


2005

# Images of God: The Effect of Personal Theologies on Moral Attitudes, Political Affiliation, and Religious Behavior

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## Recommended Citation

Bader, Christopher and Paul Froese. 2005. "Images of God: The Effect of Personal Theologies on Moral Attitudes, Political Affiliation, and Religious Behavior." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 1(11).

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Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion

*Interdisciplinary Journal of  
Research on Religion*

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Volume 1

2005

Article 11

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## Abstract

Social scientists often explain religious effects in terms of religious group affiliations. Typically, researchers identify religious groups by denomination or some broader popular categorization, such as “fundamentalist” or “evangelical.” To capture religious differences more effectively, Steensland et al. (2000) propose an intricate classification of American denominations that takes into account the theology and historical development of various American religious traditions to predict individual attitudes and behaviors. We believe that equal care and attention should be devoted to the development of key measures of belief that may cross denominational lines. In this article, we propose one such measure: personal conceptions or images of God. Our simple measure of conceptions of God predicts church attendance rates, belief in biblical literalism, political party identification, attitudes toward abortion, and attitudes about sexual morality. In addition, this indicator provides a means to understand variation within religious traditions. Views of God’s character provide a straightforward way to describe religious differences and an efficient means to demonstrate how religion affects the world.

The significance of religion is ... a reflection of what God as the object of religion does to our worldview.

Georg Simmel 1997 (1904)

When we say that someone is very religious, what do we mean? To judge by much of the research literature, we mean that the person belongs to a particular religious group (e.g., Baptist rather than Unitarian) or to a particular type of religious group (e.g., “fundamentalist” or “evangelical,” as opposed to “liberal” or “moderate”). Even so, when we ask what these markers of religiousness represent, the answer almost always involves some aspect of *belief*. That is, most fundamentalists and evangelicals believe things that most moderates and liberals do not. But if that is the actual basis of individual religious differences, why don’t we use it? Certainly, denominational affiliation provides a measure that can be used to investigate the impact of group membership on the individual, but it fails to demonstrate how religious faith affects the individual. If we want to investigate the influence of religion on attitudes and behaviors, it behooves us to determine whether there exists a direct connection between religious belief and attitudes and behavior.

In this article, we demonstrate that measures of individual conceptions of God reduce the misclassifications that arise when the “fundamentalist” minority of Episcopalians is scored as liberal and the liberals among the Southern Baptists are scored as fundamentalists in current denominational typologies. We begin with a review of the most persuasive and admired denominational classification scheme.

### *DENOMINATIONALISM*

Efforts to classify people by their denomination face a problem. Not only is denominationalism rampant in the United States (Gordon Melton has catalogued more than 1,800 different Christian bodies) and ever-changing, but many people are poorly informed as to their actual affiliation.

Respondent: “I am a Baptist.”

Interviewer: “What kind of Baptist is that?”

Respondent: “Oh, you know the First Baptist Church over by the high school.”

Interviewer: “No, I mean are you an American Baptist, a Southern Baptist, or what?”

Respondent: “Well, we’re all Americans, and this is Georgia, so I guess we must be American Southern Baptists.”

This respondent’s inability to specify an actual denomination is critical because of the immense variation in theology and practice among groups that fall under a generic label such as “Baptist.” It is impossible to say whether this

respondent is a “moderate” or an “evangelical.” To remedy this problem, Steensland et al. (2000) propose a new classification of American religious denominations. They provide six nominal categories based on a complex scheme that considers “theological criteria derived from denominational creeds and associational criteria taken from denominational membership status in national religious organizations” (Steensland et al. 2000: 297). While this cannot address the fact that some religious individuals are unaware of their denominational affiliations, it provides a way to separate Protestant denominations into three meaningful groups: mainline, evangelical, and black. Although it might seem odd to classify religious groups on the basis of racial characteristics, Steensland et al. make a convincing argument that African-American churches are fundamentally different from their white counterparts because of historical differences and therefore should not be grouped together with white churches. In the end, Steensland et al. (2000: 296) argue that they provide a “state of the art” way to categorize GSS “respondents based on their religious affiliation rather than their beliefs.”

To further investigate the importance of religious differences, we want to explore the logic of this strategy. Like Steensland et al., we are explicitly interested in the impact that religion has on individual attitudes and behavior, but we propose to categorize individuals on the basis of their religious beliefs and not their affiliations. Religious belief is a sound measure of religious commitment (see Sherkat and Ellison 1999) and has been used to better understand patterns of religious affiliation (Iannaccone 1991), individual values (Finke and Adamczyk 2003), and seemingly nonrational behavior such as martyrdom (Stark 1996).

Moreover, Robert Wuthnow (1988: 97) has persuasively argued that in the United States, “denominationalism has become less significant [since 1950] as a basis for social and cultural tensions and divisions.” In fact, Steensland et al. (2000) correctly warn that an individual’s religious affiliation and his or her religious beliefs should not be conflated. They should not be conflated because individual members of a congregation might not share the religious worldview stated by their denomination. Therefore, categorizing individuals on the basis of affiliation is arguably an attempt to determine the degree to which the theology of the group has affected the individual. For instance, we expect Evangelical Protestant churches to contain more Republicans. But this relationship remains unexplained without a sense of the mechanisms underlying the relationship. What is it about an Evangelical Protestant church that attracts or produces Republicans? There is an implicit assumption that the theology of the group is at the root of the matter, an assumption revealed by the fact that classifications of religious groups that are used to predict political attitudes and affiliations are largely based on the stated religious beliefs of the church. Therefore, as scholars develop increasingly complex denominational typologies to capture theological differences, we should

devote equal time and energy to developing meaningful measures of religious belief. Measures of belief bypass the assumption that the group's theology is fully instilled in the individual and allow for differences within denominations.

