97	2.75	1.91	3.13
	N	24	24	24	23	22
	SD	0.47	0.57	0.48	0.54	0.83
<b>Christian</b>	Mean	2.65	2.88	2.57	1.94	2.36
	N	19	18	18	18	19
	SD	0.53	0.58	0.42	0.58	0.79
<b>None</b>	Mean	2.10	2.93	2.97	1.41	1.23
	N	27	27	27	26	27
	SD	0.44	0.50	0.43	0.34	0.35
<b>Not Given</b>	Mean	2.51	2.52	2.66	2.42	2.44
	N	23	22	22	22	22
	SD	0.21	0.31	0.34	0.43	0.51

Note: Maximum score for all measures = 4, minimum score = 1.

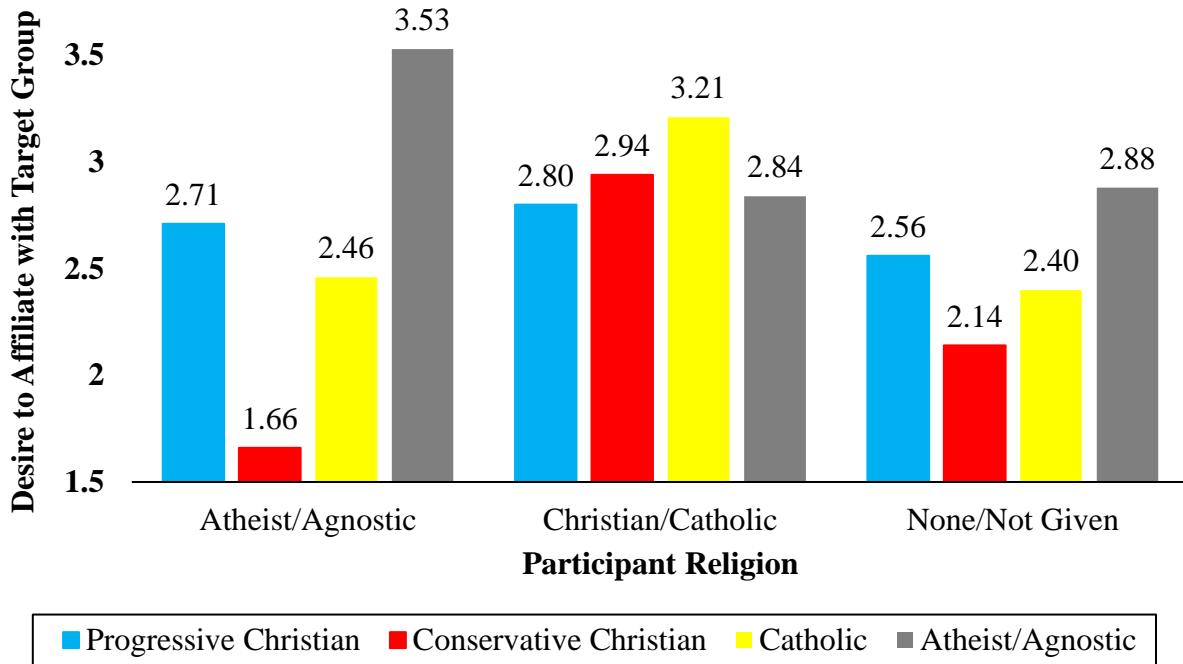
### ***Differences in Desire to Affiliate with Target Groups by Participant Religion***

Participants were divided on basis of their religion and analyzed for their respective desires to affiliate with various religions ('targets'). A 5x6 (Desire to Affiliate with Target Group x Participant Religion) mixed-model ANOVA was conducted. There was a significant main effect of participant religiosity target group,  $F(4,436) = 38.279, p < .001$ . Additionally, there was an interaction between target group by participant religious group,  $F(20, 436) = 12.212, p < .001$ . There was also significant result between-subjects  $F(5,109) = 3.34, p < .001$ .

People were most comfortable associating with those most similar to themselves. Christians were more willing to affiliate with other Christians, and the non-religious were more willing to affiliate with other non-religious. However, overall, the participants were least inclined to affiliate with Conservative Protestant Christians. See Figure 4 for a graphical depiction of

these results. See Figure 5 for a depiction of mean desires to affiliate with target groups by participant religion.

