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Ranking Objections to Christian Theism: A Survey of Subjective Declarations and their Correlations with Expert Opinions

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Ranking Objections to Christian Theism: A Survey of Subjective Declarations and their Correlations with Expert Opinions

Abstract

There have been numerous books written on the top objections to Christianity—sometimes stated as “common,” “major,” “frequent,” “every day,” “cultural,” “tough,” “difficult” objections. However, there is a dearth of behavioral studies in the literature that show how and given population ranks objections to Christianity. As such, the apologist has had to rely on expert opinions from the books that have been authored. These expert opinions are based on familiarity with the literature in the field and contact with laity from university, church, and other speaking engagements. The purpose of this study is to document trends in how people report the relative strength of objections to Christian theism.[1] We analyze whether these trends correlate with popular works of Christian apologists—our baseline for expert opinion. Further, we determine whether there are any statistically significant relationships between reported demographics, rankings, and attitudes.

Summary of Results and Analysis. Subjective declarations of respondents of the questionnaire showed that most participants were either 18-24 (marginally more than 55-64 and 65-74), male (marginally more than female), had some college (marginally more than bachelor's, master's degrees), lived in a suburban community, or lived in the South. In comparing the expert opinion baseline with the aggregate survey ranking results, we see similar rankings between the objection that “God is unloving/immoral” and that the “Bible is not inerrant” (ranked by both as 1st and 2nd, respectively) at the higher end of the spectrum. We found that those identified as agnostic seem to have the closest potential correlation to expert opinion (baseline). The mean of their rankings produced four objections that closely approximated the baseline, one objection that was about one rank removed from the baseline, and three objections that were about two ranks from the baseline. For demographics and rankings, we found statistically significant relationships between religious identification and the objection “God does not exist” with those who identified as atheists, giving it an average ranking of 3.74 (on a scale of 1-13; 1 = highest, 13 = lowest). For demographics and attitudes, we found statistically significant relationships between religious identification and age, religious discussion importance, and attitude toward Christian theism. (See “Analysis” section.)

[1] The study was done under the School of Divinity Department at Liberty University in compliance with Liberty University's Internal Review Board (Research Ethics Office). IRB-FY21-22-12. Policy: Post-2018 Rule. Submitted 07-06-2021. Last approved 09-07-2021, no expiration date applicable.

Keywords

top objections, common objections, major objections, psychology of apologetics, behavioral study

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

There have been numerous books written on the top objections to Christianity—sometimes stated as “common,” “major,” “frequent,” “every day,” “cultural,” “tough,” “difficult” objections. However, there is a dearth of behavioral studies in the literature that show how and given population ranks objections to Christianity. As such, the apologist has had to rely on expert opinions from the books that have been authored. These expert opinions are based on familiarity with the literature in the field and contact with laity from university, church, and other speaking engagements. The purpose of this study is to document trends in how people report the relative strength of objections to Christian theism.¹ We analyze whether these trends correlate with popular works of Christian apologists—our baseline for expert opinion. Further, we determine whether there are any statistically significant relationships between reported demographics, rankings, and attitudes.

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identification and age, religious discussion importance, and attitude toward Christian theism. (See “Analysis” section.)

Methodology

First, we conducted a literature review of recent books that purported to cover the most common objections to Christianity. Based on our inclusion criteria, we screened off works that were not considered popular by standard book shopping search engines and not written within the past twenty years. Objection categories were determined by patterns that emerged from topics covered in each book. Note: objection category titles have been shortened on tables and figures to accommodate format spacing. (See Table 1.)

Second, we developed a questionnaire based on the objection categories that emerged from the baseline expert opinion. We added demographic and attitude questions to determine if any general populations ranked objections to Christian theism similar to expert opinions. Participants were at least eighteen years of age, answers remained anonymous, and the questionnaire was given online.

For demographics, we included questions on age range, biological sex, level of education, type of residential community, and location. For objection category rankings, we included a comparative ranking question (ranking objections in relation to one another) and a non-comparative ranking question.

For ranking questions, we included two types—one which required respondents to rank each objection comparatively (in relation to one another) from highest (1) to lowest (13), another which required respondents to rate each objection on a scale independent from one another (1 being lowest and 10 being highest).

