

CONVENTIONAL CHRISTIAN BELIEFS AND EXPERIMENTATION WITH THE PARANORMAL

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We know from previous research that some individuals with strong, conventional Christian beliefs may also profess beliefs in paranormal phenomena incongruent with Christian beliefs (extrasensory perception, psychic abilities, communicating with the dead, etc.). What we don't have a full grasp on is to what extent people with conventional Christian beliefs will also experiment with these paranormal activities. It is one thing to believe in psychic abilities, but quite another to consult a psychic. We draw upon different perspectives in sociology of religion and present competing hypotheses about the relationship between conventional Christian beliefs and paranormal experimentation. We use the 2005 Baylor Religion Survey and count regressions to model the number of reported paranormal experiences. In general, conventional Christian beliefs have no direct effect on the reported number of paranormal experiences, but, these effects are conditioned by the level of church attendance. Among those who attend church often, conventional Christian beliefs significantly decrease the reported number of paranormal experiences. Among those who do not attend church, holding conventional Christian beliefs increases the number of reported paranormal experiences. Implications for theory and research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

There is mounting evidence that many who hold conventional Christian beliefs, such as belief in heaven, hell, God, the resurrection, are also likely to hold beliefs in the paranormal, such as extrasensory perception (ESP), astrology, and psychic abilities (see Bainbridge 2004; Laubach 2004; Orenstein 2002; Rice 2003). In this paper we pursue a related topic: Will those who hold conventional religious beliefs also report experimentation with the paranormal? In other words, will those who hold conventional Christian beliefs be more or less likely than others to experiment with non-Christian paranormal phenomena? It is one thing to believe that psychic abilities are possible, but quite another to consult a psychic. The relationship between beliefs and experimentation parallels the distinction between orientations and actions. Merton's (1948) classic work on prejudice and discrimination shows that individuals may believe one way, yet act another. Actions are more visible than beliefs, and as such, are more subject to sanctions of social control. We

present competing arguments about this relationship and follow with an analysis of paranormal activities incongruent with Christian beliefs.

Conventional Christian Beliefs and the Paranormal

According to Stark and Bainbridge (1987), the holding of majority religious beliefs represent a stake in conformity. Thus to the extent that someone holds such conventional beliefs, he or she should find alternatives less attractive. Members of groups that are in power will avoid practices outside of the spiritual mainstream because such beliefs are more likely to provoke a negative response. Indeed, in a culture where the vast majority of the population is Christian, one is deviant for rejecting such beliefs. Following this line of reasoning we should expect those who espouse Christian beliefs to be less likely to experiment with the so-called paranormal, especially those activities incongruent with Christian beliefs. Those who profess a strong belief in UFOs, ghosts, or who visit psychics, are viewed as deviant, superstitious, and unsophisticated (Goode 2000). Moreover, conventional Christian denominations discourage participation with the supernatural and the occult (Bainbridge 2004:382; see also Glendinning 2006; MacDonald 1995; Orenstein 2002; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Sparks 2001). In sum, a person who is bound to conventional Christian beliefs should find paranormal practices risky and unattractive.

Similarly, Orenstein (2002) argues that paranormal beliefs and practices are a substitute for conventional religious beliefs and practices. Some argue that practitioners represent marginalized groups deprived of power in society—less educated, lower income, rural residents, women, and minorities (see Mears and Ellison 2000; Rice 2003; Wuthnow 1978). However, to the extent that paranormal practices represent new religious movements practitioners may come from the corps of elites, those with higher levels of socioeconomic status (SES) whom new religious movements tend to attract (see Brown 1992; Stark 1996; Stark and Bainbridge 1985). In these cases the paranormal is a substitute for conventional Christian beliefs.

An argument can also be made that individuals with conventional Christian beliefs should be just as likely to experiment with the paranormal as anyone else with a spiritual world view. According to this two spheres approach, conventional Christian beliefs and paranormal beliefs (*e.g.* ESP, psychic abilities, astrology, *etc.*) are part of a larger sphere of spiritualism. Both are based on non-hypothetical truths and are at odds with conventional scientific thinking (Bainbridge 2004; Goode 2000). On the other hand, materialists (or rationalists) stress critical thinking and rational, logical, scientific explanations of all phenomena and reject supernatural explanations. As such, rationalists are not likely to embrace spiritual beliefs, be they Christian or paranormal (see also Krull and McKibben 2006). Both conventional Christian and paranormal believers have more in common with each other than with materialists and their reliance on conventional scientific standards. Since proponents of both conventional Christian and paranormal beliefs share a common orientation toward spiritualism, it is likely that holders of one set of beliefs may also be drawn to the other (Brown 1992; Goode 2000; Rice 2002; Wuthnow 1978). Therefore, those with conventional Christian beliefs will be just as likely to experiment with the paranormal.

