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## **Sympathy for the Devil: Belief in Satan and Moral Beliefs**

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### Comments

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that religious service attendance, biblical literalism, images of God, and other measures of religion are related to moral beliefs (i.e., that certain behaviors are wrong or deviant). Given previous theory and research on spiritual appraisals (particularly demonization and desecration), we argue that belief in Satan should also predict moral beliefs. Using the first four waves of the Baylor Religion Survey, we tested the association between belief in Satan and belief in the wrongfulness of twelve different behaviors related to abortion, family matters, sexuality, and substance use. Although religious service attendance and biblical literalism were consistently related to moral beliefs, belief in Satan was significantly related to six of the twelve moral beliefs. Furthermore, there was a significant interaction effect between religious service attendance and belief in Satan for ten of the twelve moral beliefs, suggesting that religious service attendance has little or no effect on moral beliefs when people do not also believe in Satan.

## Introduction

In a 2020 article, Baker, Molle, and Bader reported that a three-item index of belief in Satan, demons, and Hell was associated with more conservative views on a variety of issues related to sexual morality, including beliefs about same-sex relations, cohabitation, pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex, and the use of pornography. In the conclusion to their paper, the authors argue for the increased use of variables related to evil when examining moral beliefs. Theoretically, beliefs about religious evil should predict moral beliefs, perhaps as much as other measures of religion. Also, with respect to methodology, measuring evil requires fewer survey items than, for example, conceptions of God. Further, Baker et al. (2020) argue that beliefs about Satan are easier to interpret, as beliefs about Satan's motivations are much more unified amongst believers than are attributions regarding God's personality and motivations.

This paper seeks to test these claims in several ways. First, we examine whether beliefs about evil are, in fact, a consistent predictor of moral beliefs by examining their relationship with twelve different issues related to abortion, family matters, sexuality, and substance use drawn from the first four waves of the Baylor Religion Survey. Second, as did Baker, Molle, and Bader (2020), we assess whether beliefs about evil remain significant predictors when included in models with key controls, such as religious service attendance, biblical literalism, religious affiliation, and conceptions of God. Finally, while Baker, Molle, and Bader (2020:148) argue that "[b]elief in Satan can be adequately measured with a single item," their analyses, in fact, utilized a three-item index of belief in evil. We test the limits of the parsimony of belief in the Devil by using a single question about belief in Satan as the key predictor.

In summary, our primary contribution is to assess the relationship between religious evil, measured as belief in Satan, and moral beliefs. Although an abundance of research has shown

that religious service attendance, biblical literalism, and images of God predict moral beliefs, beliefs about religious evil have received far less attention. Does belief in Satan predict moral beliefs? Also, as suggested by previous research (Baker, Molle, and Bader 2020), does the relationship between religious service attendance and moral beliefs vary according to how strongly people believe in Satan? Our secondary contribution is methodological. How does a single item measuring belief in Satan compare to other measures of religion, in particular images of God, which requires many survey questions to measure adequately?

## **Literature Review**

### ***Why God?***

In studies of religion in the United States, the most frequently used measures of religiosity are religious identification/affiliation, frequency of religious service attendance, frequency of prayer, and beliefs about the inerrancy of the Bible (Finke, Bader, and Polson 2009). But more recently there has been a renewed interest in conceptions of God. Drawing primarily on the work of Greeley (1988; 1989; 1991; 1993; 1995), Froese and Bader (2010; 2015) posit that conceptions of God should be strong predictors of moral beliefs, since, they argue, absolutism and relativism are premised upon beliefs about the nature of ultimate authority. Indeed, several studies have found a relationship between conceptions of God and beliefs about same-sex unions (Whitehead 2014), abortion (Unnever, Bartkowski, and Cullen 2010), and punitive attitudes towards criminals (Bader et al. 2010, Unnever, Bartkowski, and Cullen 2010). In the wake of such research, scholars have called for the increased usage of images of God as a measure of religiosity, particularly in cross-cultural contexts (Bader and Finke 2010; Bader et al. 2017; Finke and Bader 2017). In their examination of fatalistic attitudes across Armenia, Azerbaijan,

and Georgia, Bader et al. (2017) find a judgmental conception of God to be the only religion measure to have a consistent and significant effect. This leads the authors to strongly advocate for survey researchers to "consider adding measures of images of God to surveys...to encourage cross-cultural research on the effects of religious belief" (Bader et al. 2017:188).

While studies that focus on conceptions of God have made a convincing argument that beliefs about ultimate, supernatural powers and forces are an important measure of religion, expanding the use of image of God measures comes at a cost. What is clear from the existing research is that any item that simply indicates whether the individual believes in God is of very little utility by itself. As Bader et al. (2017) note, more than 90% of those in the South Caucasus region report believing in God. Froese and Bader (2015) similarly argue that it is not belief in God that is important, but rather differences in opinion about God's nature and character. A single-item measure about God may help distinguish the religious from the irreligious but will be of little use in making distinctions *across* religions.

