Interdisciplinary Journal of

Research on Religion

Providentiality:

A New Measure of Religious Belief

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Abstract

Research indicates that religious beliefs can have a major impact on human behavior. Despite the explanatory value of religious beliefs, they are not rigorously studied as often as they could be, because such beliefs tend to be complex, denomination-specific, and difficult to measure. Might non-denomination-specific religious beliefs help inform our understanding of religion's influence on decision-making? Providentiality—or the belief that God has a plan that humans can help bring about—is potentially such a belief. Orthogonal to religious tradition, providentiality can inform and motivate a variety of behaviors that are of interest to scholars—from the choice to marry to the choice to vote. Data from four different sources—two nationally representative surveys, one large online survey through Amazon's Mechanical Turk, and one survey of church-attenders in Little Rock—are presented and analyzed to establish a method for validly measuring providentiality and to provide insight into its potential impact. OLS regression models and correlations present a picture of providential religious believers and their demographic, political, and religious characteristics. The results indicate that providential religious beliefs are found across religious traditions and political divisions. Better understanding individual belief motivation through mechanisms like providentiality can provide additional insight into how religion drives human behavior.

Scholars of religion and human behavior know that religious beliefs are important. The academic literature indicates that religious beliefs influence a variety of behaviors from vote choice (Layman 1997; Knuckey 2007) to marriage choice (Sigalow, Shain, and Bergey 2012), from how to manage household finances (Renneboog and Spaenjers 2012) to how to run a corporation (Hilary and Hui 2009). Yet most of what we know about religious beliefs comes from narrow, denomination-specific research. Religious beliefs can be complex and esoteric. Are there broad religious beliefs—ones that reach beyond specific denominations—that can further our understanding of human behavior? Providentiality—or the belief that God has a plan that humans can help bring about—is potentially such a belief. Data and research presented here support the idea that providential religious beliefs are one mechanism through which religion influences behavior.

THE EXPLANATORY VALUE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

In their quest to understand human behavior better, scientific scholars of religion have often focused their attention on three aspects of religion: belonging, behavior, and belief (Leege and Kellstedt 1993). Investigations of belonging, or religious affiliation, have revealed important and consistent denominational differences. For instance, evangelicals are more likely to discriminate (Tranby and Hartmann 2008), Mormons are more likely to volunteer (Curtis, Cnaan, and Evans 2014), and Catholics are more likely to hold pro-life attitudes toward abortion (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1993). Similarly, research on religious practices—like frequency of prayer and church attendance—also reveals insights into patterns of behavior and attitudes. For instance, religious participation positively influences charitable giving (Vaidyanathan, Hill, and Smith 2011), mosque attendance positively influences political participation among American Muslims (Jamal 2005), and religious activity may even improve health outcomes (Çoruh et al. 2005). Yet research has also found that religious belonging or behavior may often be simply intervening variables without independent explanatory power, but instead measures that convey political views, party affiliation, or other characteristics (Page and Bouton 2006).

Scholars are increasingly finding that religious belief measures are highly predictive and often more theoretically satisfying than religious belonging or behavior measures alone (Bader and Froese 2005; Finke and Adamczyk 2008; Friesen and Wagner 2012; Guth et al. 2006). For instance, including belief measures in statistical models can greatly reduce, and in some cases even eliminate, the effects of affiliation (Guth 2009; Jelen 1994). Similarly, Mockabee, Wald, and Leege (2011: 295) find that communitarian religious beliefs based in social and community-based religious relationships are "relevant in ways distinct

from the effects of individual piety." Studying belief is also valuable because people do not always stay in neat affiliation categories. For instance, evangelically-oriented Catholics inhabit multiple religious contexts and traditions (Welch and Leege 1991). Similarly, religious believers in Taiwan can be Christian, Buddhist, Taoist, hold folk religious beliefs, and participate in ancestor worship all at the same time (Gries, Su, and Schak 2012).

Faced with complexities in both belief and affiliation, some scholars continue to refine affiliation measures (e.g., Dougherty, Johnson, and Edward 2007), sometimes using increasingly narrow and specific religious behaviors and beliefs to sort believers into increasingly narrow and specific religious affiliations. But, particularly given a religious landscape where fewer people identify with specific denominations and more fall into the category of "nones" (Funk and Smith 2012; Kellstedt et al. 1996), religious beliefs may be more informative and more stable than affiliation.

Theoretically, belief gets at something deeper than belonging or behavior can measure—the heart of religion at an individual level, where it is most likely to influence behavior (Guth 2009). Understanding religious beliefs gives us a better theoretical think between religion and political and social concepts of interest, like support for civil liberties or capital punishment. Indeed, Bader et al. (2010) find that people who believe in a God who is angry and judgmental are significantly more likely to hold punitive attitudes regarding criminal punishment. Similarly, Froese, Bader, and Smith (2008) find that belief in a wrathful God who punishes sinners is predictive of political intolerance.