In fact, measures of individual religious beliefs will determine the extent to which churches and religious groups successfully communicate a singular theological message. It will also reveal the extent to which theologies and not group affiliations affect other attitudes. For instance, is Evangelical Protestantism related to Republicanism because Republicans congregate at those churches to find politically like-minded individuals, or is Evangelical Protestantism related to Republicanism because the theology of the religion is philosophically compatible with a politically conservative worldview? If the former is true, then no religious effect can be deduced. In other words, analyses based solely on denominational affiliations fail to convincingly capture religious effects because they assume that the religious outlooks of all the members are the same. Benton Johnson (1967: 441) questioned this assumed relationship between religious and political affiliations by arguing that political ideological movements can sometimes cut across theologically different groups. And Wuthnow (1988: 99) argues that "since World War II an increasing role has been played by other kinds of organizational forms that function in ways different from those comprising the official hierarchies of denominations." Groups such as the Moral Majority and the National Christian Action Coalition may have more to say about their members' moral and political attitudes and actions than any denominational typology would.

An analysis of religious belief at the individual level can answer the question of whether people who are politically or socially like-minded are also religiously like-minded. Peek, Lowe, and Williams (1991) found that women's attitudes concerning sex roles are related to their religious beliefs and not their religious affiliations. Specifically, women who believe in the literalness of the Bible were more likely to disapprove of working outside the home, while their membership in "fundamentalist" churches had no independent effect on these sex role attitudes. This instance demonstrates the power of religious beliefs over and above religious affiliations and indicates a direct religious effect.

To specify religious effects more accurately, we must first provide a clear and concise way to categorize an individual's religious beliefs independent of the person's organizational affiliations.

### *THE CENTRALITY OF GOD*

Religious beliefs are complex. They include intricate codes of morality, detailed descriptions of the supernatural, and explanations of what is meaningful and important. Several contemporary studies on the effects of religious belief have indicated that religious concepts affect a wide variety of outcomes from

attitudes about gender roles (Stover and Hope 1984), corporal punishment (Ellison and Sherkat 1993), and violence (Ellison 1991) to how children view their parents (Dickie et al. 1997) and whether parents hug and praise their children (Wilcox 1998) or yell at them (Bartkowski and Wilcox 2000). These studies measure religious belief in several different ways, drawing on survey questions about the literalness of the Bible, conceptions of sin, importance of the Bible, and images of God. In creating a concise indicator of differences in religious belief, an individual's perception of God appears ideal for a number of reasons.

First, God is the object of religious devotion. While certain nontheistic religious traditions posit no God, most religious believers refer to God in their practices and specifically ask God for blessings, forgiveness, and love. Even nontheistic religions can involve God (or gods); for instance, popular Buddhism is rich in supernatural beings, even though intellectual Buddhists might deny the existence of any god (Stark and Finke 2000: 90). In turn, the nature of God should provide an easy way to uncover initial differences in theological worldviews. Rodney Stark (2001) argues that God's character is crucial to understanding the commitment of believers; specifically, Stark maintains that different conceptions of God inspire very different types of human action. For instance, Stark (2001: 20) points out that "if the Gods truly are crazy then religion is futile. But if the Gods are rational, then there is an immense range of possibilities." In addition to being rational, if God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and judgmental, believers should be more inclined to closely follow the rules of their religion. In contrast, a supernatural essence that is not active in or concerned with human affairs will have trouble inspiring passionate obedience. As Georg Simmel (1997 [1904]: 53) noted, "A deity that is subsumed into a unity with the whole of existence cannot possibly possess any power, because there would be no separate object to which He could apply such power." Therefore, the most powerful religious effects should occur when individuals posit a very powerful and conscious God.

Second, beliefs about God are diverse. In a review of recent poll statistics, Bishop (1999: 426) points out that questions about the existence of God are "invariably interpreted by the press and others as 95 percent [of Americans] believing in a traditional, personal God, without any qualification. What Americans believe about the idea of God is not nearly that simple." In other words, almost all Americans will say they believe in God, but we should not assume that we understand what people mean by "God." Bishop argues that Americans disagree about God's essential nature. Therefore, the image of God provides us with an ideal variable to indicate fundamental differences in religious systems of belief.

Third, denominations and denominational typologies are culturally and historically specific. Religious tensions and divisions in the United States have altered considerably over the past 100 years; most obviously, "the deep



misgivings and outright hostility that separated Protestants and Catholics ... have largely receded from view” (Wuthnow 1988: 97). Also, denominations can split or merge over time, requiring religious group typologies to be constantly updated to account for social, cultural, and organizational shifts. In addition, religious group typologies cannot be utilized to uncover religious effects and differences outside of the United States. In sum, categorizing individuals on the basis of religious affiliations narrows the historical and cultural scope of research on the importance or impact of religion. Measures of belief have the potential to have wider applicability. We can compare how conceptions of God differ across different historical and cultural contexts.

Finally, measuring religious differences based on images of God is conceptually more distinct than using denominational affiliations or even other measures of religious or moral beliefs. While researchers sometimes measure religious belief using an indicator of whether a person believes in a literal interpretation of the Bible (Dickie et al. 1997; Ellison 1991; Ellison and Sherkat 1993; Wilcox 1998), this measure tells us little about the individual’s actual theology. God’s characteristics notably change throughout the Bible, so it remains unclear to researchers how someone who reads the Bible literally pictures God. Some literal readers of the Bible may picture God as the God of the Old Testament, quick to anger and very directly engaged in the natural world; others may conceptualize the New Testament God, one who works through a loving and all-forgiving emissary on earth. Furthermore, denominational affiliations simply indicate a difference in group membership. A person’s conception of God is distinct from that person’s memberships, political attitudes, moral opinions, and even religious commitment. Of course, we expect that images of God will be associated with these variables, but they do not overlap in how they are measured.