Practicing the Faith

Although conventional Christian denominations discourage paranormal beliefs, holding conventional Christian beliefs may not suffice to predict whether or not actors will experi-

ment with the paranormal. Iannacone (1992, 1995) maintains that actors choose their religious activities rationally and seek to minimize their risk through religious portfolio diversification (Durkin and Greeley 1991; Iannacone 1992, 1995; Stark and McCann 1993). According to Iannacone (1995), religious firms can manage risk in one of two ways: through collective production or through private production/diversification. In collective production religious organizations set and enforce norms of behavior for members. Those who “cross of the line” are subject to sanctions. The enforcement of norms of stigma and sacrifice vary by institutional characteristics, especially the level of tension between the collective and mainstream secular culture (Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

The alternative to collective production is private production and portfolio diversification (Iannacone 1995). Actors have access to a wide variety of religious activities. Risk is most efficiently reduced through diversification. In terms of religious portfolios, actors “hedge” by diversifying and consuming a variety of religious services. Actors do not face normative constraints from a well-organized collectivity and are free to consume a variety of religious products, practices, and services (conventional Christian, paranormal, *etc.*).

Risk reduction in religious consumption will affect the compatibility of conventional Christian beliefs and paranormal experimentation. In contexts where stigma and sacrifice are high, there will be low levels of compatibility between conventional Christian beliefs and paranormal experimentation. Church attendance and being a member of an Evangelical church exposes one to higher levels of stigma and sacrifice (Hammond and Hunter 1984; MacDonald 1995; Sherkat and Wilson 1995). Church attendance is an extremely important (negative) predictor of paranormal beliefs (see Glendinning 2006; McKinnon 2003; Rice 2002). Going to church often reinforces the veracity and exclusiveness of conventional Christian beliefs and the deceit of paranormal beliefs (Bainbridge 2004; Mears and Ellison 2000). Holding conventional Christian views but not practicing the faith via church attendance leaves one less exposed to religious tension (Glendinning 2006; McKinnon 2003; Stark and Bainbridge 1985). Among those exposed to lower levels of tension (*e.g.*, going to church less often), it is expected that they will be more likely to diversify religious portfolios, and hence, engage in a greater variety of religious practices (such as experimentation with the paranormal).

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON CHRISTIAN BELIEFS AND THE PARANORMAL

The empirical relationship between Christian and paranormal beliefs and experimentation is inconclusive. A battery of studies documents a negative relationship between traditional (*i.e.* Christian) beliefs and the paranormal. Wuthnow (1978) finds that traditional religious beliefs decrease (but do not eliminate) reported experiences of extrasensory perception ESP. Moreover, he finds that Protestants are less likely to experience ESP than non-religious, or eastern/mystical respondents. Stark and Bainbridge (1980) find that paranormal beliefs tend to be strong in areas where traditional Christianity tends to be weak. Other studies show a general negative relationship between traditional Christian beliefs and paranormal beliefs (Krull and McKibben 2006; Sjodin 2002).

On the other hand, a number of recent studies have shown that those with Christian supernatural beliefs also tend to hold paranormal beliefs. Orenstein (2002) points out that a greater level of traditional religious belief has a strong relationship with greater paranormal beliefs. Rudski (2003) and Goode (2000) also suggest that greater traditional religiosity is associ-

ated with greater beliefs in paranormal or supernatural phenomena. Furthermore, a number of studies fail to find a linear relationship between conventional Christian and paranormal or New Age beliefs (Donahue 1993; Rice 2003; Sparks 2001). Still others suggest that the relationship between Christian and paranormal beliefs are nonlinear and/or contextual (see Bainbridge 2004; Glendinning 2006; Krull and McKibben 2006; McKinnon 2003).

Below we present three hypotheses about the relationship between Christian beliefs and paranormal experiences. A new analysis is needed because the existing literature on this relationship is limited by several factors. First, many of the previous studies have used samples with limited generalizability. Several studies are undergraduate student samples (Goode 2000; Krull and McKibben 2006; Rudski 2003). Others are limited in geographic scope (Mears and Ellison 2000; Rice 2002; Wuthnow 1978). Second, three key studies are based on non-U.S. samples. While the questions of conventional Christian beliefs and the paranormal are not the exclusive domain of the United States, the U.S. is the most devout western nation (Inglehart and Norris 2004). The U.S. may represent a unique context within which to pursue this question.