Researchers who advocate for using images of God note that proper measurement requires survey items that ask respondents about God's perceived personality. The number of such items and the traits they are meant to capture vary. For example, some studies focus upon God's "loving" qualities (Stroope, Draper, and Whitehead 2013; Unnever, Cullen, and Bartkowski 2006), while others are more interested in the impact of gendered images of God (Greeley 1988; Whitehead 2014). Froese and Bader (2010; 2015) develop their typology of "four Gods" by focusing upon God's perceived levels of judgment and engagement with the world. Replicating their measure of God's judgment would require six survey items that ask the respondent about God's anger about sin and propensity towards judgment. Replicating their measure of God's engagement would require eight additional items that ask the respondent about

God's interest in his/her affairs and distance from the world. Consequently, the use of these measures would require devoting fourteen questions of a survey to images of God or purchasing this number of items on an existing survey—an expensive proposition.

Of course, modern, web-based surveys are less expensive to field than more traditional methods (Baker, Hill, and Porter 2017). Further, the number of questions required to discern images of God will obviously vary by the personality traits of interest and factor analyses might allow scholars to reduce the questions to a smaller number. Therefore, there are means by which the monetary costs of fielding image of God measures might be reduced. But there are other costs to consider.

First, the larger the number of items used to create an index or scale, the greater the likelihood that an individual will have missed or skipped one of those items. In such cases the entire index is either missing data for the respondent or the researcher can use mean substitution or some other technique to preserve cases. If individuals have missing data on more than one question, however, or if there are systematic patterns in these missing data, this could bias results. More problematic for image of God questions are skip patterns. Answering a question about God's perceived disposition assumes that the respondent believes in God in the first place.<sup>1</sup> In waves 2 and 3 of the Baylor Religion Survey, for example, any respondent who does not believe in God is asked to skip follow-up questions about God's perceived disposition. Therefore, using an image of God index with Baylor Religion Survey data will *itself* reduce the sample size by approximately thirteen to twenty percent, depending upon the survey wave used and exact measures of God included. Further, utilizing image of God measures with waves 2 and

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, one can have ideas about God without believing, such as imagining God as a bearded old man simply because he/she has seen that image frequently.

3 removes all of those who do not believe in God from the analysis. Put simply, using images of God will, with certain datasets, result in models that are confined to more religious people.

## ***Why Satan?***

### *Theory and Research*

There is a well-established literature concerning the historical development of Satan within Christianity (Cohn 1975; Russell 1984; 1987; 1989; 1990; Messadie 1996; Pagels 1991).<sup>2</sup> There have also been sociological attempts to examine the nature and consequences of evil within more contemporary contexts (Alexander 2001; Douglas 1970; Lemert 1997; Wieviorka 2012; Wolff 1969). What all these approaches have in common is the recognition of the absolute interdependence between what is perceived to be good, and what is perceived to be evil. Pagels (1991), for example, demonstrates that the development of Satan in the New Testament is bound up within the changing moral politics of dissenting Jewish sects, and Cohn (1975) shows how various groups and communities have used notions of evil to advance their own interests in medieval contexts and beyond. On the other hand, Wolff (1969) contemplates how a ‘sociology of evil’ might be used to alleviate alienation in contemporary society, with Lemert (1997) similarly suggesting that the trouble with evil is that it is not independent of social structure and moral order. Alexander (2001) also makes the important observation that evil is the pursuit of something that is in opposition to what is perceived to be good, it is not merely an absence of

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<sup>2</sup> Satan is the Anglicization of the Hebrew common noun שָׂטָן and is a derivation of the root STN (šāṭān). It is generally taken to mean opposer, or adversary (Russell, 1990). The devil, on the other hand, is the Anglicized version of the Late Latin word taken from the Ecclesiastical Greek diabolos - which means accuser, or slanderer. In the Septuagint, Satan was usually translated as diabolos, a practice that continued in the various versions of the bible that followed the Vulgate. While there is general agreement that Satan is not used as a proper name in the original Hebrew texts of the Old Testament (Pagels, 1991), modern discourse tends to treat Satan and the devil interchangeably.



that good. This means that narratives of evil are inscribed with very particular moralities, none of which are inevitable.

To these ends, Douglas (1970) argues that evil can only be understood in relation to what is understood to be good - and, unlike Alexander, he remains conceptually free of any imposition of what a civil society *should* look like, concentrating instead on the meanings that are encoded within the fabric of everyday moral communications. For Douglas (1970:4) the meaning of good and evil is always dependent on the tacit understanding of its opposite: “the more intense the belief in good, or the striving for it, the more intense the belief in evil, or the attacks on good. An age of saints, then, will necessarily be an age of satans or demons, and vice versa.” Although social designations between degrees of good and evil can be made, behind these labels are categorical distinctions between fundamental absolutes. These distinctions are not, and cannot be, linear approximations of the “better or worse” variety because that is not how they are understood within the context of everyday life: “good necessarily implies a categorical contrast; if there is a good type there must be an evil type” (Douglas 1970:5).

This is because behavior deemed to be moral is equal to behavior that is perceived to be normal - and what is normal is analogous with the “of course” environment of nonreflective everyday life. But someone can only be considered moral, and therefore respectable, if there are others, not identified with the self or others who are considered immoral. Indeed, where there are perceived to be extreme deviations from an ideal, the label of evil is particularly likely to be prescient. Not only does it separate the moral from the immoral, it also condemns absolutely. Evil might be a social construction that is positioned within particular moralities and contexts (Lemert, 1997), but it’s often severe consequences actually serve to reinforce the taken-for-

granted nature of those moralities (see also Alexander 2001). Therefore, the contrast of evil is as important as the content of what is understood to be good.