For attitudes, we used a Likert scale to measure familiarity with objections, openness to ideas opposing objections, likelihood of ideas opposing objections, interest in religious topics, participation in church activity, attitude toward Christian theism, religious affiliation, openness to changing views, and honesty in answering the questions.

Objection	Example(s)
Truth is unknowable.	Truth isn't real, is only subjective, can be reduced to power plays, etc.
God does not exist.	Atheism is true, nature is all there is, science is the only way to knowledge, etc.
God is unloving or immoral.	Due to gratuitous pain, suffering, evil, hell, etc.
Miracles are impossible.	Due to their improbability, going against the laws of nature, is an illusion of the brain, etc.
Christianity is anti-thinking.	Anti-philosophy, anti-science, cultish authority and manipulation, etc.
Christianity is bigoted.	Racist, sexist, intolerant, exclusivist, etc.
Christianity is one religion among many.	Too many sects, more than one way to god, no religions are true, etc.
The Bible is not inerrant.	Factual errors, inconsistencies, contradictions, etc.
The Bible is unhistorical.	Invented by conspiracy, fabrication, unreliable witnesses, etc.
The Bible is irrelevant.	Impractical, uninteresting, not applicable to daily life, etc.
Jesus is not God.	Did not claim to be, did not show it, could not prove it, etc.
Jesus did not resurrect.	No crucifixion, no empty tomb, mass hallucination, etc.
Jesus did not exist.	Was a legend, myth, etc.

Table 1

Results

For the literature review, we included 13 authors to establish the baseline expert opinion. (See Table 2, Table 3, and Bibliography.) We marked books as having significantly covered a topic with a check mark (✓) or having not significantly covered a topic with a cross mark (✗). Because of the short list, several of the resulting rankings of objections were left in an indeterminate order (e. g. 3 and 4, 11 and 12). However, a discernible comparative ranking still emerged. (See Tables 2-4.)

	No Truth	No God Exists	God Immoral	No Miracles	Anti-Thinking	Is Bigoted	Many Religions
McFarland	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Geisler	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Craig	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗
Crain	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Holden	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
McLaughlin	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Huffman	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗
Campbell	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chamberlain	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓
Mass	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Russel	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Horn	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗
Clark	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓

Table 2

	Not Inerrant	Not History	Not Relevant	Jesus Not God	Jesus Not Risen	No Jesus Existed
McFarland	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗
Geisler	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗
Craig	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Crain	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Holden	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
McLaughlin	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Huffman	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
Campbell	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chamberlain	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Mass	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗
Russel	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
Horn	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Clark	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓

Table 3

Ranks	Objections
1	Unloving/Immoral
2	Not Inerrant
3/4	God Does Not Exist
3/4	Anti-Thinking
5/6	Jesus is Not God
5/6	Unhistorical
7/8	No Resurrection
7/8	Bigoted
9	Many Religions
10	Miracles Impossible
11/12	Truth Unknowable
11/12	Jesus Did Not Exist
13	Irrelevant

Table 4

There were 218 participants who took part in the online survey and met the inclusion criteria. The following figures are aggregate results. Demographically, they were primarily composed of marginally biological males with either some college (18-24) or a bachelor's or master's degree (55-74) and live in the suburban South of the United States. (See Figures 3-7.) Age correlated to education only in that 18- to 24-year-olds were 69.4% likely to have completed "some college." Participants comparatively ranked "God is unloving or immoral" as the most powerful/persuasive objection and "Jesus did not exist" as the least powerful/persuasive. Participants independently rated "the Bible is not inerrant" as the strongest and "Jesus did not exist" as the weakest objection. (See Figure 8 and Figure 9.) Attitudinally, participants were familiar with the objections provided, open to the converse of the objections, and believed the converse of the objections were likely, reported that religious topics were important to discuss, actively participated in church activities (marginally), found Christian theism to be sacred or holy, religiously identified as Christian, agreed that their attitudes and behaviors would change if they discovered to be incorrect, and reported to be answering honestly to all the preceding questions. (See Figures 3-18.)