#### *MEASURING CONCEPTIONS OF GOD*

Although a fairly rich body of research on images of God exists, little has direct bearing on our study. For example, an aging but substantial literature examines how characteristics of parents influence the images of God held by their children (cf. Vergote and Aubert 1972; Vergote and Tamayo 1981; Vergote et al. 1969). In a more recent example of this approach, Hertel and Donahue (1995: 196) report that mothers had a greater impact than fathers in determining “images of God as love” and images of God as an authoritarian. Others explain differences in images of God through levels of self-esteem (Benson and Spilka 1973) or test for theological differences by demographic categories (Ladd, McIntosh, and Spilka 1998; Nelsen, Cheek, and Au 1985; Roberts 1989; Roof and Roof 1984; Schoenfeld 1987). Most of these studies build on earlier examinations of the

correlation of various characteristics of God (cf. Gorsuch 1968; Spilka, Armatus, and Nussbaum 1964).<sup>1</sup>

Surprisingly, few have focused on what seems the most interesting question about images of God: Do they matter? Other than a discussion of how different images of God affect church attendance (Roof and Roof 1984) and an examination of their impact on responses to stressful situations (Maynard, Gorsuch, and Bjorck 2001), the real-world outcomes of different views of God remain unexplored.

So what are the sociologically important elements of an individual's image of God in terms of understanding human action? Two questions seem especially important to individuals who believe in God: (1) "To what extent is God active in one's life?" and (2) "Is God quick to anger?" A very active and vengeful God seems a daunting figure, and one would be unwise to upset him. (We use the masculine "him" because judgmental gods usually have male identities.) On the other hand, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark (2001: 176) indicate that "few want a religion whose god is so distant and powerless as to offer little assistance in daily living and few promises for the life hereafter." Gorsuch and Smith (1983) found that feeling close to God colored people's interpretation of life events. We believe that an attentive God will have a strong effect on behaviors as well.

In the end, God's attention and personality are crucial to the individual's worldview and how she or he responds to life's choices. The General Social Survey (GSS) provides a means to specifically measure these aspects of God's character.<sup>2</sup> In 1991 and 1998, the GSS included a set of questions relating to individual conceptions of God, allowing the construction of a suitable measure for testing our key arguments. Therefore, for this study, we have combined those two years, resulting in 4,349 cases.

Six different items from the GSS were used to create an image of God scale. These items tap the two fundamental characteristics of God: Is God a judgmental being and is God personally interested in an individual's behavior? Four items ask respondents to locate their image of God between two distinct character descriptions on a scale of 1 to 7. For example, one question asked respondents

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<sup>1</sup> A more recent example, Mallery, Mallery, and Gorsuch (2000), also examines the relationship between various images of God.

<sup>2</sup> Since 1972, the National Opinion Research Center has conducted a nationwide survey of a random sample of U.S. citizens on a near-yearly basis: the General Social Survey (GSS). In addition to gathering detailed demographic information on respondents, the GSS gathers opinions on a wide variety of topics, such as the role of government in public life, controversial issues such as abortion, confidence in public institutions, and a host of others. Of course, respondents are unlikely to spend five hours completing a survey, so to gather data on a broad range of issues, the GSS has adopted the practice of rotating groups of questions into and out of the survey in different years.

whether God is more like a mother (1) or a father (7). Other contrasts presented to respondents included master/spouse, judge/lover, and friend/king.

The remaining items in the image of God measure relate to God's role in the world. After all, God may be authoritative but distant from human affairs. To determine the extent to which respondents believe God plays an active role in life, we included two additional items. One question asks respondents to indicate their level of agreement (on a Likert scale) with the statement "To me, life is meaningful only because God exists." This question indicates the extent to which an individual believes God is part of his or her life. Another item asks respondents if there is a "God who concerns himself with every human being personally."

These six items were standardized (transformed into *z*-scores) and then summed to create the final image of God measure ( $\alpha = .62$ ). Respondents with relatively low scores view God as a partner or friend and see him as relatively distant from earthly affairs. At the high end of the range are those respondents who consistently view God in more authoritarian terms (God is a king, father, judge, and master) and believe that God takes an active interest in the world and them personally. The mean on the image of God measure was .043 with scores ranging from -13 to 7. The overall distribution of the measure (see Figure 1) approximates a normal curve, with relatively few respondents who believe that God is extremely active and judgmental and conversely few who view God as passive and totally accepting.