Therefore, if we want to know how religious beliefs inform notions of right and wrong, then making an assessment concerning belief in Satan may provide a more complete explanation of moral beliefs than merely examining aspects of religiosity or conceptions of God in isolation. Given the totalizing nature of the label of evil generally, belief in the devil is a totem around which conceptions of God and religiosity can coalesce. That is to say that regardless of which versions of God someone believes in, it would be prescient to take an efficacious measurement of the opposing belief which all those positions are likely to have in common.

Indeed, empirical research on “spiritual appraisals” (sanctification, demonization, desecration) may help to explain why believing in Satan should be related to beliefs about the wrongfulness of certain behaviors (Krumrei, Mahoney, and Pargament 2011; Warner, Mahoney, and Krumrei 2009; Wong et al. 2019). People who believe in Satan would be more likely to “demonize” behaviors, such as abortion, divorce, cohabitation, premarital sex, having an affair, homosexuality, substance use, pornography, and physician assisted suicide, all of which we include in our study. Demonization is when people believe demonic forces (including the devil) influence some phenomenon directly or indirectly (Krumrei, Mahoney, and Pargament 2011:90). Once demonized, people view “individuals, groups, or events in a harsh light, appraise them in absolute terms, and consider them to be aligned with evil” (Krumrei, Mahoney, and Pargament 2011:91). Demonization is one way that people cope with things they find threatening. “Reframing a negative event as the work of Satan allows a person to make sense of suffering by attributing it to an evil force while holding on to beliefs in a just world or a benevolent God” (Krumrei, Mahoney, and Pargament 2011:91). If people find certain behaviors to be threatening

to their cherished values (e.g., abortion, divorce, homosexuality), then believing in Satan may lead them to condemn those behaviors even more strongly.

In addition to demonization, another type of spiritual appraisal, desecration, may also help to explain why belief in Satan should be related to moral beliefs. Sanctification refers to “imbu[ing] of persons, objects, or events with sacred qualities or viewing them as manifestations of a higher power” (Wong et al 2019:226). Desecration occurs when people believe that something that is sacred (or sanctified) has been violated (Wong et al. 2019:227). If, for example, people view marriage as something sacred, then divorce may be considered a desecration of marriage. Compared to people who do not believe in Satan, people who believe in Satan should be more likely to view divorce as a desecration of marriage (a violation of something sacred) and to condemn divorce as being wrong. The same argument could be applied to moral beliefs about other behaviors, such as abortion (children are sacred) or alcohol and marijuana use (the body is a temple), which may be considered a desecration of things thought to be sacred.

In addition to previous research on spiritual appraisals, similar research on “religious attributions” (events are caused by supernatural forces, such as God or Satan) suggests that believing in Satan should be related to many moral beliefs. Lupfer, Tolliver, and Jackson (1996) found that life altering events with positive consequences are often attributed to God, whereas life altering events with negative consequences, such as the moral beliefs we study here (e.g., divorce, having an affair), are attributed to Satan. If life altering events with negative consequences are attributed to Satan, then perhaps less consequential behaviors that are often condemned by religious groups, such as alcohol and marijuana use, pornography, premarital sex, cohabitation, and birth control, may also be attributed to Satan. If so, then believing in Satan

may have a stronger effect on moral beliefs, many of which refer to behaviors with perceived negative consequences, than believing in God.

An increasing body of research has found that beliefs about Satan are predictive of a variety of religious and non-religious behaviors and attitudes. Swatos (1988) and Wilcox, Linzey, and Jelen (1991) found beliefs in and about Satan were strongly associated with engaging in political activism. Martinez (2013) found that belief in the existence of evil forces was strongly associated with religious commitment. Wilson and colleagues reported significant correlations between belief in an active Satan and negative attitudes about sexual and ethnic minorities (Wilson and Huff 2001) and right-wing authoritarianism (Wilson, Accord, and Bernas 2007). More recent work indicates a relationship between belief in religious evil and punitive attitudes. Those who believe in religious evil are more likely to use corporal punishment on their children (Martinez et al. 2018) and support the harsher punishment of criminals (Baker and Booth 2016; Baker, Canarte, and Day 2018). Parents who believe in hell are also more likely to prioritize obedience in their children over independence (Jung 2020b). In another recent study, Baker, Molle, and Bader (2020) reported a strong relationship between beliefs about supernatural evil and attitudes about abortion, same-sex relations, pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex, pornography, and cohabitation. Ellison et al. (2021) found that people who believe in supernatural evil are significantly more likely to support policies that do not restrict access to guns. Several studies have found belief in evil is associated with mental well-being. According to Jung (2020a), people who believe in supernatural evil experience more general anxiety and paranoia. People who believe in demons have poorer mental health (Nie and Olson 2016). DeAngelis et al. (2021) found that reading scripture reduces the relationship between life events

and distress among people who do not believe the world is evil, but reading scripture increases the relationship between life events and distress among people who do believe the world is evil.