**Figure 4: Desire to Affiliate with Targets of Different Religion by Participant Religion**



Note: Maximum score for desire to affiliate = 4, minimum score = 1.

**Figure 5: Desire to Affiliate with Targets of Different Religion by Participant Religion**

Participant Religion	Desire to Affiliate w/...	Mean	Std. Error
Agnostic	Progressive Protestant	2.66	.18
	Conservative Protestant	1.44	.18
	Catholic	2.36	.17
	Atheist	3.39	.16
	Agnostic	3.66	.15
Atheist	Progressive Protestant	2.81	.25
	Conservative Protestant	2.09	.25
	Catholic	2.67	.24
	Atheist	3.63	.23
	Agnostic	3.44	.21
Catholic	Progressive Protestant	2.77	.15
	Conservative Protestant	3.17	.15
	Catholic	3.57	.14
	Atheist	2.72	.13
	Agnostic	2.77	.13

Christian	Progressive Protestant	2.84	.16
	Conservative Protestant	2.66	.16
	Catholic	2.78	.15
	Atheist	2.89	.15
	Agnostic	3.03	.14
None	Progressive Protestant	2.56	.14
	Conservative Protestant	1.94	.14
	Catholic	2.41	.13
	Atheist	3.15	.12
	Agnostic	3.07	.12
Not Given	Progressive Protestant	2.57	.15
	Conservative Protestant	2.39	.15
	Catholic	2.36	.14
	Atheist	2.64	.14
	Agnostic	2.55	.13

*Note: Maximum score for desire to affiliate = 4, minimum score = 1.*

## Discussion

Given that many evangelicals feel that there is blatant discrimination against them, some may interpret the fact that there is a lower desire to affiliate with conservative Protestants as a form of bias or unjust discrimination. While the results show is a certainly a degree of distinction in desire to affiliate with conservative Protestants compared to other groups, this is a far cry from justification of the “open season on Christians” warned of by conservative commentator Bill O’Reilly or of a “liberal fascism” targeting “believing Christians” as conservative Senator Ted Cruz warned of (Poor, 2015; Riehl, 2015).

The findings do strongly suggest, however, that even among Christians many don’t view conservative Protestants as the kind of individuals that they would want to affiliate with, be friends with, or work with, which may support a kind of religious bias against conservative Protestants: namely, that among those sampled, fewer people want to affiliate with them. This may provide *prima facie* justification for perception that conservative Christians are unfairly

discriminated against, though claims that there is extreme anti-Christian sentiment to the degree of “open season” on them or anti-Christian “fascism” are unsupported by the study.

This pattern of results could have occurred because socially conservative Protestants are often perceived as close-minded and discriminatory against other groups. These traits tend to be undesirable in friends and colleagues.

### *Correlations between desire to affiliate measures and participant characteristics*

While openness predicted desire to affiliate with atheists and agnostics, conservatism, religious commitment, and SDO correlated negatively with desire to affiliate with them. Those espousing social conservatism also tend towards maintenance of social norms and traditional morality, which towards traditional religion would also enforce (Crowson, 2009; Jost et al., 2018; Kirk, 1953; Thórisdóttir & Jost, 2011). Those high in SDO also often exhibit more towards traditional conservative morality, which may help drive perceptions that atheists and agnostics are immoral (Gervais, 2013; Kleppestø et al., 2019). These findings, along with the facts that those low in religious commitment tend to be irreligious and that openness predicts non-conformity may explain these findings.

Political conservatism and religious commitment correlated with desire to affiliate with conservative Protestants and Catholics. This may be because conservative Protestants tend to be more conservative and, while U.S. Catholics were 7% more likely to self-identify as Democrats rather than Republicans in 2016, the Catholics in this study were remarkably more conservative (Lipka, 2016).

Social dominance orientation and age correlated with desire to affiliate with conservative Protestants, and agreeableness correlated with desire to affiliate with all groups except

conservative Protestants. SDO and openness's negative correlation relationship may be at the heart of this finding. While SDO and its associated anti-egalitarian attitudes may drive desire to affiliate with conservative Protestants, it may be less appealing to those high in agreeableness. Those higher in prosocial attitudes may conversely desire to affiliate with other religious groups but find themselves turned off by perceptions of conservative Protestant antipathy towards outgroups.