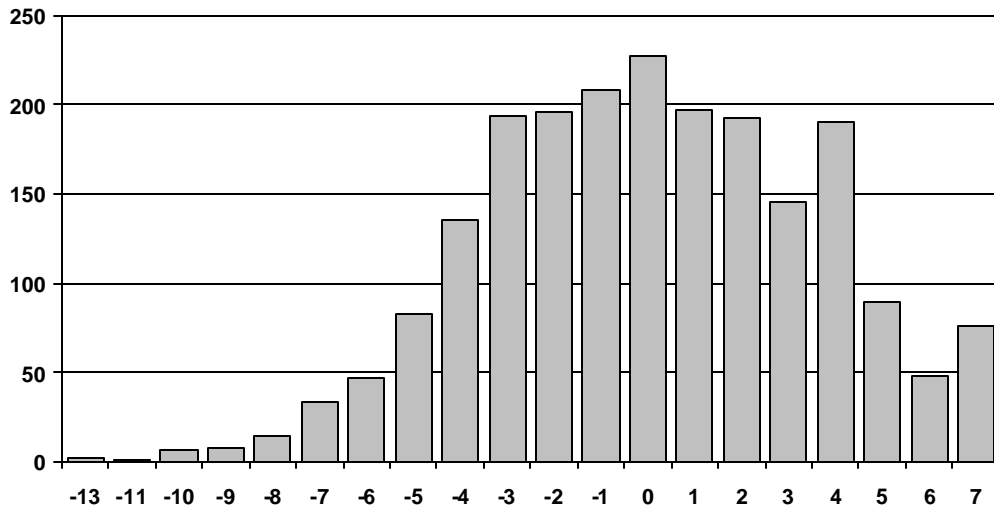
### *CONTROL AND OUTCOME MEASURES*

We conduct three sets of analyses. First, we replicate the analysis conducted by Steensland et al. (2000) to demonstrate that the measure of God's image provides a concise and predictive indicator of religious, moral, and political differences, controlling for Steensland et al.'s classification scheme (RELTRAD). Second, we compare the mean scores and standard deviations for the RELTRAD groupings and selected denominations to examine the extent to which individuals within similar traditions differ in their images of God. Finally, we test the ability of the image of God measure to predict religious, moral, and political differences within mainline Protestant groups.

Religious participation and commitment in the United States are known to be affected by age (Stark and Finke 2000), gender (Miller and Stark 2002), race (Hinojosa and Park 2004), region of the country (Hunt and Hunt 2001), income (Gockel 1969), and education (Zelan 1968). Therefore, we include these variables as controls. Gender and race are entered as dummy variables (female = 1; black = 1). We also control for the year of the survey (1991 or 1998), region of the country (South = 1), education (ranging from high school dropout = 0 to graduate degree = 4), and income. Income was created by using two income measures in

the GSS: Income91 and Income98. We took the midpoint of each income category and adjusted as necessary such that the final variable represents 1998 dollars. Missing cases on income and education were dropped from the analysis.

**Figure 1: Univariate Distribution of Image of God Measure (Mean = .043)**



We take a similar approach to Steensland et al. (2000) with respect to our outcome measures. We attempt to predict church attendance, view of the Bible, attitudes toward abortion and sexual morality, and political affiliation. In all cases, the dependent variables were coded such that higher scores reflect more religious or more conservative responses. Church attendance ranges from never (0) to several times a week (8). View of the Bible was measured by using a question that asks respondents whether the Bible is the actual word of God to be taken literally, inspired by God, or simply a book of fables.

The two dependent variables capturing attitudes about social/sexual issues are simple additive scales. The attitudes toward abortion scale was constructed by using a set of seven questions that asked respondents the circumstances under which abortion is acceptable. For example, respondents were asked whether abortion should be allowed in cases of rape, if the family has a low income, if there is a chance of a defect, if the woman simply does not want the child, and in several other situations. Respondents answered yes or no to each question. Items were dummy coded and summed ( $\alpha = .90$ ) for a final score ranging from 0 to 7. A respondent with a score of 0 allows abortion under all presented circumstances. Those with a score of 7 do not allow abortion regardless of the situation. GSS respondents were also asked their opinions on homosexuality, premarital sex, and

extramarital sex. Answers range from 1 (the behavior is not wrong at all) to 4 (the behavior is always wrong). These three items were combined to create the sexual morality scale ( $\alpha = .60$ ).

The political affiliation variable consists of one question that asked respondents to indicate their political leanings on a scale ranging from strong Democrat (0) to strong Republican (6).<sup>3</sup>

Finally, we include a set of dummy variables representing the classification scheme (RELTRAD) proposed by Steensland et al. (2000), who classify religious affiliations in seven categories: Catholic, Black Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Jewish, other, and none (no religious affiliation).<sup>4</sup> According to their approach, individuals who are nondenominational Christians but go to church at least monthly were coded as Evangelicals. In our analyses, the contrast category represents no religious preference. Hence, the coefficients represent the difference between a particular religious grouping and the unchurched.

## RESULTS

### *Religious Behavior and Attitudes*

Table 1 presents the results of OLS regression of biblical literalism and church attendance on our control variables, RELTRAD and the image of God measure. This set of regressions attempts to answer a basic question: Does an individual's image of God affect that person's religious behaviors and attitudes? In each case, we add the image of God measure last, to determine whether it has any effects when other key variables are taken into consideration.

The results for the various control variables in all models are in line with previous research. Increasing levels of education are associated with less literal views of the Bible in Model 2 ( $b = -.177, p < .01$ ) but higher levels of church attendance in Model 4 ( $b = .226, p < .01$ ). Females hold a more conservative view of the Bible on average ( $b = .046, p < .05$ ) than males do.

Given that we entered the RELTRAD variables with the nonreligious as the contrast category, it should not be surprising that they are significantly related to both church attendance and Biblical literalism (with the exception of "other").

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<sup>3</sup> Steensland et al. (2000) include one additional dependent variable in their analysis: a scale of attitudes regarding government involvement in the economy. The necessary items to construct this scale were not asked of respondents in 1991 and 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Steensland et al. (2000) provide an appendix that lists all denominations included in the General Social Survey and their placement within their coding scheme. In the interests of space, we have not reproduced that appendix in the current paper. Readers are referred to Steensland et al. (2000) to determine how any particular group was coded.