Second, with a few exceptions (*e.g.* Laubach 2004; Mears and Ellison 2000), sociological studies of the relationship between conventional Christian beliefs and the paranormal have focused primarily on paranormal *beliefs*. Our question pertains to paranormal experimentation. This is a difference between orientation and actions. Actions are more visible and observable than attitudes and beliefs. Hence, actions are more subject to informal sanctions. Drawing conclusions about actions from a literature based almost exclusively on beliefs is problematic in that actors may believe one way, but act another (see Merton 1948). Therefore, we pursue the question with new data on paranormal experiences.

DATA AND METHODS

The data used in this study are from the first (2005) wave of the Baylor Religion Survey (BRS) developed by the Department of Sociology and the Institute for the Study of Religion (ISR) at Baylor University. Although it contains questions on a variety of topics ranging from civic engagement to political tolerance, the majority of the fixed content of the BRS is devoted to religion items. The BRS was administered and collected by the Gallup Organization using a mixed-mode method. The final sample size was 1,721. For details about the methodology of the survey and how it compares to other national surveys, see Bader, Mencken, and Froese (2007).¹

Paranormal Experimentation

There are four measures of paranormal experiences in the BRS that are incongruent with Christian beliefs:

As an adult, have you ever done any of the following?

- Consulted a horoscope to get an idea about the course of your life? (Horoscope)
- Called or consulted a medium, fortune teller, or psychic? (Psychic)
- Visited or lived in a house or place believed to be haunted? (Haunted)
- Consulted a Ouija board to contact a deceased person or spirit? (Ouija)

The four items required yes/no responses resulting in four dichotomous measures of paranormal experimentation/participation. We summed these four items to create a count of

reported paranormal experiences. A Poisson count model was used to predict the reported number of paranormal experiences.

Independent Variables: Controls

The hypothesis that conventional Christian beliefs and paranormal experimentation are incompatible is grounded in social control and marginalization theory. Socioeconomic status (SES) is a good measure of stake in conformity and indeed measures of SES have negative effects on paranormal beliefs (Goode 2000; Hirschi 1969; Mears and Ellison 2000; Orenstein 2002; Stark and Bainbridge 1987). Higher status actors will participate in conventional religious organizations at a greater rate because they have access to the rewards that these institutions provide. However, to the extent that religious beliefs become compensators for the lack of material success in this world, there will be a negative relationship between beliefs and social class (Stark 1996; Stark and Bainbridge 1985). To the extent education represents development of rational/critical reasoning skills, there should be a strong negative relationship between education and paranormal experimentation (Krull and McKibben 2006).

Those who live on the margins of society and have loose bonds to primary groups may eschew conventional standards and be more inclined to experiment with the paranormal (Hirschi 1969; Orenstein 2002; Wuthnow 1978). Demographically, marginalized groups may include those divorced or not married, and racial/ethnic minorities (in addition to those with less education and income). Moreover, the existing literature indicates that demographic effects on paranormal beliefs vary considerably from study-to-study. We expect to contribute to this on-going debate with the current analysis.

The demographic variables in this analysis include: age (in years), gender (1 = female), whether or not the respondent is currently divorced (binary), whether or not the respondent is currently employed (binary), education (highest grade completed: 8th or less; 9-12th no diploma, high school graduate, some college, trade/technical/vocational training, college graduate, postgraduate work/degree), income (\$10,000 or less, \$10,001-\$20,000, \$20,001-\$35,000, \$35,001-\$50,000, \$50,001-\$100,000, \$100,001-\$150,000, \$150,000 or more). We also control for region of the country with 4 binary variables (West, Midwest, East, South). West is the suppressed category.

Independent Variables: Religious Measures

Previous research notes the role of church attendance in inhibiting beliefs contrary to church teachings (MacDonald 1995; Orenstein 2002; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Sparks 2001). As Mears and Ellison (2000:295) note, those who attend church more consistently will "...receive more frequent exposure to the doctrines and assumptions of those groups." To the extent that the doctrines of a religious group are at odds with supernatural beliefs or practices, frequent exposure should reduce supernatural beliefs and experiences (Iannaccone 1995). Non-Christian beliefs should be less prevalent among Evangelical Protestants (Goode 2000; Orenstein 2002) who practice religious faith in contexts of higher levels of tension and those who attend church very often (Glendinning 2006; Krull and McKibben 2006; McKinnon 2003).

