

## **Religious Orientation Mediates Relationship Between Religious Identification and Multiple Dimensions of Wellbeing**

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### Abstract

Unequivocally, repeated investigations have demonstrated that religious identification is predictive of wellbeing. However, it is well-acknowledged that *how* an individual is religious may greatly affect the religious identification and wellbeing relationship. That is, an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors towards the transcendent may shape his or her experience of wellbeing. In this investigation, we evaluated the mediation of religious identification and wellbeing relationship by religious orientation. In contrast to past investigations, we employed a multiple mediator strategy as it has been argued that the various religious orientations may uniquely affect the religious identification-wellbeing relationship. We expected that the Intrinsic orientation would positively mediate the relationship between religious identification and religious and existential wellbeing. We also expected that the Extrinsic orientation would positively mediate the relationship between religious identification and religious wellbeing, but negatively mediate the relationship between religious identification and existential wellbeing. We anticipated that the Quest orientation would not mediate the religious identification and religious wellbeing relationship, but would negatively mediate the relationship between religious identification and existential wellbeing. A total 217 undergraduate participants (65% women) completed measures of religious identification, orientation and wellbeing. Intrinsic and Quest religious orientations were found to mediate the religious identification-religious wellbeing and religious identification-existential wellbeing relationships. The Extrinsic orientation was not a statistically significant mediator in either model. Religious identification retained a direct effect on religious wellbeing. These results suggest the Intrinsic and Quest orientations are critical to consider when assessing the relationship between religious identification and wellbeing.

*Keywords:* religion, religiosity, motivation, spiritual well-being

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In the preface of his seminal text on religion, William James (2009) wrote “that a large acquaintance with particulars often makes us wiser than the possession of abstract formulas...” (p. 5). Nothing could be truer than when assessing the relationship between religious identification, religious orientation, and wellbeing. Over the decades, this research has been fraught with contradictory and equivocal findings (Hackney & Sanders, 2003). Using a multiple mediator approach, this investigation had the goal of assessing the differential impact of various religious orientations in mediating the relationship between religious identification and religious and existential wellbeing. To date, few investigations have incorporated the use of multiple mediators in this literature.

### Religious Identification and Wellbeing

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that religious identification is associated with subjective well-being. In his comprehensive review of the literature from the 1800s to 2010, Koenig (2012) and Koenig, King, and Carson (2012) identified 326 peer-reviewed, quantitative investigations that assessed the relation between religious identification and/or spirituality and well-being and happiness. Of these investigations, 79% found a positive and statistically significant relationship between religious identification and spirituality and well-being. Further,

Koenig's review indicated that religious identification or spirituality was positively correlated with increased hope, optimism, meaning, self-esteem, and a sense of control. Additionally, Koenig's (2012) review found that religious identification or spirituality was associated with less depression, anxiety, suicide, and substance abuse.

Koenig's (2012) results have been replicated outside of empirical investigations as well. Several large scale surveys of adults (ranging from 550,000 to 676,000 participants) from across the United States by Gallup indicate that participants who reported being very religious had higher composite wellbeing scores (combining multiple measures of wellbeing, such as life and occupational satisfaction) than participants who identified as moderately religious or non-religious (Newport, Witters, & Agrawal, 2012). Similarly, very religious participants were less likely to report experiencing depression during their lifetime and less likely to report daily negative emotions (e.g., worry, stress, and anger; Newport, Agrawal, & Witters, 2010).

### **Religious Identification and Existential Wellbeing**

The previously reviewed research focused on broad aspects of wellbeing, but other investigations have examined the relationship between religious identification and specific facets of wellbeing, such as religious and existential wellbeing (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982). Religious wellbeing has been defined as satisfaction with one's relationship with the transcendent (God). Existential wellbeing reflects a sense of purpose and satisfaction with life. As with findings discussed above, religious identification (variously assessed as church attendance, frequency of prayer, and/or importance of religion) has been found to be positively correlated with religious and existential wellbeing in many investigations across diverse samples (Boisvert & Harrell, 2012; Dreyer & Dreyer, 2012; Fernander, Wilson, Staton, & Leukefeld, 2005; Genia, 1996; Genia, 2001; Kneipp, Kelly, & Cyphers, 2009; Lawler-Row & Elliot, 2009; Mela et al., 2008; Musa, Pevalin, & Shahin, 2016; Staton, Webster, Hiller, Rostosky, & Leukefeld, 2003). In a comprehensive review of the literature assessing religious and existential wellbeing, Bufford, Paloutzian, and Ellison (1991) found that participants with higher religious identification (e.g., in training to be a religious leader, identifying with a religious group, or identifying as a born again Christian) had higher religious and existential wellbeing scores than participants in counseling or undergoing medical treatment.