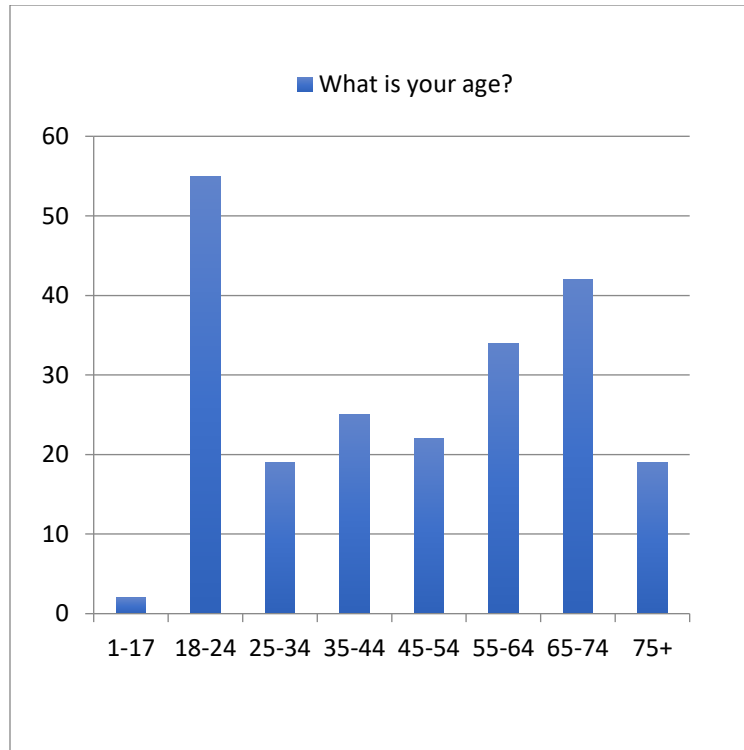


Figure 1

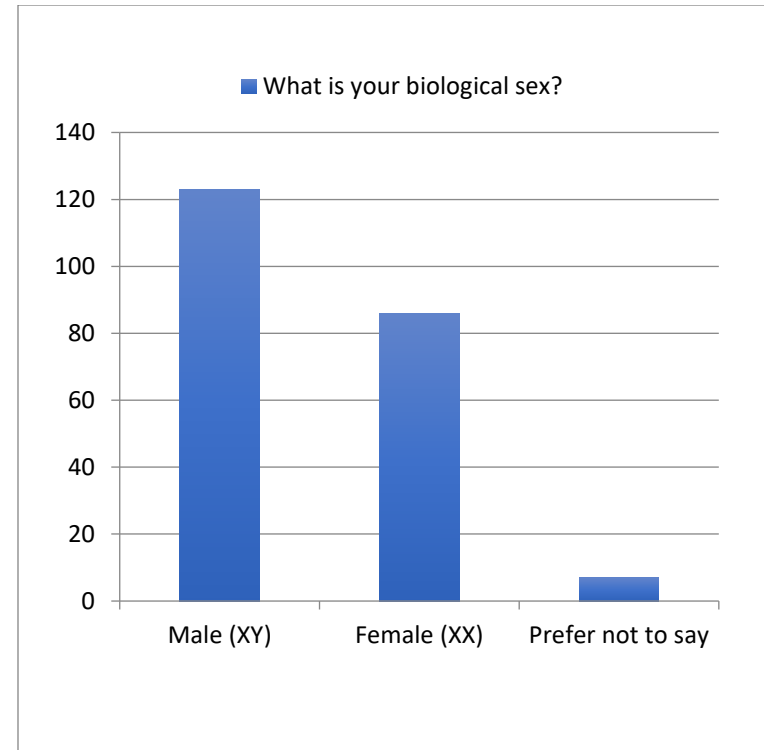


Figure 2