There are three religious measures in this analysis. The first is how often the individual attends church ranging from 0 (never attend) to 8 (several times per week). We also control for religious tradition using the RELTRAD system of binary variables from RELTRAD

(see Steensland, Park, Regnerus, Robinson, Wilcox, and Woodberry 2000): Evangelical Protestant, Roman Catholic, Black Protestant, Jewish, Mainline Protestant, other religion, no religion. Evangelical Protestants are the suppressed category in the analysis.² Third, the conventional Christian belief index is comprised of five items (see Table 1), which are

Table 1
Cell Percentages and Factor Loadings for Conventional Christian Belief Items

Cronbach's alpha= .938; Eigenvalue= 4.2		Factor
		<u>Loading</u>
Which one statement comes closest to your personal beliefs about God?		
I don't believe in anything beyond the physical world	4.70%	0.786
I believe in a higher power or cosmic force	14.70%	
I sometimes believe in God	1.80%	
I believe in God, but with some doubts	11.10%	
I have no doubts that God exists	67.70%	
Which one statement comes closest to your personal beliefs about Jesus?		0.799
Jesus is a fictional character	1.10%	
Jesus probably existed, but he was not special	3.50%	
Jesus was an extraordinary person, but he was not a messenger of God	8.40%	
Jesus was one of many messengers or prophets of God	12.80%	
Jesus is the son of God	74.30%	
In your opinion, does heaven exist?		0.885
Absolutely	66.50%	
Probably	17.40%	
Probably not	9.80%	
Absolutely not	6.35%	
In your opinion, does hell exist?		0.791
Absolutely	55.64%	
Probably	17.90%	
Probably not	17.22%	
Absolutely not	9.24%	
In your opinion, does God exist?		0.86
Absolutely	75.30%	
Probably	13.70%	
Probably not	6.90%	
Absolutely not	4.20%	

summed to create an additive index with a Cronbach's alpha score of .938 and an Eigenvalue of 4.2.³ Finally, we include an interaction term between church attendance and conventional Christian beliefs to determine if the effect of such beliefs depends upon levels of exposure. The hypotheses presented in the literature review indicate that conventional Christian beliefs in and of themselves may not have an effect on the reported number of paranormal experiences. The implication is that conventional Christian beliefs will have a negative effect on reported paranormal experiences depending upon the level of church attendance.

RESULTS

Table 2 presents a frequency analysis. These data show that 26.2% had consulted a horoscope to get an idea about the direction of their life. Two items with lower levels of participation are visiting a psychic or other medium (14.1% reported yes) and using an Ouija board to contact the dead (6.9%). Nineteen percent (19.1%) report having visited or lived in a haunted house. Forty-two percent of the sample report at least one of these four paranormal experiences, and 19% report two or more.

Table 2
Paranormal Experiences

N=1683

<u>As an adult, have you ever done any of the following?</u>	<u>% Yes</u>
Consulted a horoscope to get an idea about the course of your life?	26.2
Called or consulted a medium, fortune teller, or psychic?	14.1
Visited or lived in a house or place believed to be haunted?	19.1
Consulted a Ouija board to contact a deceased person or spirit?	6.9

Table 3 presents the count models.⁴ The first column of data shows that church attendance and several denomination measures have significant effects on the reported number of paranormal experiences. For each additional unit of church attendance, the reported number of paranormal experiences decreases by 15%. Among the denomination measures, Catholics report 30% more paranormal experiences than Evangelical Protestants. In contrast, Black Protestants report 37% fewer paranormal experiences than Evangelical Protestants. Those who report "other" religion report 58% more paranormal experiences than Evangelical Protestants. Religious "nones" report 22% fewer paranormal experiences than Evangelical Protestants, but the level of significance ($p=.07$) does not allow for the rejection of the null hypothesis. There are no differences between Mainline Protestants and Evangelical Protestants, Jews, and Evangelical Protestants. The conventional Christian belief index has no effect on reported paranormal experiences.

The results for the control variables show some support for marginalization theory. Females and those with lower incomes are significantly more likely to report paranormal experiences. Females report 101% more paranormal experiences than males. With each unit increase in income, the number of reported paranormal experiences declines by 9%. Age also has a negative effect, while education has no effect on the number of reported paranormal experiences.