### **Religious Orientation and Religious and Existential Wellbeing**

Although the relationship between religious identification and wellbeing seems fairly straight forward, Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis (1993) observed "there are different ways of being religious and that distinguishing among them may be of great importance in any attempt to understand the impact of religion on people's lives" (p. 157), which is a sentiment that is frequently echoed in the literature (e.g., Genia, 1996; Hackney & Sanders, 2003; Pargament, 2002; Ventis, 1995). The most common strategy that has been used to conceptualize religious beliefs, attributions, and behaviors that extends beyond denomination affiliation and religious identification is religious orientation. One of the earliest but most frequently used models of religious orientation is Allport and Ross' (1967) Intrinsic-Extrinsic religious orientations. In their conceptualization, Intrinsic (I) orientation is characterized by deep commitment to religious beliefs, which serve as the "master motive" (Allport & Ross, 1967, p. 434) for organizing an

individual's behaviors and beliefs. Individuals with an Intrinsic orientation are often described as living in accordance with their religious beliefs (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993). In contrast, the Extrinsic (E) orientation is characterized by an approach to religion as a means of meeting personal needs, such as safety, comfort, or social belonging. Due to psychometric concerns (particularly low internal reliability of the Extrinsic orientation scale) and after undergoing subsequent modifications over the decades (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989; Gorsuch, Mylvaganam, & Gorsuch, 1997; Gorsuch & Venable, 1983; Kirkpatrick, 1989), the Intrinsic and Extrinsic orientations have remained a mainstay in religious research. Subsequent to the development of the I-E orientations, Batson (1976) and Batson and Ventis (1982) introduced the Quest (Interactional) dimension. As with the I-E orientations, this dimension has been challenged on psychometric and conceptual grounds (e.g., Batson & Schoenrade, 1991), but is frequently used in conjunction with the I-E orientations. According to Batson and Schoenrade (1991), individuals with a Quest orientation approach religion in questioning way, recognizing that answers to existential questions will be complex, changeable, but potentially unknowable.

When the various religious orientations have been assessed in relationship to religious and existential wellbeing, the results are variable depending on the religious orientation and aspect of wellbeing being assessed. Across investigations, the Intrinsic orientation is positively associated with both religious and existential wellbeing (Beck, Baker, Robbins, & Dow, 2001; Genia, 1996; Genia, 2001; Jurkovic & Walker, 2006; Mahalik & Lagan, 2001; Pollard & Bates, 2004; Ventis, 1995; Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch, 2004). These findings have generally led to the conclusion that intrinsically orientated participants' involvement with a religious community and faith in the transcendent may give meaning to life, which results in higher religious and existential wellbeing (Genia, 1996; Ventis, 1995).

The Extrinsic orientation findings reveal a complex relationship with religious and existential wellbeing. This is likely due in part to the Extrinsic scale being composed of two related, but distinct, dimensions, referred to as Extrinsic-Social and Extrinsic-Personal (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989; Kirkpatrick, 1989). The Extrinsic-Social dimension was described as use of religion for social benefits ("I go to church mostly to spend time with friends") while the Extrinsic-Personal dimension was described as use of religion to meet needs for comfort, happiness, or relief from distress. When summing across investigations (and Extrinsic dimensions), the Extrinsic orientation is positively correlated with religious wellbeing in some studies (Genia, 1996; Genia, 2001; Jurkovic & Walker, 2006; Pollard & Bates, 2004), but negatively correlated (Beck et al., 2001; Jurkovic & Walker, 2006; Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch, 2004), or unrelated (Mahalik & Lagan, 2001; Richards, 1991) in others. The Extrinsic orientation has also been found to be negatively correlated or unrelated with existential wellbeing (Beck et al., 2001; Genia, 2001; Jurkovic & Walker, 2006; Mahalik & Lagan, 2001; Pollard & Bates, 2004; Richards, 1991; Ventis, 1995; Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch, 2004). It has been suggested that participants with an Extrinsic orientation are seeking a relationship with the transcendent (positive relationship with religious wellbeing) because of emotional distress or lack of wellbeing (negative relationship with existential wellbeing; Genia, 1996; Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch, 2004). This lack of integration of beliefs and behaviors may result in distress (Pargament, 1992; Pargament, Steele, & Tyler, 1979). Interestingly, a meta-analysis by Smith, McCullough, and Poll (2003) suggest that the Extrinsic orientation and negative religious coping are the strongest predictors of depression, lending indirect support to this notion.