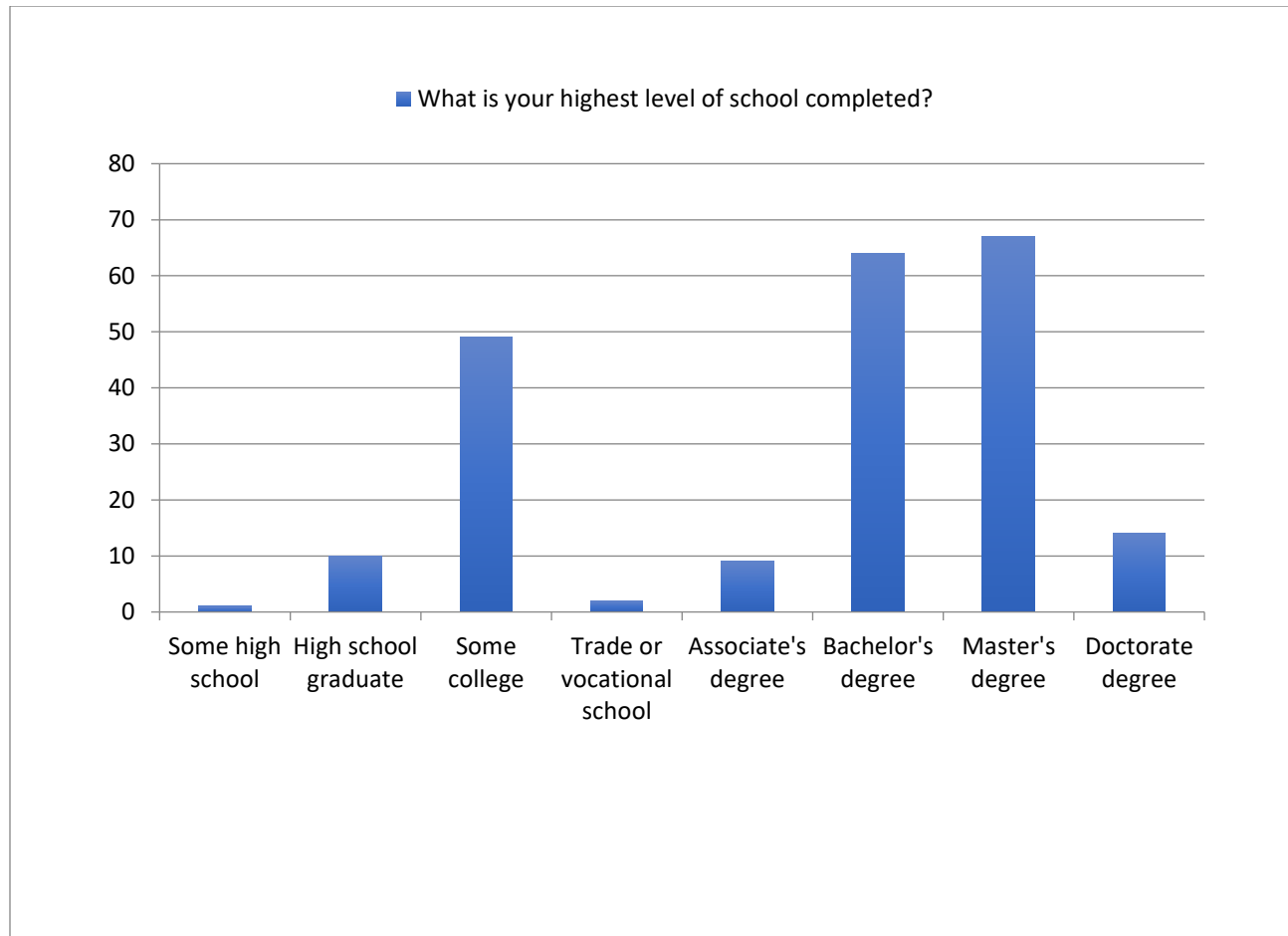


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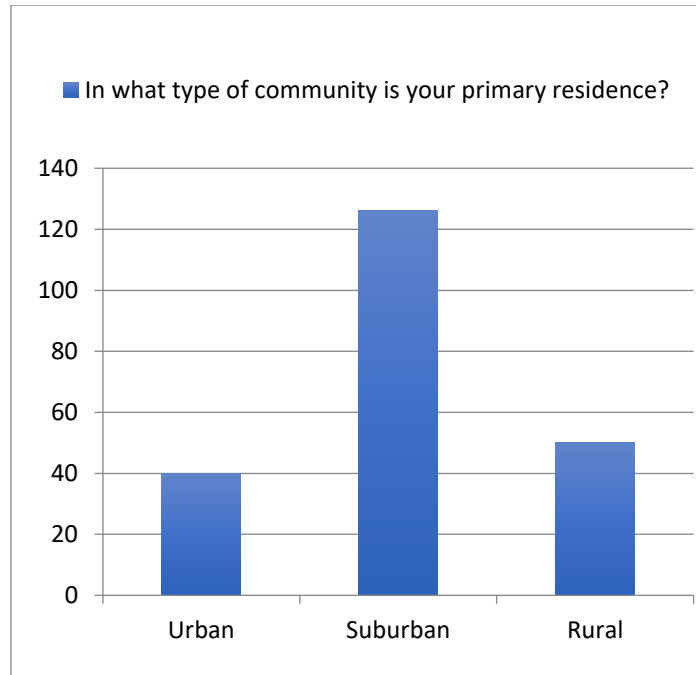