Table 3
Poisson Count Regression Model of Reported Paranormal Experiences (n=1437)

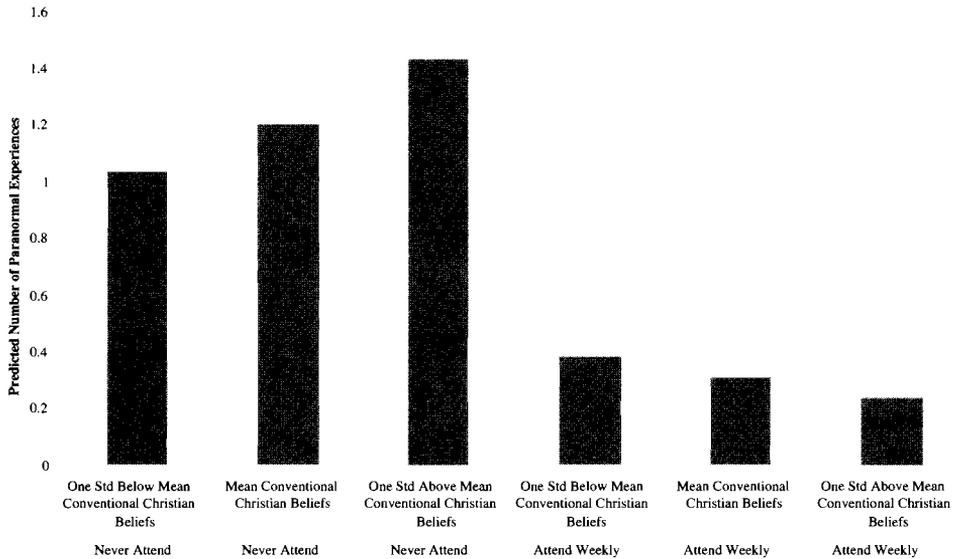
	Beta	SE	Beta	SE
<i>Religious Measures</i>				
Church Attendance	-0.157	0.013 ***	0.091	0.086
Catholic	0.267	0.089 **	0.237	0.092 **
Mainline Protestant	0.084	0.091	0.043	0.092
Black Protestant	-0.447	0.186 ***	-0.441	0.186 *
Jews	0.069	0.235	-0.026	0.239
None	-0.2421	0.134	-0.161	0.136
Other	0.462	0.129 ***	0.437	0.131 ***
Conventional Christian Belief Index	0.012	0.01	0.029	0.011 *
Church Attendance*Conv. Christian			-0.012	0.004 **
<i>Control Variables</i>				
Female	0.703	0.068 ***	0.703	0.068 ***
Age	-0.017	0.002 ***	-0.017	0.002
Education	0.005	0.022	0.005	0.002
Income	-0.085	0.022 ***	-0.083	0.022 ***
Divorced	0.039	0.091	0.043	0.091
No Job	-0.072	0.075	-0.078	0.075
East	0.111	0.091	0.104	0.091
Midwest	-0.038	0.095	-0.045	0.093
South	-0.002	0.091	-0.012	0.091
Intercept	0.64	0.268 ***	0.311	0.295
Pearson Chi Square	1617.6	df=1419	1608.5	df=1418
R-Square	0.214 ***		0.217 ***	

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

The second column of data show the results when the interaction between church attendance and conventional Christian beliefs is included in the model. The substantive results of the original model do not change, with one exception: church attendance does not have a significant direct effect. However, there is a contextual effect—the effect of church attendance when conventional Christian beliefs are fixed at zero.⁵ The contextual effect for conventional Christian beliefs is positive and significant, showing that among those who do not attend church, having conventional Christian beliefs has a positive effect on the number of reported paranormal experiences (Aiken and West 1990; Long 1997). Within this context of not attending church, for each unit increase in conventional Christian beliefs the number of reported paranormal beliefs increases by 3%. The interaction effect is negative. As church attendance increases, the slope of conventional Christian beliefs decreases. Among those who attend church several times a week, the effect of conventional Christian beliefs is strongly negative. In this context of high levels of church attendance, for each

unit increase in conventional Christian beliefs, the number of reported paranormal experiences declines by 9.2%.

Figure 1. Predicted Number of Paranormal Experiences for Different Levels of Conventional Christian Beliefs and Church Attendance



The information in Figure 1 summarizes this interaction effect. It shows the predicted number of paranormal experiences for different levels of church attendance and conventional Christian beliefs. On the left side of this figure are the predicted values for those who never attend church. These data show that the greatest frequency of predicted paranormal experiences (1.4) is for those respondents who never attend church but are one standard deviation above the mean on conventional Christian beliefs index. Among those who never attend church, the predicted number of paranormal experiences increases directly as conventional Christian beliefs increase.