Although shared religious beliefs within congregations help build important social connections and a sense of belonging (Stroope 2011), it is naïve to think that each church attender at any given service holds the same religious beliefs as the next person in the pew. Congregations we might assume are homogenous in terms of religious beliefs may turn out to surprise us (Dougherty et al. 2009). Different congregants, even within the same congregation, internalize and interpret religious teachings differently from one another (Broughton 1978). Individual belief differences influence how clergy messages are perceived (Glazier 2015) and what religious components are prioritized (McGuire 2008; Putnam and Campbell 2012). Variance in congregation-level biblical interpretations, for instance, can lead to different outcomes (Djupe and Hunt 2009). Affiliation is not a reliable proxy for belief; religious behavior is not much better. It is not necessarily the frequency of attending and praying but "the content of what people believe and internalize before, during, and after attending and praying" that matters (Escher, 2013: 115).

Despite the potential explanatory power of religious beliefs, identifying and measuring them can be a challenge, especially for survey researchers working within strict limits of space and time. Many religious belief batteries are too

narrowly focused on denomination to be broadly applicable. Researchers have tended to focus on Christian religious traditions (Cadge, Levitt, and Smilde 2011; Gries, Su, and Schak 2012) and, within Christianity, on evangelicals. Thus, for many survey measures, "what counts as a 'good' or 'faithful' Catholic, Episcopalian, African American Christian, Jew, etc. is measured by criteria appropriate for a 'good' evangelical Protestant " (Mockabee, Wald, and Leege, 2011: 278). This historical focus means many current belief measures are denomination-specific and intended more accurately to identify evangelicals. Take, for instance, research on the relatively narrow issue of biblical literalism/inerrancy (Barker, Hurwitz, and Nelson 2008; Dixon, Jones, and Lowery 1992; Jelen, Wilcox, and Smidt 1990) or the scholarly controversies over how exactly to ask people whether they are born-again Christians (Dixon, Levy, and Lowery 1988; Schumm and Silliman 1990) or how precisely to ascertain their views on evolution (Colburn and Henriques 2006). This research has been immensely informative of our understanding of conservative Christians, but there is no denying that these belief measures are often quite narrow, applying to only a small part of the religious population.

Some scholars have examined broad explanatory divisions, like Layman's "great divide" between orthodox and progressive religions (Layman 2001; Smidt et al. 2010), which can help researchers see how similar belief dynamics play out across religious traditions. Determining whether a believer is orthodox or progressive often takes a number of specific doctrinal questions (Batson 1976), which must be adapted to fit each religious tradition (see, for instance, Ji and Ibrahim's [2007] Islamic doctrinal orthodoxy scale). Additionally, these measures tell us little about *how* religious beliefs influence individual decisions (Friesen and Wagner 2012).

One example of religious beliefs with informative and predictive power is research by Froese and Bader (2010), which demonstrates that how people think about God—specifically regarding God's judgment and God's engagement—influences a variety of social, moral, political, and even scientific attitudes. Froese and Bader, however, are only able to establish these relationships through an extensive, 15-question battery about an individual's perception of God. This level of detail and amount of survey space is rarely available to researchers outside of the field of religion.

Thus, religious beliefs are theoretically useful because they may hold more explanatory power than other religious measures, they expand our understanding of religion's influence beyond narrow denominational categories, and they help to identify commonalities across religious traditions. But religious beliefs are also often nebulous, complex, and difficult to measure. Is it possible to retain the explanatory power of beliefs without the specificity and complexity associated with denomination-specific doctrinal details or other, highly nuanced, beliefs?

Achieving this balance is a challenge for researchers. Speaking of religion and politics research, Jelen (1998: 127) argues, "If a religious variable of any type is to have a significant net effect on any important aspect of American politics, that variable must describe a large number of people and, therefore, is likely to be quite simple." Are there simple, measurable beliefs that both transcend affiliation boundaries and significantly influence behavior? Providentiality is one possible belief that fits these criteria.

PROVIDENTIAL RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

In 1995 the Prime Minister of Israel Yitzhak Rabin negotiated the Oslo Peace Accords with the Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat. On November 4th of that year, Rabin was speaking at a peace rally when Yigal Amir, a college student and Israeli army veteran, assassinated him (Juergensmeyer 2003). Immediately afterward, Amir was quoted as saying that he had "no regrets" and acted "on orders from God" (Greenberg 1995). Amir and other prominent religious and political figures like Yoel Lerner believed the transfer of land in the Oslo Accords ran contrary to God's will—and they believed that violence was justified in trying to stop it (Juergensmeyer 2003; Sprinzak 2000).

In 1856 a fifteen-year-old girl named Nongqawuse from a Xhosa village in South Africa had visions of the tribe's ancestors (Peires 1989). She eventually convinced the king that all of the Xhosa's cattle had to be killed and the Xhosa's possessions destroyed so the ancestors could save them from the oppression and contamination of the British. Following this religious admonition, the king ordered everyone to destroy their cattle and contaminated possessions to bring about the will of the ancestors. This religious act had significant consequences for the Xhosa: many starved to death while waiting for the ancestors' millenarian promise to be fulfilled (Wessinger 2000).