Figure 4

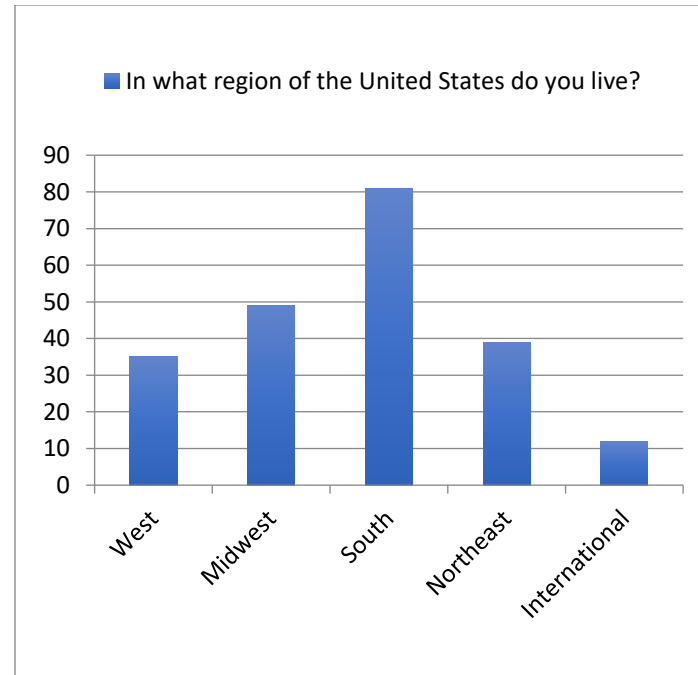


Figure 5