Given a relatively long-standing theoretical rationale that points toward the absolute interdependence of good and evil (see also Baker and Booth, 2016), perhaps it is a little surprising that few studies have tested for an interaction effect between the two. However, Baker, Molle, and Bader (2020), note that a multiplicative interaction term between beliefs about religious evil and levels of religious service attendance was significant when assessing the immorality of abortion. Those with a strong belief in religious evil scored twice as high compared to regular attenders who did not believe in supernatural evil. Jung (2020) also reports evidence to suggest that secure attachment to God attenuates the otherwise positive relationships between belief in supernatural evil and general mental health problems and general anxiety - but only for women. Baker and Booth (2016) have also found that the highest levels of support for the death penalty occur among those with high levels of belief in religious evil, but relatively low levels of religious practice.

### *Methodological Advantages*

While research on belief in Satan is limited, both the theoretical work on evil generally and the empirical results specifically, suggest that the influence of believing in Satan warrants further exploration – particularly in respect to any relationship it might have with what is perceived to be good. Belief in Satan should be a simpler concept to utilize than images of God. As Baker, Molle, and Bader (2020:149) note "[w]ith the rare exceptions of certain, small Satanic groups—members of which are unlikely to appear on general population surveys—images of Satan are more uniform." If people believe in Satan, then they believe in a powerful, supernatural force of

evil, and knowing if this force of evil is maternal or paternal, judgmental or not, is of little added benefit. Since this concept does not require follow up questions that assume the respondent believes in the devil, the final sample for analysis can consist of all types of respondents, including those who do not believe in Satan at all.

However, despite the potentially parsimonious nature of belief in Satan as a measure of religion, most of the studies cited above have, in fact, created indexes composed of multiple items about evil. Several studies use three item indices that combine items gauging belief in Satan, demons, and Hell (Martinez 2013, Martinez et. al 2018, Ellison et al 2021). Others, such as Jung (2020a), confine themselves to Satan and demons or a combination of belief in Satan and statements about evil (Baker and Booth 2016). Wilson and Huff (2001) and Wilson, Accord, and Bernas (2007) both utilize a ten-item Belief in an Active Satan Scale (BIASS). This scale includes a question that asks if Satan exists, but combines it with nine other questions about the Satan's activities and influence. Baker, Molle, and Bader (2020) also use a three-item index that combines belief in Satan with belief in Hell and demons.

Similarly, it would be prescient to examine how such a belief in evil interacts with notions of what is perceived to be good. Given the relative ubiquity of religious attendance within religion-based surveys and the literature more generally, it makes practical sense to use this single measure as a corollary of evil. Not only do these two terms represent good and evil, they also serve to highlight the potential confirmatory relationship between ritual and belief. Therefore, this paper will attempt to build upon previous research by examining the extent to which a single survey item that asks respondents if Satan exists predicts a wide variety of moral beliefs, and how such a belief might interact with religious attendance.

## **Methods**

### ***Sample***

This paper utilizes data from the first four waves of the Baylor Religion Survey (2005-2014). The Baylor Religion Survey (BRS) data have been collected every 2-3 years since 2005. While the survey includes demographic questions and rotating content modules on a variety of topics, such as civic engagement and tolerance, its primary focus is to capture data on religious affiliation, beliefs, and related behaviors (Bader, Mencken, and Froese 2007). The Gallup Organization collected the data for the first four waves of the BRS.

For Waves 1-3 (2005; 2007; 2010), Gallup utilized a mixed-mode sampling design. For each wave, Gallup completed 1,000 telephone interviews with potential respondents selected via random digit dialing. Those who agreed to participate during the phone interviews were mailed survey booklets. In addition to random-digit dialing, Gallup also mailed questionnaires to members of Gallup's national RDD database, which consists of households that had been pre-selected. Of the 2,603 surveys mailed out for BRS Wave 1, 1,721 were returned. Wave 2 has 1,648 valid cases out of 2,460 mailed questionnaires. Wave 3 has 1,714 cases from 2,556 mailed questionnaires. Gallup used a different methodology for BRS Wave 4 (2014), which did not include phone interviews. Rather, Gallup mailed out 10,253 survey booklets using an address-based sample purchased from Marketing Systems Group to avoid "evolving coverage problems associated with telephone-based samples" (Froese 2020). A total of 1,514 surveys were returned.

Key to the goals of this paper, the first four waves of the Baylor Religion Survey include 1) an item asking respondents about belief in the Devil/Satan, 2) a wide variety of moral beliefs,

and 3) the items necessary to control for other key measures of religiosity, such as religious affiliation, religious service attendance, biblical literalism, and images of God.

### ***Dependent Variables: Moral Beliefs***

The first four waves of the Baylor Religion Survey include questions about the wrongfulness of different behaviors. Some of the questions were repeated in multiple waves, but others were not. For example, a question about the wrongfulness of getting an abortion when “the pregnancy is the result of rape” was repeated on all four waves of the Baylor Religion Survey, but a question about the wrongfulness of getting an abortion when “the baby may have a serious defect” was only included in the first wave of the survey. For the analysis we either: 1) used the most recent wave of the Baylor Religion Survey that included a particular question (e.g., premarital sex was included in both wave 1 and wave 4, so we used wave 4) or 2) used the wave that included the most questions related to a particular issue that could be used to create an index (e.g., wave 1 included five items related to abortion, whereas no other wave had more than two questions about abortion, so we used the wave 1 questions to create a five-item abortion index).