In 1992 the Catholic Community of Sant'Egidio, led by founder and peace activist Andrea Riccardi, successfully negotiated an end to civil war in Mozambique (Haynes 2009). Scholars have identified the Community's religious motivation—namely, the sincere desire to do the will of God—as one reason why its peace efforts were successful (Barbato, de Franco, and Le Normand 2012). With no apparent ulterior motive, Sant'Egidio was a peace broker with which combatants were willing to work. Riccardi himself stressed the importance of religion to his role in the peace process, citing specifically a reliance on divine guidance through prayer (Riccardi, Durand, and Ladous 1999).

In all three of these cases, the actors did their best to further what they understood to be divine will. This understanding is the heart of providentiality, a belief that can potentially impact both private and public behaviors. Providentiality has two components. The first is that the adherent believes in a

divinely-authored plan. People who believe in providence believe that they know God's will. Amir believed God's plan was for Israel to retain the land promised to her by God, the Xhosa believed that the ancestors would restore them to prosperity, and Riccardi believed that God wanted peace in Mozambique. Second, and importantly, people who believe in providence believe that they have a role to play in facilitating God's plan. Amir believed God wanted him to protect Israel by assassinating Rabin, the Xhosa believed they had to kill their cattle to facilitate the ancestors' plan, and Riccardi believed that God led him and Sant'Egidio in the Mozambique peace talks.

Importantly, providentiality is different from religiosity. A person who self-identifies as religious or engages in religious behaviors does not necessarily believe he or she is helping to carry out God's will. Members of some religious traditions may believe in the absolute sovereignty of God, meaning that humans have no ability to contribute to bringing about God's will. Even though these people may be very religious, they would not be considered providential believers.

The belief that one can facilitate God's will, together with specific providential content, is more likely to influence behavior than religiosity alone. For instance, research conducted by Fair, Malhotra, and Shapiro (2012) in Pakistan differentiates between those who believe *jihad* is a militarized struggle and those who believe *jihad* is an internal struggle for righteousness. They find that those who believe *jihad* is a militarized struggle are more likely to support terrorism. Importantly, religiosity is not a significant predictor of support for terrorism. The difference that matters is not how religious one is, but how one conceptualizes *jihad,* a religious imperative from God.

For a sincere providential believer, difficult and even extreme actions are justified and sometimes required in the name of carrying out God's will. Osama bin Laden claimed to be acting with Allah's blessing in attacking the United States on 9/11 (Kean 2011); Matt Goldsby and Jimmy Simmons, two convicted abortion clinic bombers, described feeling as though "God was calling them to end abortion" (Blanchard and Prewitt, 1993: 46); Mother Teresa felt called by God to devote her life to serving others (Teresa and Kolodiejchuk 2009). But not all providentially-motivated behaviors are so significant or extreme. God's plan for an individual's life might be more personal in scope: to be a good parent, to serve the community, or to develop greater faith.

What exactly does God's plan entail for any given believer? There are perhaps as many answers to that question as there are providential believers. A believer's sense of God's plan is composed of a diverse collection of specific beliefs, life experiences, and doctrinal content, all of which help the believer make sense of the world (Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi 2014; James 1985 [1902]). Thus, providential religious content about God's plan may include admonitions to help

the poor, to stop abortion, to protect one's country, to spread freedom, to marry within the faith, and so on.

How might these specific beliefs about God's plan impact decision-making? For a believer with a high degree of providentiality, doing God's will or fulfilling God's plan is a concern that is often present. The believer's religious content fits within this belief structure. The specific content of God's plan may change over time but is most likely to influence decisions when a connection is made between that content and reality—when individuals perceive, or are reminded of, its relevance to specific attitudes or decisions (Lea and Hunsberger 1990). Although the social context of affiliation and involvement provide the background, "the most basic link between religion and politics [or other topics] is surely a direct connection of beliefs to issues" (Kellstedt et al., 1996: 175).

How is the connection made? Religious tradition and teachings make some connections easier than others (Lehman 1971), but generally speaking, there are at least three, non-mutually-exclusive ways that religious beliefs can be connected to reality. The first is through events. Powerful events can make a connection readily apparent to providential believers. The strategic dramaturgy of Martin Luther King Jr. (Zald 1996) or the way a community copes with a terrorist attack (Collins 2004), particularly one on the "sacred space" of a religious site (Cole 2002; Hassner 2003), are potential examples. Events, as well as other mechanisms, can trigger (or deactivate) providential religious content (Escher 2013).