The Quest orientation tends to be unrelated or negatively correlated with religious wellbeing (Beck et al., 2001; Genia, 1996; Genia, 2001; Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch, 2004), and negatively correlated with existential wellbeing (Beck et al., 2001; Genia, 2001; Ventis, 1995; Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch, 2004). Ventis (1995) suggested that questing participants'

religious questioning (resulting in a negative relation with religious wellbeing) may result in ongoing existential anxiety and angst (and negative correlations with existential wellbeing).

The complex pattern of findings regarding the relationship between the religious orientations and wellbeing has prompted arguments that the religious orientations are potentially measuring distinct and independent dimensions (Kirkpatrick & Hood, 1990) with unique relationships to wellbeing (Hackney & Sanders, 2003) that should be considered distinctly as the various religious orientations reveal the diverse ways individuals grapple with religious and existential issues (Genia, 1996; Ventis, 1995). In the present investigation, we assessed mediation between religious identification and religious and existential wellbeing by religious orientation (Intrinsic, Extrinsic, and Quest) through the use of a multiple mediator models. We only found a single investigation as of yet that used multiple mediator models to examine the relationship between religious participation and wellbeing. In their investigation, Steffen, Masters, and Baldwin (2017) evaluated three separate models assessing the relationship between religious service attendance and depression, anxiety, and wellbeing as mediated by distress denial, social support, and the Intrinsic orientation. They found that the negative relationship between religious service attendance and depression and anxiety was mediated by the Intrinsic orientation. The Intrinsic orientation did not mediate the relationship between religious service attendance and wellbeing. These findings illustrate the usefulness of multiple mediator models in clarifying the mediational roles religious variables may play in explaining the relationship between religious behaviors or identification and wellbeing.

There are several advantages of using multiple mediator models that are relevant for the current investigation. Multiple mediator models permit evaluation of a set of potential mediators simultaneously (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). This allows for the determination of which of the religious orientations may be particularly relevant mediators between religious identification and religious and existential wellbeing. Multiple mediator models also allow for consideration of the extent to which mediators are critical conditional on the presence of other mediators in the mediational model (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Thus, we can compare the relative importance of mediation by a specific religious orientation when others are included in the mediational model. Multiple mediator models also reduce the likelihood of the “third variable” problem because the most critical mediators can be included in the model (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). In the current investigation, inclusion of the most commonly assessed religious orientations permits a comprehensive evaluation of the mediation of the relationship between religious identification and wellbeing. Finally, including several simultaneous mediators allows for a direct comparison of the indirect effects associated with all mediators to determine which of the mediators may have more statistical importance (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

## Method

### Participants

A total of two hundred and seventeen ( $N=217$ ) individuals consented to participate in the study ( $M_{\text{age}} = 22.30$ ,  $SD = 5.59$ ). The sample consisted of 65% females ( $n=141$ ) and 35% males ( $n=76$ ). All participants were undergraduate students who completed the survey prior to the end of a course in their first week of the semester at Texas A&M University-Commerce. Participants indicated their ethnic/racial category as White (38.2%), African American (33.6%), Hispanic (17.5%), multiracial (6.5%), other (1.4%), Central Asian/Indian/Pakistani (1.4%), and Asian/South Pacific Islander (1.4%).

## Materials

Students completed a survey that included measures related to religiosity, motivations to be religious, and spiritual well-being. Unless noted otherwise, all measures used a 7-point Likert type response scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

## Procedure

**Degree of religiosity.** To assess participants' degree of religiosity, we used a single item ("How religious are you?") from prior research by Katzarska-Miller, Barnsley, and Reysen (2014). Their previous research used the Likert scale (1 = *not religious* to 7 = *very religious*).

**Degree of motivations to be religious.** To measure motivations to be religious, we adopted from Katzarska-Miller et al. (2014) three short two-item measures of intrinsic motivation ("My religious beliefs are what lie behind my whole approach to life," "Religion is especially important to me because it answers many questions about the meaning of life;"  $r = .83, p < .001$ ), extrinsic motivation ("The purpose of prayer is to secure a happy and peaceful life," and "The church is most important as a place to form good social relationships;"  $r = .54, p < .001$ ), and quest motivation ("There are many religious issues on which my views are still changing," and "Questions are far more central to religious experience than are answers,"  $r = .42, p < .001$ ).

**Degree of spiritual well-being.** To assess spiritual well-being we adopted a measure from Paloutzian and Ellison (1982). The measure contains two subscales each containing 10 items: religious well-being (e.g., "I believe that God loves me and cares about me;"  $\alpha = .92$ ) and existential well-being (e.g., "I feel that life is a positive experience;"  $\alpha = .85$ ).