Religious commitment, conservatism, SDO, and openness did not predict desire to affiliate with progressive Christians, but also did not predict against it. This finding is notable, as it may be the case that perceptions of progressive Christians may be more flexible compared to other targets, such that the subject may be able to read themselves into the progressive Protestant more than other Christian religious groups, such as conservative Protestants or Catholics. Further research could investigate perceptions of progressive Protestants across a variety of religious groups.

### *Correlations between participant characteristics*

Numerous correlations in the participant characteristics were predicted by previous research, but there were unexpected results as well. Conservatism and low openness did not correlate significantly in this sample, contrary to the findings of Vecchione and colleagues (2011). Conservatism and SDO correlated strongly among participants, in line with the prediction and previous research (Beyer, 2020; Kleppetø et al., 2019, Nilsson & Jost, 2020). Conservatism also correlated with older age, squaring with previous findings that older people tend to be more conservative (Peterson et al., 2020; Truett, 1993)

SDO correlated negatively with openness and agreeableness. Previous research has verified that those lower in agreeableness are more inclined towards SDO, but the relation between openness and SDO may be linked via Right-Wing Authoritarianism, a common correlate of SDO and a trait very strongly driven by low openness (Ekehammar et al., 2004). SDO correlated positively with older age. This may not have been because of age directly causing individuals to increase in SDO but due to the fact, as Mirisola and colleagues (2007) suggest, that older individuals have been exposed to political socialization towards SDO for longer than younger individuals have.

A particularly interesting set of findings was the strong correlation religious commitment and SDO, religious commitment and conservatism, and religious commitment with low openness. These findings may be the result of *religious fundamentalism*, a characteristic of individuals within a given religion that hold a literal interpretation of religious texts, desire to impose their views on others in a society, are intolerant of other religions, and are socially conservative (Chapman et al., 2015). Fundamentalism, which correlates strongly with commitment to one's religious persuasion to the exclusion of others, also predicts strong religious commitment and conservatism (Altemeyer, 2003; Chapman et al., 2015). Fundamentalists, dogmatic in nature and cognitively inflexible, are also traditionally low in openness to experience (Saraglou, 2010, Zhong et al., 2017). The phenomenon of religious fundamentalism may explain these findings.

### ***Limitations***

There are several limitations for this study. Particularly important is that the sample studied, a convenience sample, can't be generalized to any populations. Though numerous

findings were made within the sample, the unknown population of the participants makes it impossible to extrapolate out from the sample studied.

Further, all measures in this study were explicit, and included treating on sensitive groups (i.e., religious groups) and affirming agreement with statements potentially offensive to society at large (e.g., SDO items “Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups” and “An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others to be on the bottom”). These statements may have elicited perception of demand characteristics. Conducting the study online reduced the influence of demand characteristics from researchers (Sparrow & Spaniol, 2018), the questions were carefully worded to be even-handed, and all responses were confidential, but it is still possible that the desire to more socially desirable influenced our responses

Another confound in our work was that many individuals would simply select the ‘Christian’ label as a religious identifier for themselves. While informative, more specific denominational distinction among Christians (e.g., Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist) would have been more specific, and thus more informative, than merely finding the individual to be in the unspecific ‘Christian’ group. If replicated, it is advisable to create a series of religious options for participants to choose between.

### ***Directions for Future Research***

Future research should use probability sampling to ensure that an established population is studied rather than a convenience sample to increase external validity.

Additionally, there are many more religious groups than Christians (e.g., Muslims, Jews, Satanists) and non-religious groups than atheists and agnostics (e.g., secular humanists, pantheists, anti-theists) in the United States. These groups may show more notable differences



than the relatively large contingent of atheists, agnostics, and Christians, which jointly made up 92% of the United States population in 2021 (Smith, 2021). Perhaps the inclusion of groups that are more notably minorities than the “Nones”, the second-largest religious group in the United States, may increase the number of notable findings.

There are many more variables that may affect desire to affiliate with certain groups that ought to be studied as well. Further research could include more measures, such as Right-Wing Authoritarianism, the other “Big Five” personality factors, or the degree of certainty that an individual places on their religious or non-religious convictions.

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