**TABLE 1: OLS Regression of Biblical Literalism and Church Attendance on Control Variables, RELTRAD and Image of God**

	Biblical Literalism		Church Attendance	
	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
Black	.061* (.051)	.002 (.072)	.128† (.206)	.203† (.299)
Age	-.027 (.001)	-.053 (.001)	.140† (.003)	.142† (.004)
Education	-.196† (.010)	-.177† (.013)	.201† (.042)	.226† (.056)
Female	.035* (.023)	.046* (.029)	.052† (.093)	.013 (.124)
GSS year	.005 (.003)	-.015 (.004)	-.018 (.014)	-.026 (.018)
Income	-.052† (.000)	-.053* (.000)	.042* (.000)	.020 (.000)
South	.033* (.024)	.028 (.031)	.011 (.097)	.020 (.132)
Church attendance	.251† (.005)	.210† (.006)	—	—
Biblical Literalism	—	—	.263† (.076)	.228† (.108)
Black Protestant	.178† (.069)	.126† (.096)	.214† (.281)	.123† (.406)
Evangelical Protestant	.433† (.043)	.271† (.059)	.431† (.175)	.379† (.248)
Mainline Protestant	.221† (.043)	.131† (.060)	.278† (.176)	.265† (.248)
Jewish	-.026 (.090)	-.056* (.139)	.064† (.367)	.046 (.588)
Catholic	.172† (.041)	.084* (.057)	.384† (.163)	.363† (.233)
Other	.081† (.076)	.048 (.101)	.174† (.307)	.173† (.420)
Image of God	—	.273† (.004)	—	.129† (.020)
R <sup>2</sup>	.303	.330	.260	.273
Valid <i>N</i>	2739	1480	2739	1480

\*  $p < .05$ .†  $p < .01$ .

Catholics ( $b = .084, p < .05$ ), Black Protestants ( $b = .126, p < .01$ ), Evangelical Protestants ( $b = .271, p < .01$ ), and mainline Protestants ( $b = .131, p < .01$ ) all hold more literal views of the Bible than do the unchurched. Jews are the sole exception, having less literal views of the Bible than those without a religious affiliation ( $b = -.056, p < .01$ ). This is likely because 66% of the Jews in the sample do not identify as Orthodox or Conservative.<sup>5</sup> With the exception of Jews, all of the RELTRAD categories were significantly related to church attendance.

To ensure that our image of God measure does not simply act as an alternative measure of attendance or Biblical literalism, church attendance was included as a control in the equation for Biblical literalism and vice versa. Indeed, those who attend worship services with greater frequency hold more conservative (literal) views of the Bible ( $b = .251, p < .01$ ), and those with a more literal view of the Bible attend with greater frequency ( $b = .228, p < .01$ ).

Nevertheless, in the presence of the control variables across all models, image of God remains a significant predictor of Biblical literalism and church attendance. Those who view God as a strict and authoritative being with an active interest in human affairs are more likely to believe that the Bible is the actual word of God ( $b = .273, p < .01$ ). Understandably, we might expect that an active and authoritarian God would not employ ghostwriters. Similarly, image of God is a significant predictor ( $b = .129, p < .01$ ) of church attendance. It should be no great surprise that an active and judgmental God inspires steadfast churchgoers.

The fact that image of God remains significant when we control for view of the Bible and denominational groups is quite telling. First, it demonstrates that Biblical literalism is not a proxy for images of God. Second, it demonstrates how denominational schemas cannot, by themselves, account for important theological differences between individuals.

### *Moral Attitudes and Political Affiliation*

Table 2 presents the results of a series of regression equations examining the relationship between image of God and three measures of nonreligious variables: attitudes toward abortion, sexual morality attitudes, and political affiliation. The dependent variables were coded such that higher values indicate more conservative attitudes. In addition, we add church attendance and Biblical literalism as controls in all models.

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<sup>5</sup> While there were 82 self-identified Jews in the total sample, only 29 answered all of the questions necessary to create the image of God measure. Of those 29, 13 were Reformed, 1 was Orthodox, 8 were Conservative, and 6 reported that they were none of the three.

**TABLE 2: OLS Regression of Attitudes Toward Abortion, Sexual Morality Attitudes, and Political Affiliation on Control Variables, RELTRAD, and Image of God**

	Abortion Attitudes		Sexual Morality Attitudes		Political Affiliation	
	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>	<i>Model 5</i>	<i>Model 6</i>
Black	-.039 (.284)	-.075 (.417)	-.000 (.304)	-.057 (.460)	-.227† (.164)	-.252† (.245)
Age	.024 (.004)	-.008 (.005)	.089† (.004)	.072* (.005)	-.065† (.002)	-.067† (.003)
Education	-.140† (.056)	-.160† (.075)	-.156† (.056)	-.159† (.076)	.024 (.034)	.043 (.046)
Female	-.017 (.122)	-.008 (.161)	-.020 (.123)	-.074* (.170)	-.098† (.073)	-.120† (.099)
GSS year	.070† (.019)	.075* (.024)	-.078† (.018)	-.122† (.024)	-.027 (.011)	-.029 (.014)
Income	-.023 (.000)	-.004 (.000)	-.011 (.000)	-.022 (.000)	.118† (.000)	.090 (.000)
South	.025 (.127)	.031 (.170)	.110† (.128)	.122† (.179)	.019 (.076)	.012 (.105)
Church Attendance	.208† (.025)	.246† (.034)	.336† (.025)	.286† (.035)	.067† (.015)	.069* (.021)
Biblical Literalism	.235† (.105)	.101† (.026)	.210† (.105)	.182† (.157)	.029 (.062)	.002 (.088)
Black Protestant	.028 (.384)	.064 (.543)	.030 (.407)	.012 (.609)	-.031 (.225)	-.005 (.328)
Evangelical Protestant	.117† (.233)	.105 (.313)	.151† (.239)	.148* (.337)	.116† (.144)	.129† (.204)
Mainline Protestant	-.021 (.229)	-.022 (.309)	.041 (.235)	.048 (.337)	.132† (.142)	.148† (.202)
Jewish	-.035 (.473)	-.017 (.681)	-.059* (.487)	-.065 (.703)	-.038 (.288)	-.042 (.468)
Catholic	.134† (.216)	.113* (.292)	.009 (.227)	-.078 (.323)	.023 (.135)	.021 (.193)
Other	.040 (.403)	.016 (.527)	-.008 (.382)	.019 (.527)	.050* (.248)	.091† (.343)
Image of God	—	.101† (.026)	—	.102* (.027)	—	.059* (.016)
$R^2$	.234	.225	.400	.412	.148	.162
Valid $N$	1347	778	1063	544	2695	1459