We included twelve dependent variables that assess the wrongfulness of different behaviors. The response format for all the survey questions was the same: 1 = “not wrong at all,” 2 = “only wrong sometimes,” 3 = “almost always wrong,” and 4 = “always wrong.” The first dependent variable combined five questions about the wrongfulness of abortion under different circumstances: “the baby may have a serious defect” (wave 1), “the woman’s health is in danger” (wave 1), “the pregnancy is the result of rape” (wave 1), “the family cannot afford the child” (wave 1), and “the woman does not want the child” (wave 1). The next dependent variable combined two questions about divorce: “divorce if children are present” (wave 2) and



“divorce if the couple does not have children” (wave 2). We included a question about cohabitation or “living with a partner before marriage” (wave 1) and having sex “with someone other than the marriage partner” (wave 1). We combined three questions related to homosexuality that ask about the wrongfulness of “sexual relations between two adults of the same sex” (wave 1), “adoption of children by homosexual couples” (wave 1), and “gay marriage” (wave 1). We also included three questions about sexual relations and pregnancy that asked about the morality of “premarital sex” (wave 4), “having a planned pregnancy outside of marriage” (wave 1), and “birth control” (wave 4). We combined two questions about the morality of substance use: “the consumption of alcohol” (wave 1) and “the use of marijuana” (wave 1). Finally, respondents were asked about the wrongfulness of “the viewing of pornography” (wave 1), “physician-assisted suicide” (wave 2), and “embryonic stem cell research” (wave 3).

### ***Independent Variable: Belief in Satan***

The main independent variable is based on a question about belief in Satan. The same question was repeated on the first four waves of the Baylor Religion Survey. Respondents were asked “In your opinion, does each of the following exist?” with one of the items being “Satan.” The response format for the question was coded 0 = “absolutely not,” 1 = “probably not,” 2 = “probably,” and 3 = “absolutely.”

### ***Control Variables***

We included a series of control variables, including sex (0 = female, 1 = male), race (0 = nonwhite, 1 = white, non-Hispanic), and age (measured in years). Income was measured on a

seven-point scale ranging from 1 = \$10,000 or less to 7 = more than \$150,000. Education was also measured on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 = 8<sup>th</sup> grade or less to 7 = postgraduate degree. Marital status was coded as 0 = not married and 1 = married. Political ideology was measured using a question related to political party. Responses ranged from 1 = “strong Democrat” to 7 = “strong Republican” (the middle category was 4 = “independent”).

In addition to basic demographics, we also controlled for the effects of other religion variables. Religious tradition was coded based on the RELTRAD scheme for classifying religious groups, first developed by Steensland et al. (2000) and later modified by Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson (2007). Respondents were separated into seven religious traditions based on their denominational history and theology: evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, black Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, other religion, and no religion. We used evangelical Protestant as the contrast category.

To measure religious service attendance, we included the item: “How often do you attend religious services at a church, mosque, synagogue, or other place of worship?” Responses ranged on a nine-point scale from 1 = “never” to 9 = “several times a week.” We also controlled for biblical literalism using an item that asks respondents to choose the statement that “comes closest to your personal beliefs about the Bible?” from the following: 4 = “the Bible means exactly what it says. It should be taken literally, word-for-word, on all subjects,” 3 = “The Bible is perfectly true, but it should not be taken literally, word-for-word, we must interpret its meaning,” 2 = “The Bible contains some human error,” and 1 = “The Bible is an ancient book of history and legends.” Finally, we included two indexes that reflect God’s engagement in the world and God’s judgement of human beings. God’s engagement was measured by combining eight items. For the first six items, respondents were asked on a five-point scale how much they

agreed or disagreed that God is “removed from my personal affairs,” “removed from worldly affairs,” “concerned with my personal well-being,” “concerned with the well-being of the world,” “directly involved in my affairs,” and “directly involved in worldly affairs.” The final two items used to create the index asked respondents how well (1 = “not at all well” to 5 = “very well”) God is described by the adjectives “distant” and “ever-present.” God’s judgment was measured by combining six items. For the first two items, respondents were asked on a five-point scale how much they agreed or disagreed that God is “angered by my sins” and “angered by human sins.” The other four items used to create the index asked respondents how well God is described by the adjectives “critical,” “punishing,” “severe,” and “wrathful.”