On the right side of Figure 1 are the data for those who attend church at least weekly. These data show that among those who attend church very frequently, holding stronger conventional Christian beliefs predicts significantly fewer reported paranormal experiences (significantly less than one, on average).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

At first glance it appears that religious beliefs have minimal impact on experimentation with paranormal activities that are incongruent with conventional Christian beliefs. After all, in our first model we do not find conventional Christian beliefs to have a suppressing effect upon experimentation with the paranormal. In other words, those who are firm believers in Christianity are just as likely to participate in paranormal activities as those who are not. Further, there is a *positive* relationship between conventional Christian beliefs and para-

normal experimentation among those respondents who do not attend church. Non-attendees who still profess conventional Christian beliefs are in fact the most likely to experiment with the paranormal.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to conclude that conventional Christian beliefs never act to suppress beliefs in the non-Christian paranormal. The key to understanding the relationship between conventional Christian beliefs and paranormal experimentation is church attendance (Glendinning 2006; McKibbin 2003; Orenstein 2002). Attendance has strong negative direct effects on the number of reported paranormal activities. But it also conditions the effects of Christian beliefs on paranormal experimentation. In other words, people who hold strong Christian beliefs *and* are frequently exposed to others with similar beliefs through high levels of church attendance are the least likely to engage in paranormal activities that are incongruent with conventional Christian beliefs.

Theoretically, the concepts of religious portfolios, stigma, and sacrifice help us to understand this relationship (Iannacone 1992, 1994, 1995, 1997). Church attendance represents a form of religious commitment, exposes individuals to the message, and also places actors under greater social control of the religious collective. Since Christian denominations discourage experimentation with the paranormal (Bainbridge 2004), *ceteris paribus*, actors who attend church more often are embedded in a religious collective that will discourage involvement with the paranormal. Conventional Christian beliefs have their strongest negative effect on paranormal experimentation among those actors who attend church at least weekly.

In sum, the interaction effect between conventional Christian beliefs and paranormal experiences ties together the various hypotheses presented in our initial discussion. Those who have Christian beliefs but attend infrequently are comparatively free to engage in outside experimentation. In such cases the line between what are ultimately two different forms of supernatural beliefs will not be clearly drawn. But to the extent that conventional Christian beliefs are mixed with commitment to those beliefs in the form of church attendance, experimentation with the paranormal brings increased risk and increased potential for sanction.

Our findings also demonstrate support for marginalization theory as an allied explanation for experimentation with the paranormal. Females report more paranormal experiences, on average—a finding consistent with previous literature (Mears and Ellison 2000; Rice 2002). Older wealthier respondents reported the lowest levels of paranormal experiences. Education, however, has no effect.⁶ Together these findings suggest that paranormal experimentation is not solely the province of elites (see Lewis 1992) but of marginalized actors.⁷

In this analysis we examined the effects of conventional Christian beliefs on experimentation with paranormal activities that are incongruent with traditional Christian beliefs. The paranormal, however, is not limited to this set of measures (see Goode 2000; Lewis 1992). We see the need for future analyses that examine how compatible Christian belief systems are with other forms of paranormal, such as New Age/alternative medicine and paranormal experiences that are not necessarily inconsistent with conventional Christian beliefs (such as crypto-zoology).

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NOTES

¹A full description of the Baylor Religion Survey and its methodology can also be found at www.baylor.edu/isreligion.

²We had initially included a binary variable for race (white/non-white). However, it was highly negatively correlated with Black Protestant. Therefore we exclude the white/non-white binary variable from the analysis.

³We had initially included a measure of Biblical literalism. This item was too highly correlated with other religion measures to include in the model.

⁴The anti-log of the regression coefficient must be calculated to compute the percent change in reported number of paranormal experiences (see Long 1997).

⁵However, zero is not an observable value for the conventional Christian belief index so this effect is not readily interpretable.

⁶Several other studies have explored educational effects, but with very mixed results (see Fox 1992; Glendinning 2006; Goode 2000; Krull and McKibben 2006; McKibben 2002; Orenstein 2002; Rice 2003).

⁷The one exception may be females who have been leaders in new religious movements (Stark 1996). However we tested an interaction effect of income and education by gender (female=1) and found no effect.

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