\*  $p < .05$ .

†  $p < .01$ .



There are reasons to expect that more authoritarian and active images of God will be associated with conservative political attitudes. An authoritarian and involved God is one who makes judgments, viewing certain behaviors as indisputably wrong, immoral, and sinful. To the extent that conservative worldviews tend toward restricting behaviors on moral grounds, those who believe in such a God should lean in a conservative direction. On the other hand, those who believe in a distant and nonjudgmental God, little concerned with human affairs, should allow greater moral latitude in human behavior.

The results of all models support this line of reasoning. In Models 2 and 4, education is a strong and significant predictor of abortion and sexual morality attitudes. Those with higher levels of education are more permissive with regard to abortion ( $b = -.160, p < .01$ ) and sexual morality ( $b = -.159, p < .01$ ). The findings also suggest a shift toward more liberal sexual attitudes between 1991 and 1998 ( $b = -.160, p < .01$ ) and more conservative attitudes toward sexual morality in the South ( $b = .192, p < .01$ ). Several demographic variables were significant predictors of political affiliation, blacks ( $b = -.252, p < .01$ ) and females ( $b = -.120, p < .01$ ) being less likely to be Republican. Respondents also become less “Republican” as they age ( $b = -.067, p < .01$ ).

Of greatest interest to the current research are the effects of the various measures of religiosity included in the models. The RELTRAD typology had varied effects. Once all variables were included in the model, only being Catholic has a significant effect on attitudes toward abortion, Catholics exhibiting significantly more conservative views on abortion than those who report no affiliation ( $b = .113, p < .05$ ). Evangelical Protestants had significantly more conservative views on issues related to sexual morality than did those with no affiliation ( $b = .148, p < .05$ ). The other RELTRAD categories, however, did not have significant effects once all variables were included in the model. With regard to political affiliation, Evangelical Protestants ( $b = .129, p < .01$ ), mainline Protestants ( $b = .148, p < .01$ ), and those with other affiliations ( $b = .091, p < .01$ ) were significantly more “Republican” than were those with no affiliation.

With one exception, the effects of Biblical literalism and church attendance remain strong and significant across the models. Higher levels of church attendance are associated with more conservative attitudes toward abortion ( $b = .246, p < .01$ ), more restrictive views of sexual morality ( $b = .286, p < .01$ ), and more Republican political leanings ( $b = .069, p < .05$ ). Biblical literalism also has significant effects on attitudes toward abortion ( $b = .101, p < .01$ ) and sexual morality ( $b = .182, p < .01$ ) but does not significantly affect political affiliation.

Even though we control for several key aspects of religiosity—Biblical literalism, attendance, and denominational affiliation—image of God remains a significant predictor in all models. Those with an active and judgmental view of God will be more conservative with regard to sexual morality ( $b = .102, p < .05$ )

and abortion ( $b = .101, p < .01$ ). They will also be significantly more Republican in their political leanings ( $b = .059, p < .05$ ).

### *Differences Between Religious Groupings*

The above findings indicate that an individual's understanding of God is an important aspect of his or her total worldview, independent of other key measures of religiosity. Therefore, it is important to know the extent to which individuals within different religious groupings, as categorized by RELTRAD, vary in their images of God. This will clarify the extent to which religious institutions successfully impart clear and exclusive theological conceptions of the supernatural.

Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations for each of the RELTRAD categories and four denominations on the image of God measure. The results demonstrate wide variation on mean images of God between the RELTRAD groupings. For example, Evangelicals have the highest mean (1.521), indicating a more authoritarian and active view of God, on average. As we would expect, mainline Protestants have a much more lenient, inactive view of God than Evangelicals (mean =  $-1.168$ ). Following Evangelicals, Black Protestants have the most authoritarian view of God (1.064). Not surprisingly, those with no religious affiliation tend to view God as relatively distant and nonjudgmental (mean =  $-2.655$ ), although Jewish respondents are similar in attitude (mean =  $-2.621$ ).

Distinct differences in the means of religious categories indicate that Steensland et al.'s utilization of official theological statements reflects actual theological differences between religious group members. In other words, these groups are successfully communicating with or attracting individuals with generally similar images of God. Nevertheless, the standard deviations of each group are noteworthy. While each group has noticeably different mean scores, the standard deviations indicate that there are high levels of disagreement within groups. The standard deviations are over 3 points for all RELTRAD groupings (with the exception of Jews, who have only 29 valid cases).