The second way that providential beliefs can be connected to reality is through the explicit efforts of religious figures like clergy. In this role religious leaders can be pivotal; as Appleby (2000: 55) puts it, "The ambivalence of the sacred gives religious leadership its decisive character" and makes it possible for clergy to make connections that others might not see. And they often do so: clergy regularly speak out on social and political issues, making normative judgments and urging their congregations to make their voices heard (Djupe and Gilbert 2002). Martin Luther King Jr. and others regularly used religious rhetoric to mobilize citizens and shame inactive clergy in the struggle for civil rights (Miller 1998). Other leaders may issue formal religious decrees that serve as connections; Islamic *fatwas* are one way that radical leaders impel believers to engage in acts of *jihad* (Bar 2008). Religious leaders of tight-knit and faith-committed communities can facilitate rapid, episodic mobilization, even if political activity among the membership is rare (Campbell 2004; Campbell and Monson 2007). Wilcox (1988) argues that the members of the Ohio Moral Majority who saw the strongest connections between religion and politics were those who belonged to congregations where the clergy regularly made those connections.

Of course, sometimes clergy messages do not resonate. Religious leaders may face a backlash from their membership if their attempts at connections reach too far or push too hard (Djupe and Gilbert 2003). At other times messages may

conflict with one another and cause cognitive dissonance; Moral Majority members heard messages about an active devil, which urged political activity, as well as messages about an imminent millennium, which discouraged it (Wilcox, Linzey, and Jelen 1991). And clergy are not the only ones who seek to make providential religious connections. Politicians, for instance, often use religious language and connect religious imperatives to political issues in deliberate and sometimes partisan ways (Domke and Coe 2007).

The third, and perhaps essential, way that connections are made between providential religious content and reality is through believers themselves. The personal context and biographical experiences of individuals influences whether events or messages from religious leaders will resonate enough to establish a connection (Escher 2013; Wilcox 1988), but individual believers can and do make connections all on their own. Conclusions regarding appropriate decisions can result from personal connections made through contemplative meditation or personal prayer. Thus, for the providential believer, the connection can actually come from God, a source with significant credibility. For instance, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of being directed by "the inspiration of the spirit of God" and concluding "God had used me well" (Carson, 2001: 42–43). Desmond Tutu was self-reflectively providential in his efforts to advocate for peace and justice in South Africa; he believed that "whether or not others judged his actions as divinely inspired, he had no doubt that God acts in history" (Allen, 2006: 154).

The religious content of providential believers motivates their decision-making when situations or events in reality are connected to that content. The providential nature of their beliefs leads them to work towards the fulfillment of God's plan, but it is the connection of religious content to reality that provides guidance on how and when to act (Hoge 1972). It seems likely that providential religious beliefs can have a significant impact on the personal and political decisions of individuals, but we know little about these types of beliefs and the people who tend to hold them.

MEASURING PROVIDENTIAL RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Many of the most commonly used survey questions on religion have seen little or no change for decades (Bader and Finke 2014). Consistency is valuable for comparisons' sake, but few questions address belief, and those that do are often denomination-specific. Despite the need for more belief measures, identifying powerful new explanatory variables can be difficult. Are providential beliefs found widely enough and felt strongly enough (Jelen 1998) to have a significant net effect on behavior measures about which researchers care? The first step is to measure the belief.

I propose measuring providential religious beliefs through two questions. First is a question about religious guidance, variants of which are consistently used in the General Sociological Survey and the American National Election Studies: Would you say that religion provides little to no guidance in your day-to-day living, some guidance, quite a bit of guidance, or a great deal of guidance in your day-to-day life? Second is a question specifically about a belief in God's plan, measured through agreement with the statement "God has a plan and I have a part to play in it." Importantly, this second question measures one's perceived role in God's plan.

Other survey questions could also be used to measure providentiality. For instance, in Wave III of the Baylor Religion Study, respondents were asked for their agreement with the statement "God has a plan for all of us" (Dougherty et al. 2011). Other surveys have included more specific measures of providentiality related to particular topics. For instance, the American Values 2010 Post-Election Survey asked about agreement with the statement "God has granted America a special role in human history" (Jones and Cox 2010). Similarly, Wave II of the Baylor Religion Study asked about agreement with the statement "The success of the United States is part of God's plan" (Gallup Organization 2007). And Froese and Bader's (2010) questions about God's engagement with the world and with individuals get at an important component of providentiality.

The two proposed questions—the guidance question coded from 1 to 4 and the God's plan question coded from 1 to 5—yield a providential belief scale that ranges from 2 to 9. Four different surveys have used these two questions to measure providentiality, with an overall Cronbach's alpha reliability statistic of 0.86. The four surveys draw from different populations, creating a diverse pooled sample. First, in 2007, the two providential belief questions were asked in a survey experiment funded by Time-sharing Experiments in the Social Sciences (TESS) and distributed by Knowledge Networks using a web-based delivery mode to reach a nationally representative sample. The total number of respondents is 473, with a response rate of 63.1 percent. Second, in 2012, the two providential belief questions were asked in a national survey conducted by Paul Djupe and Michael Brady (D&B) of 660 randomly chosen respondents using the Qualtrics interface and data collection service.

Third, data on the providential measures were also collected through the Little Rock Congregations Study (LRCS) in 2012. Paper surveys were distributed in five Little Rock congregations the Sunday before the 2012 presidential election. These five congregations represent the following five religious traditions: mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, Catholic, black Protestant, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon). These churches were selected from those that returned a congregation leader survey and whose clergy participated in an in-depth interview. Given this sampling procedure, the churches

are not representative. A total of 374 congregants completed the survey, a response rate of 38.6 percent.[1] In addition to the survey, random congregants were also asked to participate in short interviews. Interview excerpts are included in the analyses that follow to add insight into how providentiality influences decision-making in the lives of believers.