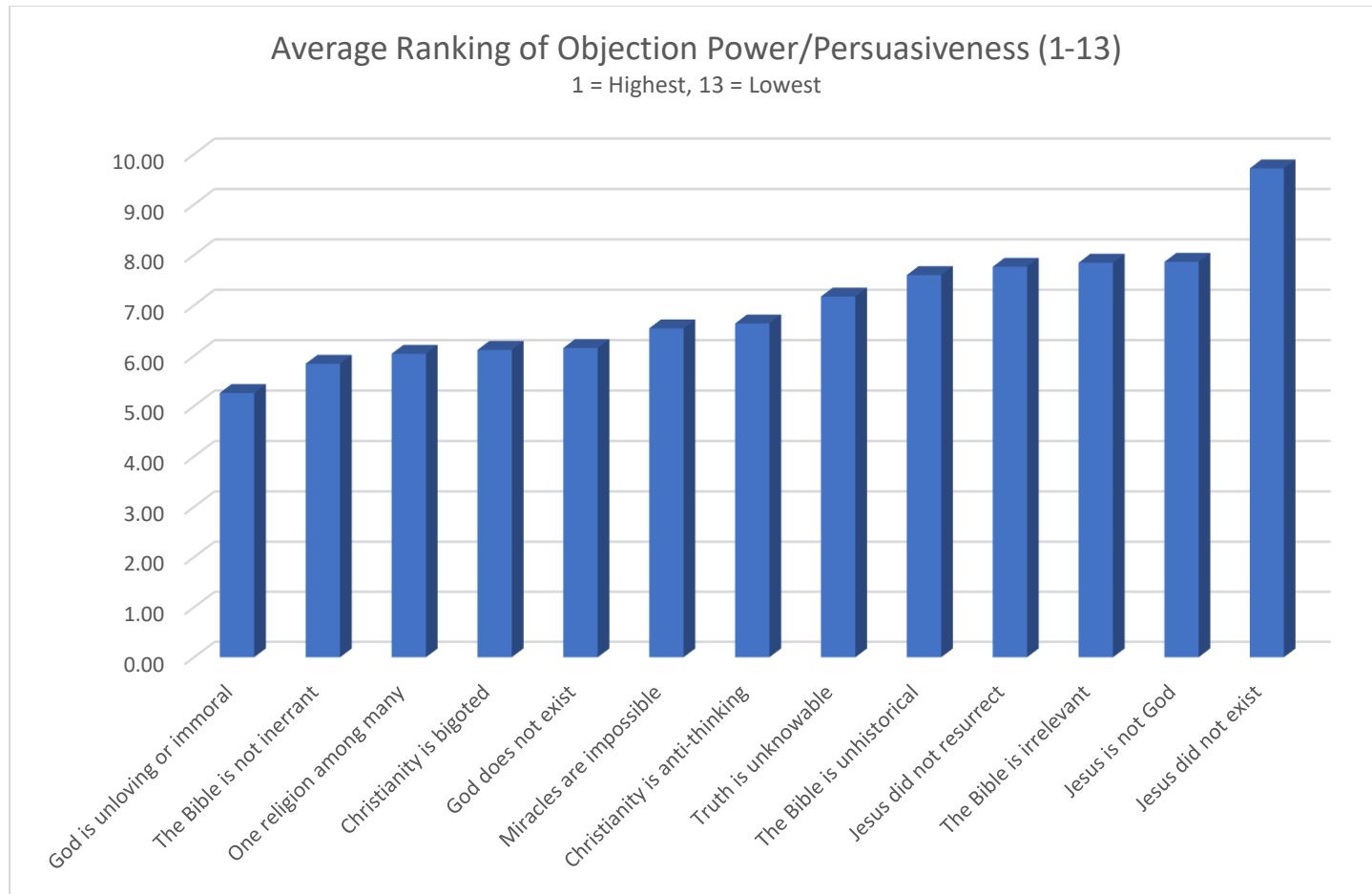


Figure 6

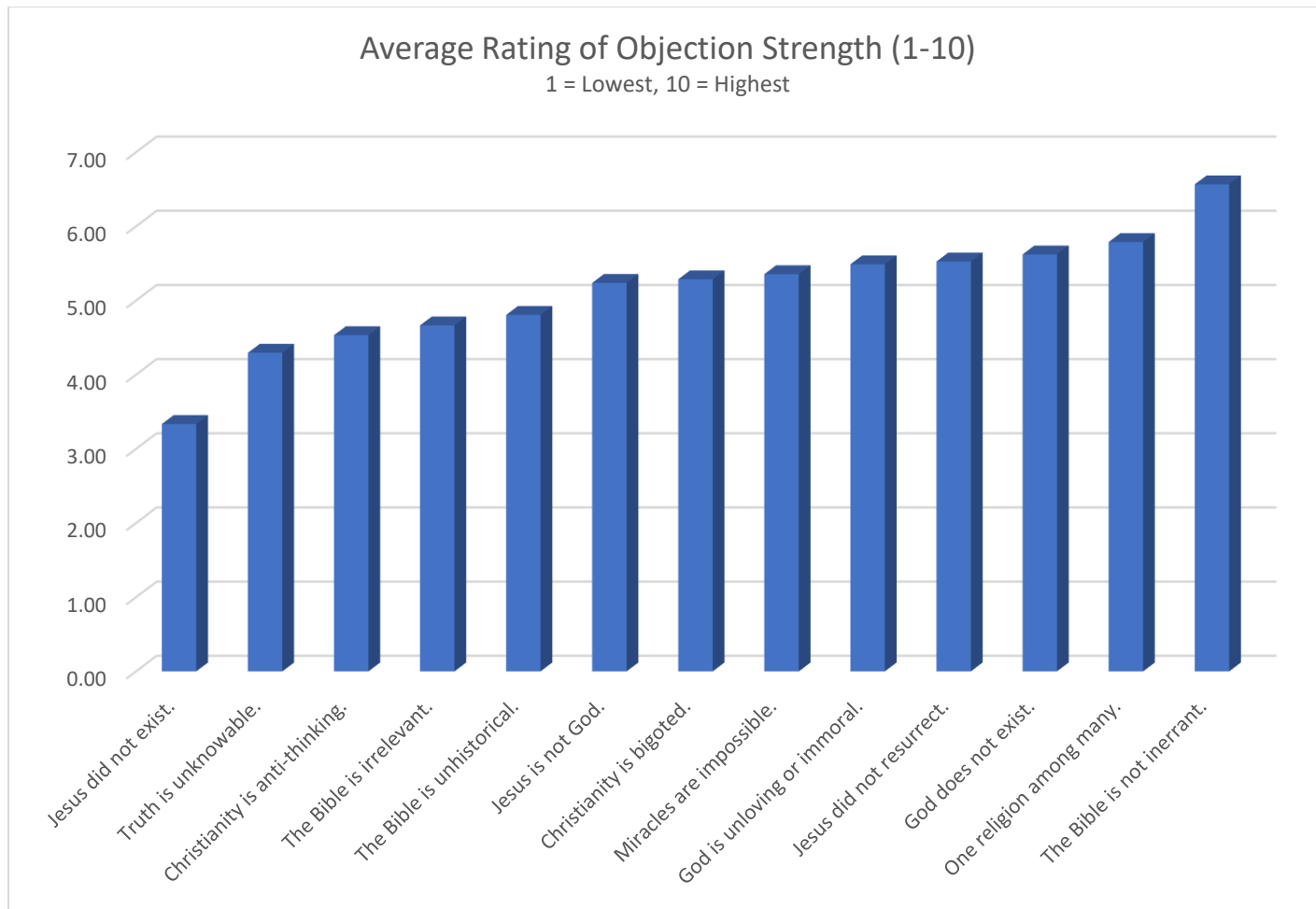