One might expect that standard deviations would differ widely between groups. Wouldn't groups that promote a judgmental and active God attract or produce only individuals with a similar outlook? This appears not to be the case. For instance, Evangelical Protestants have the most active and judgmental view of God but still have a standard deviation of 3.206. This result shows that while the theological outlook of a religious grouping is important (in that they differ significantly), it is not the sole defining characteristic of its members' images of God. Evangelical Protestants may have a stricter view of God on average, but members of Evangelical denominations will still exhibit significant spread around that mean.

**TABLE 3: Image of God: Means and Standard Deviations for RELTRAD and Selected Denominations**

	<i>N</i>	Mean	Standard Deviation
RELTRAD			
Catholic*	561	-.576	3.214
Black Protestant	156	1.064	3.346
Evangelical Protestant	583	1.521	3.206
Mainline Protestant	405	-.168	3.324
Jewish	29	-2.621	2.744
Other	57	0.474	3.339
None	177	-2.655	3.640
Selected Denominations			
Southern Baptist	202	1.856	3.366
Lutheran Church Missouri Synod	40	.675	3.116
Presbyterian USA	19	-.105	2.470
Episcopal	47	-.128	3.865

\* $F = 51.838; p < .001$ .

Case problems prevent a detailed examination of denominational variation in images of God. Nevertheless, we selected two generally recognized conservative denominations (Southern Baptist and Lutheran Church Missouri Synod) and two generally recognized liberal denominations (Presbyterian USA and Episcopal). With only nineteen Presbyterian USA members, little should be made of their relatively low standard deviation (2.470). But the findings conform to expectations. The conservative denominations, Southern Baptist and Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, have relatively higher means on image of God (1.856 and .675, respectively) than the comparatively liberal groups do. Members of the Presbyterian USA and Episcopalians view God in more passive, less authoritarian terms (means = -.105 and -.128, respectively).

These results demonstrate that image of God differ *between* religious groups and may also be an important predictor of behavioral and attitudinal differences *within* religious groups. Therefore, our analysis turns to an examination of image of God within a particular religious grouping.

*Mainline Protestants*

A final test of the image of God measure is its ability to explain religious effects and differences within a religious category. Table 4 presents the results of OLS regressions of our dependent variables on the image of God measure and the control variables for mainline Protestants only. Although none of the measures of religiosity had an influence on political affiliation among mainline Protestants,

**TABLE 4: OLS Regression of Biblical Literalism, Church Attendance, Attitudes Toward Abortion, Sexual Morality Attitudes and Political Affiliation on Control Variables and Image of God (Mainline Protestant Respondents)**

	<b>Biblical Literalism</b>	<b>Church Attendance</b>	<b>Abortion Attitudes</b>	<b>Sexual Morality Attitudes</b>	<b>Political Affiliation</b>
Black	.038 (.166)	.144† (.719)	-.040 (.459)	-.083 (1.846)	-.253† (.635)
Age	-.021 (.002)	.181† (.008)	-.153* (.010)	.081 (.010)	.048 (.007)
Education	-.173† (.028)	.167† (.121)	-.328† (.156)	-.132 (.158)	-.040 (.107)
Female	.046 (.063)	-.013 (.278)	.000 (.335)	.090 (.380)	-.115* (.243)
GSS year	-.032 (.009)	.012 (.038)	.095 (.049)	-.244† (.050)	-.042 (.033)
Income	-.021 (.000)	-.041 (.000)	.050 (.000)	.099 (.000)	.072 (.000)
South	.063 (.066)	-.026 (.289)	.053 (.350)	.158* (.354)	-.079 (.253)
Church Attendance	.196† (.013)	—	.254† (.071)	.180* (.073)	.082 (.051)
Biblical Literalism	—	.216† (.250)	.127 (.337)	.235† (.359)	.016 (.223)
Image of God	.338† (.009)	.171† (.043)	.176* (.052)	.297† (.057)	.026 (.038)
$R^2$	.260	.183	.257	.458	.105
Valid $N$	304	304	159	110	302

\*  $p < .05$ .

†  $p < .01$ .

image of God is a strong and significant predictor of biblical literalism ( $b = .338$ ,  $p < .01$ ), church attendance ( $b = .171$ ,  $p < .01$ ), attitude toward abortion ( $b = .176$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and attitude about sexual morality ( $b = .297$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Impressively, image of God is a significant predictor of attitudes toward abortion and sexual morality among mainliners even when we control for church attendance and Biblical literalism.

These results show that individual conceptions of the supernatural are an important part of individual decision making and personal worldview regardless of group identity. It also indicates that while individuals are receiving similar theological messages from their churches, they do not necessarily hold similar personal beliefs. This analysis could be applied to individual congregations for further exploration of this issue. (Small sample sizes prevented us from that type of analysis in this article.)