Finally, in 2015, a survey experiment distributed through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (mTurk) infrastructure was administered to 3,874 participants, who also received the providential questions. Data from all four surveys are analyzed as individual and pooled samples below.

WHO ARE PROVIDENTIAL BELIEVERS?

Given this diverse, pooled sample, what can we learn about the characteristics of providential believers and the potential usefulness of the measure? The following analysis presents data on the demographics, religious characteristics, and political characteristics of providential believers.

First, what do providential believers look like demographically? How common are providential believers? Those who score 9/9 on the providential battery—those with the strongest providential beliefs—make up about 23 percent of the pooled sample ($N = 1,599$). Another 23 percent ($N = 1,612$) scored 7 or 8, and about 32 percent scored 4 or below ($N = 2,143$). There are important differences between the study populations, however. The TESS and D&B data are both national samples. The LRCS surveyed church-going congregants in Little Rock—a much less representative sample—and the mTurk study was of paid participants recruited online.

These diverse samples have different strengths and weaknesses. The Little Rock Congregations Study provides information on the distribution of providentiality among church attenders, where we would expect to see people paying greater attention to God's will. Indeed, the data indicate that providential beliefs are more common in the LRCS, with strong providential believers making up approximately 52 percent of the study population. By contrast, the TESS study contains about 25 percent strong providential believers, and the D&B data contain about 17 percent, indicating that about 21 percent of the general population could be considered very providential (scoring 9/9). The mTurk sample recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk is even less providential—only 10 percent of the mTurk respondents received the highest providential score.

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[1] The Little Rock Congregations Study had higher numbers of missing data, which were dealt with using multiple imputation (Horton and Lipsitz 2001; Penn 2007). I used the "ice" package created by Patrick Royston (Royston 2005) to generate five imputed datasets and conduct regression analyses.

There are a number of demographic questions that are common to all four studies. These variables and their correlations with the combined providential measure are presented in Table 1. The strongest correlation in the pooled sample is between age and providentiality, with older respondents more likely to hold providential beliefs.[2]

Table 1: Variable Correlations with Providential Belief Measure

Variable	Pooled	TESS	LRCS	D&B	mTurk
Demographic					
Non-white	0.003	0.124	0.089	0.028	-0.010
Male	0.001	-0.225	-0.131	-0.145	-0.001
Education	0.014	-0.143	-0.106	-0.053	-0.050
Age	0.162	0.089	0.083	0.195	0.055
Political					
Conservative Ideology	0.196	0.343	0.492	0.309	0.202
Republican Party Identification	0.364	0.133	0.268	0.135	0.338
Political Activity			-0.127	0.049	
Religious					
Prayer		0.366	0.742		
Church Attendance			0.443	0.367	
Scripture			0.756		
Born Again				0.593	

Regression analysis provides additional insight into these relationships. The first half of Table 2 presents the results of OLS regression on the providential measure and reveals that both age and education are statistically significant. Older people are more providential, whereas more educated people are less providential. These results fit with what we know about people who are more likely to use religion to make decisions. For instance, those who are less educated tend to have fewer secular resources for decision-making and are therefore more likely to turn to religion (Glock and Stark 1965; Schieman and Plickert 2008; Schwadel 2005).

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[2] The mTurk sample is significantly younger than the rest of the sample population, likely due to the online study medium. The mean age for the mTurk respondents is 35. For both the TESS study and the LRCS, the mean age is 48; for the D&B study, it is 52.

Well-educated people, however, also use religion to make decisions—if they regularly attend, are involved in religious services, and have a strong certainty in their faith (Schieman 2011). Research also indicates that older people are more religious (Argue, Johnson, and White 1999) and may use religion more frequently for decision-making (Miller and Hoffmann 1995). Consistent with the literature, these results indicate some face validity for the proposed providentiality measure.

Table 2: OLS Regression on Providential Belief Measure

Variable	Demographics Only	Demographics plus Republican Party ID
Age	0.004** (0.000)	0.003** (0.000)
Education	-0.190** (0.031)	-0.138** (0.029)
Male	-0.006 (0.009)	-0.008 (0.008)
Non-white	-0.003 (0.007)	0.001 (0.007)
LRCS	1.147** (0.117)	0.903** (0.113)
D&B	-0.494** (0.155)	-0.473** (0.149)
mTurk	-1.523** (0.111)	-1.383** (0.107)
Republican		0.348** (0.014)
Constant	6.845 (0.141)	5.395 (0.148)
N	6468	6450
	R2 = 0.219	R2=0.282

Standard errors are in parentheses.
** $p < 0.01$.