## Results

First, we examined the correlations between the assessed variables. As shown in Table 1, with the exception of quest motivation and religious and existential well-being occurring nonsignificant, all other variables were positively correlated with one another. Next, to examine whether the motivations to be religious mediates the relationship between religiosity and spiritual well-being, we conducted two mediations. In the first we examined religious well-being as the outcome and existential well-being in the second using Preacher and Hayes' (2008) SPSS macro (bootstrapping with 20,000 iterations, 95% confidence interval).

Table 1

*Means (Standard Deviation) and Correlations between Assessed Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Religiosity	--	--	--	--	--	--
2. Intrinsic Motivation	.67*	--	--	--	--	--
3. Extrinsic Motivation	.55*	.72*	--	--	--	--
4. Quest Motivation	.29*	.19*	.29*	--	--	--
5. Religious Well-Being	.63*	.78*	.59*	.11	--	--
6. Existential Well-being	.27*	.45*	.32*	-.11	.65*	--
Mean	4.91	4.99	4.46	3.91	5.57	5.57
Standard Deviation	1.67	1.84	1.67	1.43	1.37	1.05

*Note.* \*  $p < .01$ .

As shown in Figure 1, religiosity predicted intrinsic motivation ( $\beta = .67, p < .001$ ), extrinsic motivation ( $\beta = .55, p < .001$ ), quest motivation ( $\beta = .29, p < .001$ ), and religious well-being ( $\beta = .63, p < .001$ ). Intrinsic motivation predicted religious well-being ( $\beta = .61, p < .001$ ), while extrinsic motivation ( $\beta = .06, p = .315$ ) did not, and quest motivation was marginally significant ( $\beta = -.09, p = .054$ ). Importantly, the relationship between religiosity and religious well-being was reduced ( $\beta = .21, p < .001$ ) when the mediators were included in the model as indicated by the absence of zero in the confidence interval (CI = .265 to .433). Intrinsic (CI = .257 to .427) and quest (CI = -.047 to -.002) motivations were significant mediators, while extrinsic motivation (CI = -.018 to .079) was not.

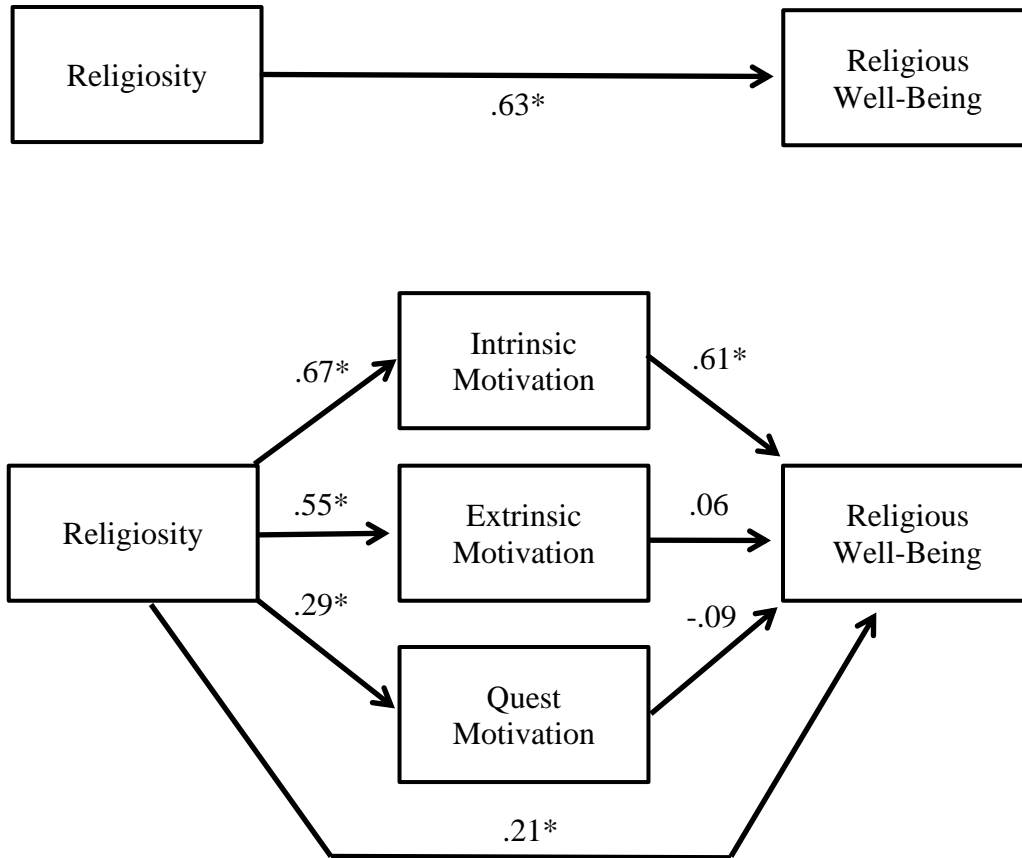


Figure 1. Religious motivations as mediators of relationship between religiosity and religious well-being. \*  $p < .001$ .