## **Results**

The results for the analysis of moral beliefs about abortion are depicted in the first column of Table 1. For the sake of brevity, we focus our discussion on the primary religion variables, religious service attendance, biblical literalism, engaged God, judgmental God, and belief in Satan. We report standardized regression coefficients so we can determine which of our key independent variables have a greater effect on moral beliefs. The results suggest that attendance at religious services, belief in a literal interpretation of the bible, engaged God, judgmental God, and belief in Satan are all significantly related to beliefs about the wrongfulness of abortion. People who attend religious services more frequently, and people who believe in a literal interpretation of the bible, are more likely to believe that abortion is wrong. Respondents who believe that God is engaged in the world and God is judgmental are also more likely to believe that abortion is wrong. Finally, the more strongly people believe in the existence of Satan the more likely they are to believe that abortion is wrong. Based on standardized coefficients,

religious service attendance is the strongest predictor for the wrongfulness of abortion (belief in Satan is the fifth strongest predictor, following religious service attendance, biblical literalism, political affiliation, and engaged God).

The three remaining columns in Table 1 depict the results for the analysis of three behaviors related to marriage and family. Similar to the results for abortion, attendance at religious services, belief in a literal interpretation of the bible, and belief in an engaged God are all significantly related to moral beliefs about the wrongfulness of divorce, cohabitation, and having an affair. People who attend religious services more frequently, those with a literal interpretation of the bible, and people who believe that God is involved in worldly affairs are more likely to believe that divorce, cohabitation, and having an affair are wrong. In contrast, belief in a judgmental God and belief in Satan are only significantly related to the belief that having an affair is wrong, but not significantly related to believing that divorce and cohabitation are wrong. Individuals who believe in a judgmental God and Satan are more likely to believe that having an affair is wrong. Based on standardized regression coefficients, religious service attendance is the strongest predictor that cohabitation is wrong, whereas biblical literalism is the strongest predictor that divorce and having an affair are wrong.

The results for the analysis of moral beliefs about homosexuality, premarital sex, pregnancy, and birth control are displayed in Table 2. Once again, religious service attendance is significantly related to all four moral beliefs. People who attend religious services frequently are more likely to believe that homosexuality, premarital sex, pregnancy outside of marriage, and using birth control are wrong. Individuals who believe in a literal interpretation of the bible are also more likely to believe that homosexuality, premarital sex, pregnancy outside of marriage, and birth control are wrong. People who believe that God is engaged in worldly affairs are more

likely to believe that premarital sex and pregnancy outside of marriage are wrong, whereas individuals who believe that God is judgmental are more likely to believe that homosexuality, premarital sex, pregnancy outside of marriage, and birth control are wrong. Finally, belief in Satan is significantly related to moral beliefs about homosexuality, premarital sex, and pregnancy outside of marriage, but not birth control. People who believe strongly in the existence of Satan are more likely to believe that homosexuality, premarital sex, and pregnancy outside of marriage are wrong. Based on standardized regression coefficients, religious service attendance is the strongest predictor of moral beliefs about premarital sex, pregnancy outside of marriage, and birth control, whereas biblical literalism is the strongest predictor of moral beliefs about homosexuality.

Table 3 summarizes the results for moral beliefs about substance use, pornography, physician assisted suicide, and stem cell research. The results suggest that attendance at religious services is significantly related to moral beliefs about substance use, pornography, physician assisted suicide, and stem cell research, while belief in a literal interpretation of the bible is significantly related to moral beliefs about substance use, pornography, and physician assisted suicide, but not stem cell research. Respondents who attend religious services frequently are more likely to believe that substance use, pornography, physician assisted suicide, and stem cell research are wrong. Individuals who believe in a literal interpretation of the bible are also more likely to believe that substance use, pornography, and physician assisted suicide are wrong, but not stem cell research. People who believe that God is engaged in worldly affairs are significantly more likely to believe that pornography, physician assisted suicide, and stem cell research are wrong, whereas people who believe in a judgmental God are only significantly more likely to believe that substance use is wrong. Finally, belief in Satan is only significantly

related to moral beliefs about stem cell research, but not substance use, pornography, or physician assisted suicide. Individuals who believe in Satan are more likely to believe that stem cell research is wrong. Based on standardized regression coefficients, religious service attendance is the strongest predictor for moral beliefs about substance use and pornography, biblical literalism is the strongest predictor for moral beliefs about physician assisted suicide, and political affiliation is the strongest predictor for moral beliefs about stem cell research.

In summary, religious service attendance is the most consistent predictor of moral beliefs (all twelve dependent variables) and usually the strongest predictor (seven of the twelve models). Biblical literalism was significantly related to eleven of the twelve moral beliefs (all but stem cell research) and was always one of the strongest predictors of moral beliefs (always in the top three). Belief in an engaged God was significantly related to nine of the twelve moral beliefs and belief in a judgmental God was significantly related to seven of the twelve moral beliefs. Finally, belief in Satan was significantly related to six of the twelve moral beliefs. When belief in Satan is significantly related to a moral belief, it tends to be one of the five strongest predictors of that moral belief.

In addition to examining the relationship between belief in Satan and moral beliefs, based on previous research, we also theorized that the relationship between religious service attendance and moral beliefs would vary according to how strongly people believe in the existence of Satan. Table 4 depicts the results for the interaction effects between religious service attendance and belief in Satan. The interaction effect between religious service attendance and belief in Satan is significant for ten of the twelve moral beliefs (all but having an affair and divorce). Figure 1 provides a visual depiction of the interaction between religious service attendance and belief in Satan. When people do not believe in Satan (absolutely not), an increase in religious service

attendance is not associated with a greater belief that abortion is wrong. As belief in Satan increases (from probably not to probably to absolutely), religious service attendance is more strongly related to the belief that abortion is wrong. Visual inspection of the other significant interaction effects (not shown) shows a similar pattern. In all cases, an increase in religious service attendance is not related (or only weakly related) to moral beliefs when people do not also believe in Satan. In contrast, when people believe in Satan, an increase in religious service attendance is more strongly related to the belief that behaviors are wrong.