Figure 7

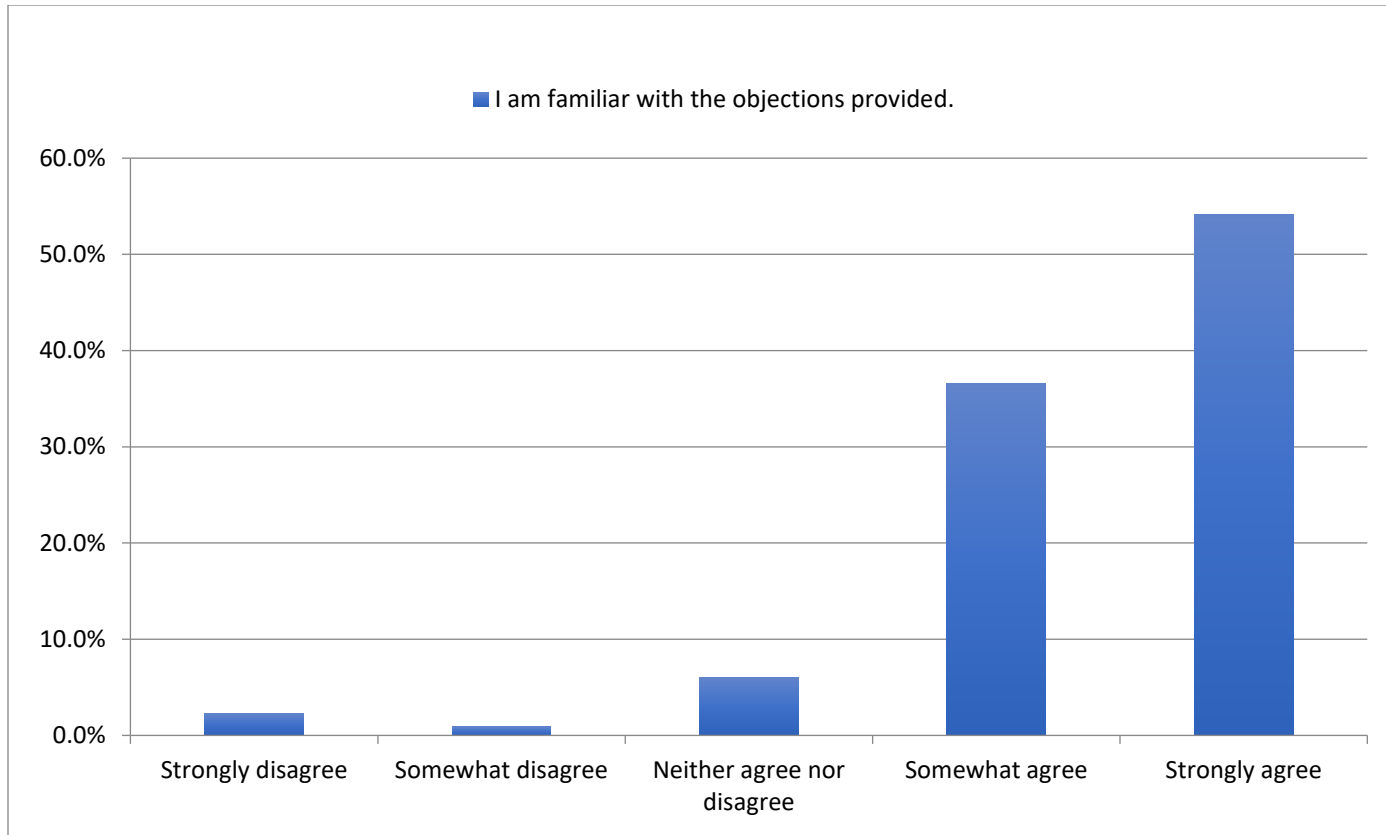


Figure 8