As noted above, religiosity predicts the three types of religious motivation. Religiosity also predicted participants' reported degree of existential well-being ( $\beta = .27, p < .001$ ). As shown in Figure 2, intrinsic ( $\beta = .45, p < .001$ ) and quest ( $\beta = -.21, p = .001$ ) motivations predicted existential well-being, while extrinsic motivation ( $\beta = .06, p = .504$ ) did not. The relationship between religiosity and existential well-being was reduced ( $\beta = .004, p = .964$ ) when the mediators were included in the model (CI = .082 to .273). Similar to the first mediation, intrinsic (CI = .107 to .288) and quest (CI = -.073 to -.016) motivations were significant, while extrinsic was not a significant mediator (CI = -.029 to .075).



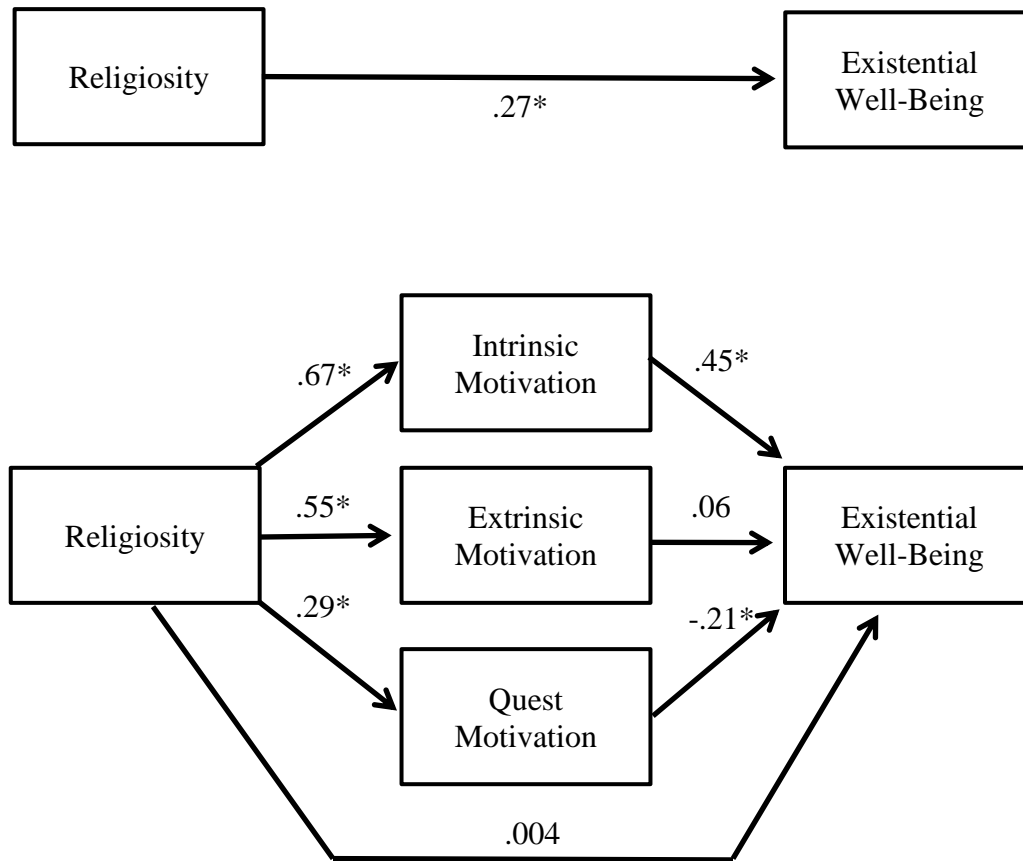


Figure 2. Religious motivations as mediators of relationship between religiosity and existential well-being. \*  $p < .001$ .

### Conclusion

Based on the findings reviewed above, we expected to find that the Intrinsic orientation would mediate a positive relationship between religious identification and both religious and existential wellbeing. Additionally, we expected that the Quest orientation would have a negatively mediate the relationship between religious identification and existential wellbeing, but not mediate the relationship between religious identification and religious wellbeing. Finally, we anticipated that the Extrinsic orientation would positively mediate the relationship between religious identification and religious wellbeing, but negatively mediate the relationship between religious identification and existential wellbeing.

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