### ***Supplementary Analysis***

#### *What about Other Forms of Religious Evil?*

Previous research on religious evil (Ellison et al. 2021; Jung 2020; Martinez 2013; Martinez et al. 2018), much of it utilizing the Baylor Religion Surveys, has generally used an “evil index” that combines belief in Satan with belief in hell and demons. We replicated the analysis using a three-item evil index instead of the single item about belief in Satan. Compared to belief in Satan, the effect size for the evil index is usually a little stronger (it is not surprising that a three-item index would have a stronger effect than a single item). Whereas belief in Satan was significantly related to six of the twelve dependent variables, the evil index was significantly related to eight of the twelve moral beliefs (the same six for belief in Satan, plus cohabitation and pornography). Using an evil index, instead of belief in Satan, did not dramatically improve the adjusted R-square for the models (the biggest change was 2.7% for having an affair, but for eleven of the twelve models the adjusted R-square increased less than 1%). Therefore, the single item measuring belief in Satan performed almost as well as the three-item evil index.

## **Discussion**

Previous research suggests that religion, especially religious service attendance, biblical literalism, and beliefs about God, are related to moral beliefs (Baker et al. 2020; Froese and Bader 2010). Based on previous research on spiritual appraisals and religious attributions, we argue that belief in Satan should also be related to moral beliefs. Compared to people who do not believe in Satan, or people who are less certain of Satan's existence, people who believe in Satan should be more likely to demonize a variety of behaviors, consider certain actions to be a desecration of the sacred, and/or attribute events/behaviors with negative consequences to Satan. When people believe that events/behaviors are influenced by Satan, they tend to view those events/behaviors in absolute terms (there is no "gray area"), which suggests that people who believe in Satan will more strongly condemn those behaviors as wrong. Furthermore, people are likely to have a strong emotional response if they believe that Satan is responsible for certain behaviors, and those strong emotions may contribute to the belief that those behaviors are wrong and people engaging in those behaviors should be condemned and sanctioned.

Our results suggest that religious service attendance is significantly related to every moral belief and, based on standardized regression coefficients, usually the strongest predictor of a moral belief. Biblical literalism is significantly related to every moral belief except stem cell research. Based on standardized regression coefficients, the effect of biblical literalism on moral beliefs is often one of the strongest predictors of a moral belief (usually one of the three strongest predictors). Despite the strong, consistent effects of religious service attendance and biblical literalism on moral beliefs, belief in Satan is significantly related to six of the twelve moral beliefs. When belief in Satan is significantly related to a moral belief, it is one of the five strongest predictors. In summary, consistent with our argument, believing in Satan predicts



many moral beliefs, even controlling for religious service attendance, biblical literalism, and images of God.

In addition to having a significant effect on six of the twelve moral beliefs that we examined, the interaction effect between religious service attendance and belief in Satan was significant for ten of the twelve moral beliefs. Visual inspection of the interaction effects suggests that an increase in religious service attendance has little or no effect on moral beliefs when people do not also believe in Satan. In other words, religious rituals (attendance) that are not accompanied by strong beliefs, in this case a belief in Satan, are not strongly related to moral beliefs. Of course, the interaction effect can also be interpreted to mean that belief in Satan has little or no effect on moral beliefs when people are not part of a religious community (low religious service attendance). In other words, religious beliefs (belief in Satan) that are shared and reinforced by participation in a religious community (high religious service attendance) may have a stronger effect on moral beliefs.

This paper has provided evidence that belief in the existence of Satan is a significant predictor of moral beliefs, even when controlling for other key religion measures. Belief in Satan provides a window into the individual's views of supernatural powers and agencies but can do so in a parsimonious manner that does not require a host of follow up questions or clarifications to become useful. What remains to be seen is if beliefs in Satan influence behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs beyond morality and punitive attitudes. It is our hope that future surveys will measure belief in Satan/the devil and that future research will explore the breadth of Satan's power.

**Disclosure statement**

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TABLE 1: OLS Regression of Moral Beliefs about Abortion, Divorce, Cohabitation, and Homosexuality on Satan and Other Religion Measures (Standardized Coefficients)