Predictably, the regression model reveals that the church-going participants in the LRCS are significantly more likely to be providential. Respondents from the national sample analyzed by Djupe and Brady are significantly less likely to be providential, compared to the reference group of the national TESS sample. The Internet sample from mTurk—where the average respondent age is 35, 13 years younger than the other samples—is even less likely to be providential.[3]

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[3] These differences across samples really constitute a "tale of two samples": the Little Rock Congregations Study collected data from religious, mostly Republican, church-goers in the South,

Second, what are the political characteristics of providential believers? Returning to the correlations in Table 1, when it comes to politics, the strongest correlation is between providential beliefs and Republican Party identification at 0.364. Conservative ideology is next at 0.196. Because Republican Party identification is associated with providentiality, it is included in the second iteration of the regression model in Table 2, where it is a statistically significant predictor of providentiality and substantially increases the predictive power of the model (from an R^2 value of 0.21 to 0.28). Again in the second model, the same demographic variables are significant in the same direction, as are all of the individual study controls.

Although Republican Party identification is a strong predictor of providentiality, providential believers are found in both parties. Party identification is measured on a 1 (strong Democrat) to 7 (strong Republican) scale. Approximately 19 percent of strong Democratic identifiers are also strong providential believers ($N = 206$), whereas 49 percent of strong Republican identifiers are also strong providential believers ($N = 405$). The mean providential score for a strong Democrat is 5.26, whereas the mean providential score for a strong Republican is 7.23, a statistically significant difference. Republicans are much more likely to hold providential religious beliefs. The data do not indicate, however, that the relationship between party identification and providentiality is linear; the least-providential partisan group is Democratic leaners (those selecting 3 on the 7-point party identification scale), whose providential mean is 4.73, significantly lower than strong Democratic identifiers. Although the GOP is known for its more religious, and particularly evangelical, membership (Layman 2001; Patrikios 2008), providentiality is not a proxy for Republican party identification. While Republicans are more likely to hold strong providential beliefs, these diverse data support the idea that providentiality is found in significant amounts in both major parties and among independents, as presented in Table 3. Approximately 20 percent of independents (those selecting 4 on the 7-point party identification scale) are strong providential believers ($N = 270$), and the providential mean for independents is 5.81.

Moving from party identification to political behavior, the correlations presented in Table 1 indicate little relationship between providentiality and political activity. Driskell, Embry, and Lyon (2008) find that people who believe "God is directly involved in world affairs"—a measure of global providentiality—are less likely to be politically active. Providential believers may default to less political activity, living their personal lives as they best can to align with God's plan and only engaging in politics when they see a clear connection between

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and the mTurk study collected data from non-religious, mostly Democratic, tech-savvy Internet users from around the country.

sometimes vague religious admonitions and actual political conditions in the world.

**Table 3: Party Identification and Providentiality**

Party Identification	Number	Mean Providential Score	Percent Strong Providential (9/9)
Strong Democrat	206	5.26	19%
Independent	270	5.81	20%
Strong Republican	405	7.23	49%

The party identification scale ranged from 1 (strong Democrat) to 7 (strong Republican). Independents are those who selected the mid-point of 4.

Finally, what is the relationship of providentiality to other religious variables? The component studies analyzed here provide insight into these relationships through a number of different questions; unfortunately, the same questions are not asked in each study. Of primary importance is the distribution of providential believers across religious traditions. The LRCS, the Djupe and Brady survey, and the mTurk study all ask about religious tradition, although through slightly different operationalizations. For the LRCS, respondents are categorized according to the church they attended the Sunday before the 2012 election. The D&B survey asks a question about religious self-identification, which includes the general category of Protestant, along with Other Christian.[4] Black Protestants are identified in the D&B data as those respondents who self-identify as black to the race question and self-identify as either Protestant or Other Christian to the religious tradition question. Black Protestants are similarly identified in the mTurk data. Evangelicals are identified in the D&B data as those who strongly agree or agree with the statement "I consider myself a 'born again' or evangelical Christian." The mTurk study does not have an evangelical question.

The mean providential score by religious tradition is displayed in Figure 1 with number of respondents for the category and study listed above each bar. Data is presented for all of the religious traditions for which it was collected, although caution in interpreting is certainly warranted, as the number of observations for some religious traditions is quite small.

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[4] The LRCS "Mainline Protestant" category and the D&B and mTurk "Protestant" category are both presented under the "Mainline Protestant" label in Figures 1.