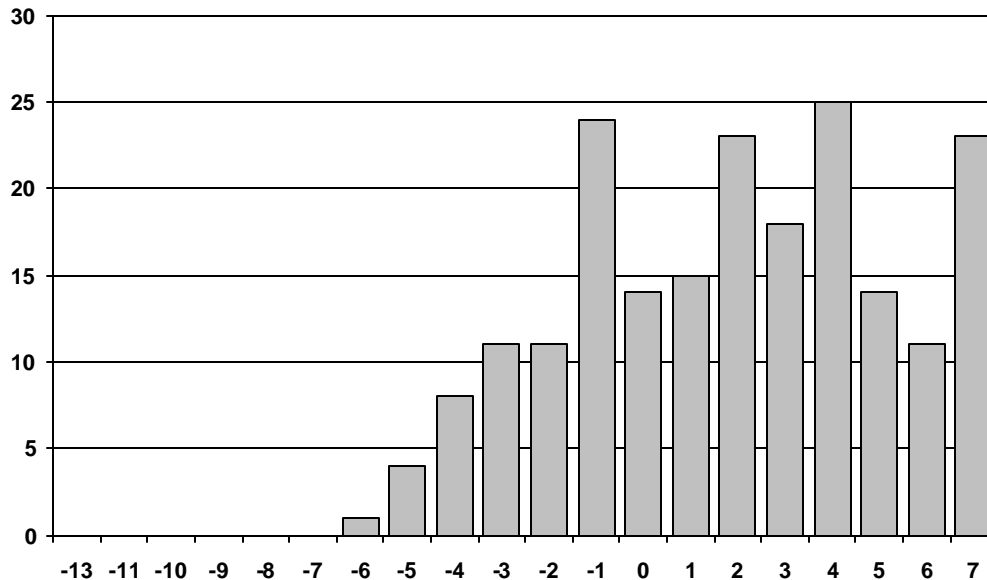
## DISCUSSION

The impact of religion on social life, individual behavior, and personal opinion is a topic of important research. To what extent does religion play a role in individuals' lives? Often, researchers look for the answer by examining differences between individual religious affiliations. Steensland et al. (2000) provide a rigorous classification scheme and defend its reliability by showing a statistically significant difference between each of RELTRAD groupings.

RELTRAD categories allow us to discover important trends such as the following: Evangelicals are more politically conservative than the unchurched, and Evangelicals have a more literal view of the Bible than Mainline Protestants do. But why? There is an assumption that it is the religious aspect of being an Evangelical that creates this statistical relationship. But how do we know? If we are to identify the mechanism by which denominational categories affect individual behaviors and attitudes, we should devote as much effort to developing meaningful measures of religious belief as we do to developing typologies. Such efforts will allow us to determine the degree to which denominational affiliations reflect religious beliefs.

For instance, Southern Baptists are, on average, more theologically conservative than Episcopalians are. But the standard deviations of our images of God measure within RELTRAD categories (see Table 3) suggest that there is as much theological variation *within* denominations as there is *between* groupings. Figure 2 presents the univariate distribution of the image of God measure for Southern Baptists only ( $n = 202$ ). Southern Baptists have a higher mean (0.62) than the general population (0.43), and the distribution is shifted to the right, with no respondents having an image of God score less than  $-6$ . Within their more restricted range, however, the Southern Baptists exhibit considerable variation.

**Figure 2: Univariate Distribution of Image of God Measure for Southern Baptists (Mean = .062)**



An important qualification of the RELTRAD typology, Stark and Finke's (2000) niche model, and any other scheme that categorizes religious denominations as a whole are niche-straddlers—groups that have a significant number of members in different religious niches. According to Stark and Finke (2000), the Methodists and Presbyterians straddle the liberal and moderate niches. The Episcopalians and the United Church of Christ straddle the liberal and ultraliberal niches. The autonomy given to local congregations within the Southern Baptists makes them one of the hardest groups to categorize, spreading them across perhaps up to three niches in the Stark and Finke model (2000: 215). If many Southern Baptists have more in common theologically with Presbyterians than with their own brethren, we have gained little insight into the effects of religion when Steensland et al. categorize all Southern Baptists as “Evangelical Protestants.”

In addition, religious typologies give no indication when religious change will occur and can only respond to change with new classification schemes after the fact. Recent years have seen the Episcopalians face divided responses to gay clergy and a general proliferation in Evangelical renewal movements within mainline denominations (McKinney and Finke 2002). If the Episcopal Church splits what will be the rationale with which we should reclassify each group? Typology

creators will need to address a myriad of social, political, and organizational differences between groups to recategorize each. Measures of belief provide a way to demonstrate the sources of religious differences (as opposed to political or organizational differences) between members of each group. More important, significant increases in variation in belief measures could predict when religious schisms occur.

In this article, we have proposed one measure of belief that, while utilized by psychologists, has been generally ignored in the sociological study of religion. Overall, an individual's image of God provides a parsimonious concept that is related to, but not fundamentally entangled with, specific denominations. Not all Catholics are equally observant. Not all Southern Baptists hold the same political values. Consideration of concepts such as image of God allows for variation at the individual level and demonstrates how religious worldviews affect the individual. Finally, a precise measure of an individual's religious belief is a powerful indicator of the direct impact of religion on individuals' attitudes and behaviors.

### *BRINGING GOD BACK IN*

Religious groups, organizations, and institutions determine much about individual identity, belief, and behavior; this is a central theme of sociology. Nevertheless, what is it about religious groups that set them apart from other social groups? It is their clear and certain reference to the supernatural. Therefore, references to the supernatural should be at the center of sociological studies of religion. And if we are concerned with how religion affects individual decision making and behavior, we need to understand the individual's relationship with and understanding of the supernatural.

The image of God measure varies in the general population and operates as a powerful predictor of church attendance, view of the Bible, attitudes toward abortion, sexual morality, and political affiliation. We also find that image of God varies significantly across the denominational groupings suggested by Steensland et al. (2000). Finally, image of God is a powerful predictor even *within* a particular denominational grouping. Mainline Protestants may attend church less often, on average, than Evangelicals, but Mainline Protestants who believe in a judgmental and observant God are still more likely to be in the pews on Sunday and more likely to vote Republican.

God is the object of religion, but researchers have been slow to recognize and demonstrate the fundamental importance of God's character to religious believers. The more we know about how people view God, the better we will understand how religion affects the world.

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