	<b>Abortion (Wave 1)</b>	<b>Divorce (Wave 2)</b>	<b>Cohabitation (Wave 1)</b>	<b>Affair (Wave 1)</b>
Sex (Male = 1)	-.018	.076**	-.053*	-.117**
Race (White = 1)	.021	-.013	.008	-.038
Age	-.046*	.000	.108)**	-.022
Income	-.061*	-.073*	.013	-.035
Education	-.022	.028	.090	-.057
Married	.011	.027	.023	.048
Political Affiliation	.186**	.116**	.130**	.002
Mainline Protestant	-.151**	-.165**	-.164**	.007
Black Protestant	.007	-.044	.019	-.037
Catholic	.032	-.032	-.184**	-.009
Jewish	-.059**	-.057*	-.034	.037
Other Religion	-.020	-.066*	.021	-.001
No Religion	.037	-.015	.027	-.032
Church Attendance	.227**	.133**	.363**	.103**
Biblical Literalism	.217**	.272**	.193**	.137**
Engaged God	.176**	.148**	.076*	.099*
Judgmental God	.058*	.014	.110	.071*
Satan	.100**	.013	.059	.093*
<i>Adjusted R-Square</i>	.563	.338	.534	.218
<i>N</i>	1149	1152	1174	1174

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

TABLE 2: OLS Regression of Moral Beliefs about Premarital Sex, Having an Affair, Pregnancy Outside Marriage, and Birth Control on Satan and Other Religion Measures (Standardized Coefficients)

	Homosexuality (Wave 1)	Premarital Sex (Wave 4)	Pregnancy (Wave 1)	Birth Control (Wave 4)
Sex (Male = 1)	.094**	-.064*	.038	.118**
Race (White = 1)	-.041	.044	-.036	-.018
Age	.115**	.110**	.151**	.044
Income	-.063*	-.082**	-.034	-.100*
Education	-.023	.000	.046	-.041
Married	.022	.094**	-.017	-.020
Political Affiliation	.244**	.054	.160**	.087*
Mainline Protestant	-.110**	-.078**	-.059*	.035
Black Protestant	-.005	.020	-.001	-.008
Catholic	-.108**	-.133**	-.064*	.177**
Jewish	-.047*	-.007	.037	.032
Other Religion	-.038	.032	.050*	.091**
No Religion	-.103**	.047	.039	.081
Church Attendance	.105**	.355**	.253**	.205**
Biblical Literalism	.284**	.191**	.198**	.188**
Engaged God	.013	.102**	.082*	-.070
Judgmental God	.078**	.077**	.122**	.139**
Satan	.140**	.106**	.129**	-.041
<i>Adjusted R-Square</i>	.541	.499	.457	.151
<i>N</i>	1154	897	1172	893

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

TABLE 3: OLS Regression of Moral Beliefs about Substance Use, Pornography, Physician Assisted Suicide, and Stem Cell Research on Satan and Other Religion Measures (Standardized Coefficients)

	Substance Use (Wave 1)	Pornography (Wave 1)	Physician Assisted Suicide (Wave 2)	Stem Cell Research (Wave 3)
Sex (Male = 1)	-.065**	-.144**	.010	.031
Race (White = 1)	-.029	-.023	.000	.053
Age	.097**	.240**	-.021	-.022
Income	-.129**	-.026	-.063*	-.047
Education	-.117**	-.035	-.062*	-.047
Married	.041	.028	-.020	.028
Political Affiliation	.121**	.078**	.087**	.273**
Mainline Protestant	-.061*	-.130**	-.105**	-.095**
Black Protestant	.001	-.037	.032	.046
Catholic	-.143	-.167**	-.031	-.040
Jewish	-.039	-.040	-.014	.009
Other Religion	.053*	.005	-.057*	-.009
No Religion	.001	-.047	-.058*	.037
Church Attendance	.259**	.263**	.190**	.217**
Biblical Literalism	.227**	.188**	.294**	-.002
Engaged God	.042	.092**	.101**	.150**
Judgmental God	.090**	.047	.031	.023
Satan	-.053	.051	.030	.151**
<i>Adjusted R-Square</i>	.396	.487	.403	.349
<i>N</i>	1174	1172	1144	1042

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

TABLE 4: Interaction Effects for Religious Service Attendance and Belief in Satan

	<b>Abortion (Wave 1)</b>	<b>Divorce (Wave 2)</b>	<b>Cohabitation (Wave 1)</b>	<b>Affair (Wave 1)</b>	<b>Homosexuality (Wave 1)</b>	<b>Premarital Sex (Wave 4)</b>
Church Attendance	-.091 (.181)	-.009 (.083)	-.105 (.044)*	.008 (.036)	-.196 (.134)	-.046 (.041)
Satan	-.017 (.246)	-.056 (.104)	-.205 (.059)**	.051 (.049)	.172 (.182)	-.082 (.063)
Interaction	.143 (.049)**	.032 (.023)	.074 (.012)**	.006 (.010)	.094 (.036)*	.079 (.015)**
	<b>Pregnancy (Wave 1)</b>	<b>Birth Control (Wave 4)</b>	<b>Substance Use (Wave 1)</b>	<b>Pornography (Wave 1)</b>	<b>Assisted Suicide (Wave 2)</b>	<b>Stem Cell Research (Wave 3)</b>
Church Attendance	-.076 (.049)	-.007 (.033)	-.015 (.070)	-.022 (.044)	-.067 (.044)	-.060 (.049)
Satan	-.037 (.067)	-.101 (.050)*	-.270 (.095)**	-.077 (.059)	-.078 (.055)	.052 (.060)
Interaction	.054 (.013)**	.024 (.012)*	.048 (.019)**	.036 (.012)**	.043 (.012)**	.043 (.014)*

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