Figure 1: Mean Providential Score by Religious Tradition and Study
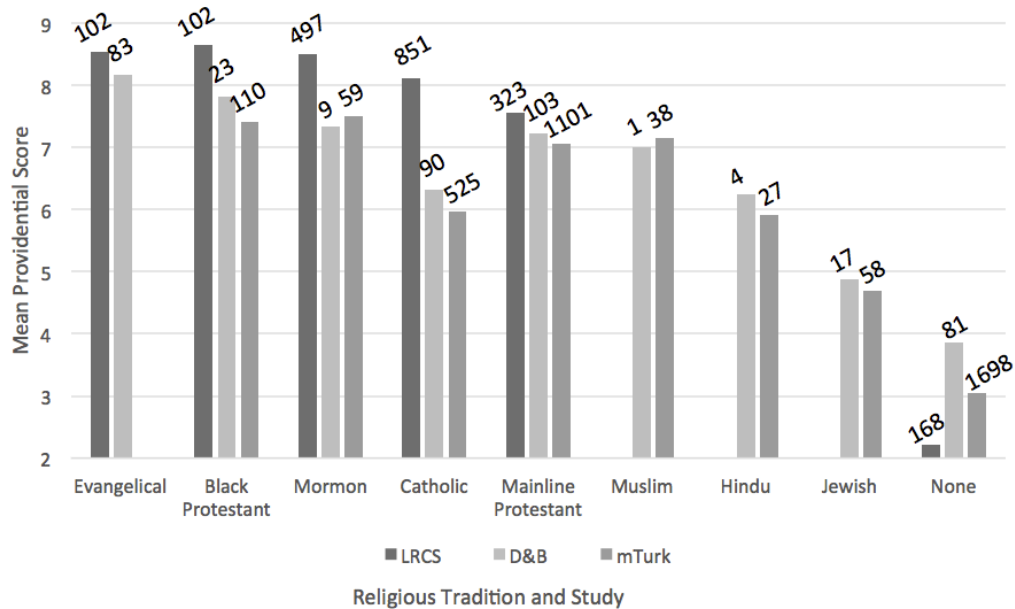
Note: Numbers above each bar represent the number of respondents for that study and religious tradition.

Black Protestants, evangelicals, and Mormons appear to be the most providential religious traditions. In the Little Rock Congregations Study, Catholics are not far behind. Figure 1 also illustrates the differences between the samples. The respondents in the Little Rock sample are consistently more providential across the board, with higher providentiality scores found in each religious congregation surveyed. This higher providentiality is likely because all of these believers are in the South, a region of the United States known for its emphasis on religion (Applebome 2012; Smith, Sikkink, and Bailey 1998). Although respondents in the LRCS are consistently more providential, the D&B and mTurk data, which have a more diverse sample of religions, indicate that providential believers are found across religious traditions; no one faith has a monopoly on believing it has access to God's will.

The data also reveal diversity within religious traditions. For instance, Mormons in Little Rock appear to be more providential than Mormons nationally, but within the Mormon sample, there is plenty of variance. In the Djupe and Brady data, six of the nine Mormons in the sample are very providential. One of the Mormon respondents, however, scored 3, and one scored 4 (out of 9) on the providential battery. Similarly, in the mTurk data, nineteen of the fifty-nine Mormons surveyed are very providential, but six score 5 or lower. Thus, religious

tradition is far from determinative when it comes to providential beliefs. All of the religious traditions surveyed contain believers across different levels of providentiality.

Sigalow, Shain, and Bergey (2012) find something similar: although people who say religion is important to them are more likely to turn to religion to help them make decisions—that is, they could be considered providentially-orientated toward religion—there is not a consistent pattern across denominations. Pious evangelical Protestants are not more likely than pious Catholics to use religion for decision-making, reinforcing the notion that providentiality is not a denomination-specific orientation but one that cuts across religious boundaries.

The correlations in Table 1 also reveal that those who believe in providence exhibit many behaviors associated with traditional religiosity. Prayer and scripture study are strongly correlated with providentiality, with church attendance less strongly correlated.[5] In fact, fourteen of the twenty respondents who reported never attending church in the D&B survey are very providential. Similarly, recent research finds that Quran reading—but not mosque attendance—is predictive of protest participation in the Arab Spring (Hoffman and Jamal 2014). Both results indicate that better understanding internal religious motivations will shed light on individual decisions and behaviors.

Of particular note in the religious correlations is the positive relationship between the providential belief measure and the born-again question in the Djupe and Brady survey. The born-again question is an important one because it has been so commonly used in the American politics literature and often predicts attitudes and behaviors of interest (Dixon 1990; Dixon, Levy, and Lowery 1988; Schumm and Silliman 1990). One drawback of the born-again measure is its specificity to evangelical Christians. Although providential religious beliefs are correlated with born-again identification, providentiality remains a distinct measure that is found across religious traditions. This finding indicates that the providential belief measure is capturing people with the kind of powerful religious beliefs that have led born-again identity to be an often-used and often-predictive variable, but the providential belief measure is capturing such a belief across religious denominations.

In introducing new religious measures, Mockabee, Wald, and Leege (2011: 285–86) caution that they should "correlate with existing items to some degree as an indicator of validity. But extremely high correlation indicates they aren't adding new explanatory power." The correlations presented in Table 1 indicate that providentiality walks this line, validly measuring an underlying religious element while not simply replicating existing variables.

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[5] The correlations are higher for the church-going sample from the LRCS, likely in part because the respondents received the survey instrument while at church.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

In 2012, as part of the Little Rock Congregations Study described in the methods section above, interviews were conducted with local Little Rock church-goers from five different denominations. These interviews provide contextual insight into what providential religious beliefs look like in practice, in the words of providential believers. Respondents across religious traditions spoke readily and openly about how God's influence guides their personal lives. Many respondents spoke about understanding God's will through prayer, which fits with the high correlation between providentiality and prayer (0.742) in the Little Rock sample. For instance, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (a Mormon) expressed a providential sentiment in remarking, "All those things that led me to where I am in life today were decided through prayer." A member of a mainline Protestant church said, "[My faith] helps me make my decisions every day." A Catholic parishioner spoke in even more providential terms, reporting the reoccurring thought, "There is a purpose for why deity woke me up that day, and I just pray to serve His will." One black Protestant said that religion has "helped me make decisions on things like homosexuality, abortion, and these kind of things," and one evangelical commented, "I cannot separate faith from politics and religion or any other aspect of my life."

Whereas some interviewees spoke about turning to God for guidance or trying to fulfill God's will in general providential terms, others were more explicit. For instance, one Catholic parishioner connected God's will very directly to personal life choices, saying, "Being a teacher is my calling from God, so I teach in a bad area." This statement helps illustrate the process by which providential beliefs influence choices: the believer knows God has a calling or plan for him or her, has specific content about that plan, and then connects it to reality. In this case the respondent believes that God's plan for her is to be a teacher. Through personal experience, clergy advice, or external events, she has connected God's will that she be a teacher to teaching in a bad area. Similarly, another Catholic parishioner spoke at length about feeling called to the work of alleviating poverty in Little Rock, saying, "Being compassionate is an important part to our faith." These qualitative data indicate that the theoretical description of providential beliefs outlined above is present in the decisions of providential individuals.

THE IMPACT OF PROVIDENTIAL RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Providential religious believers are both Democrats and Republicans, pious and non-church-going, and are found across the religious spectrum. Those who believe in providence believe that God has a plan they can help carry out. Exactly what they might do to facilitate that plan depends on context and content, but

existing literature hints at the providential mechanism at work in both political and personal decisions. For instance, research suggests that Christians who believe in the end times are less likely to support policies designed to protect the environment and curb global warming (Barker and Bearce 2013; Guth et al. 1995). The connection between providential belief (in this case, the specific divine plan for the world to end relatively soon) and reality (the world is getting warmer, posing a long-term danger to humans) leads believers to decisions that are directly influenced by religion (less support for anti-global warming policies). In another example, research based on the Little Rock Congregations Study finds that providential believers who report hearing sermons on volunteering in the community and participating in the electoral process are more likely to be politically active (Glazier 2015).

An experimental study based on the TESS data reveals that when a foreign policy is presented in providential terms—that is, in terms of fulfilling God's plan—providential believers are much more willing to support it (Glazier 2013). This finding holds even when the foreign policy runs counter to the providential believer's political views, indicating that the desire to do God's will is powerful enough to outweigh political considerations. Another experimental study finds that religious people who have high levels of moral certainty—that is, they see the world in black and white and are confident they know the right way—are more likely to support violent conflict justified in religious terms but not conflict justified in geopolitical terms (Shaw, Quezada, and Zárate 2011). Just like the results of the prior experiment, the link between religion and politics enables moral certainty—or providentiality—to have an impact.

Similarly, experimental subjects in a study by Bushman et al. (2007) read an obscure passage from the Old Testament about Israelites undertaking a series of violent acts of revenge for the death of a man's concubine. Some subjects were told that this passage came from the Bible, and others were told it was from an ancient scroll. Additionally, in one experimental condition God was explicitly mentioned in the passage as condoning this action. The authors found that aggression was especially strong for participants exposed to the experimental conditions that identified the source as the Bible and mentioned God explicitly—if they believed in God and in the Bible. Essentially, participants were more aggressive when they believed God condoned aggression. Each of these examples shows that the desire to do God's will can have a powerful influence, indicating the potential explanatory power of providentiality.

CONCLUSION

The scientific study of religion has come a long way, but there is much we still do not know, particularly when it comes to religious beliefs. The findings

presented here indicate that providentiality can inform a wide range of research topics on religion, providing a mechanism to explain how religion influences decision-making in everyday life, in politics, and even in conflicts. Providentiality is not inherently bad or good but depends on the religious content driving action in God's name. Thus, the impetus to fulfill differential understandings of God's will helps explain the sometimes puzzling ambivalence of the sacred that has historically led religion to advocate from multiple sides of conflicts, whether they be violent or philosophical or both (Appleby 2000; Philpott 2007).

Many current surveys include no religious belief measures at all, while others include highly specific questions that only measure the religious beliefs of a small percentage of the population, and others are so lengthy as to deter inclusion. Providentiality, on the other hand, is a theoretically important aspect of belief that transcends denominational boundaries. For survey researchers, including the two non-denomination-specific providential questions proposed here can reduce the number of survey items required to gain substantive and analytically useful information regarding religious beliefs. Any scholar that uses religion either as a control or a predictive variable in her or his models may consider using the providential religious belief measure, in addition to other religious measures. The preliminary results presented here indicate that the concept warrants further investigation.

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