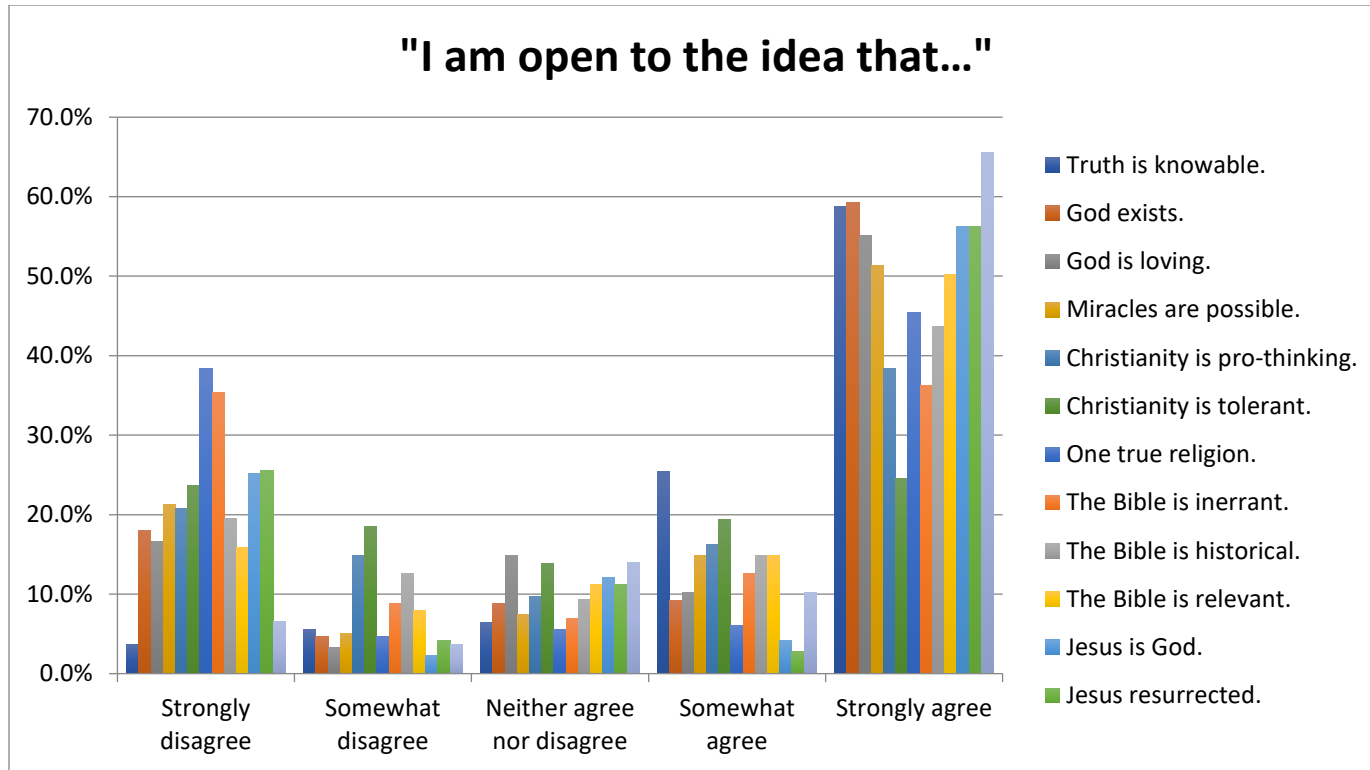


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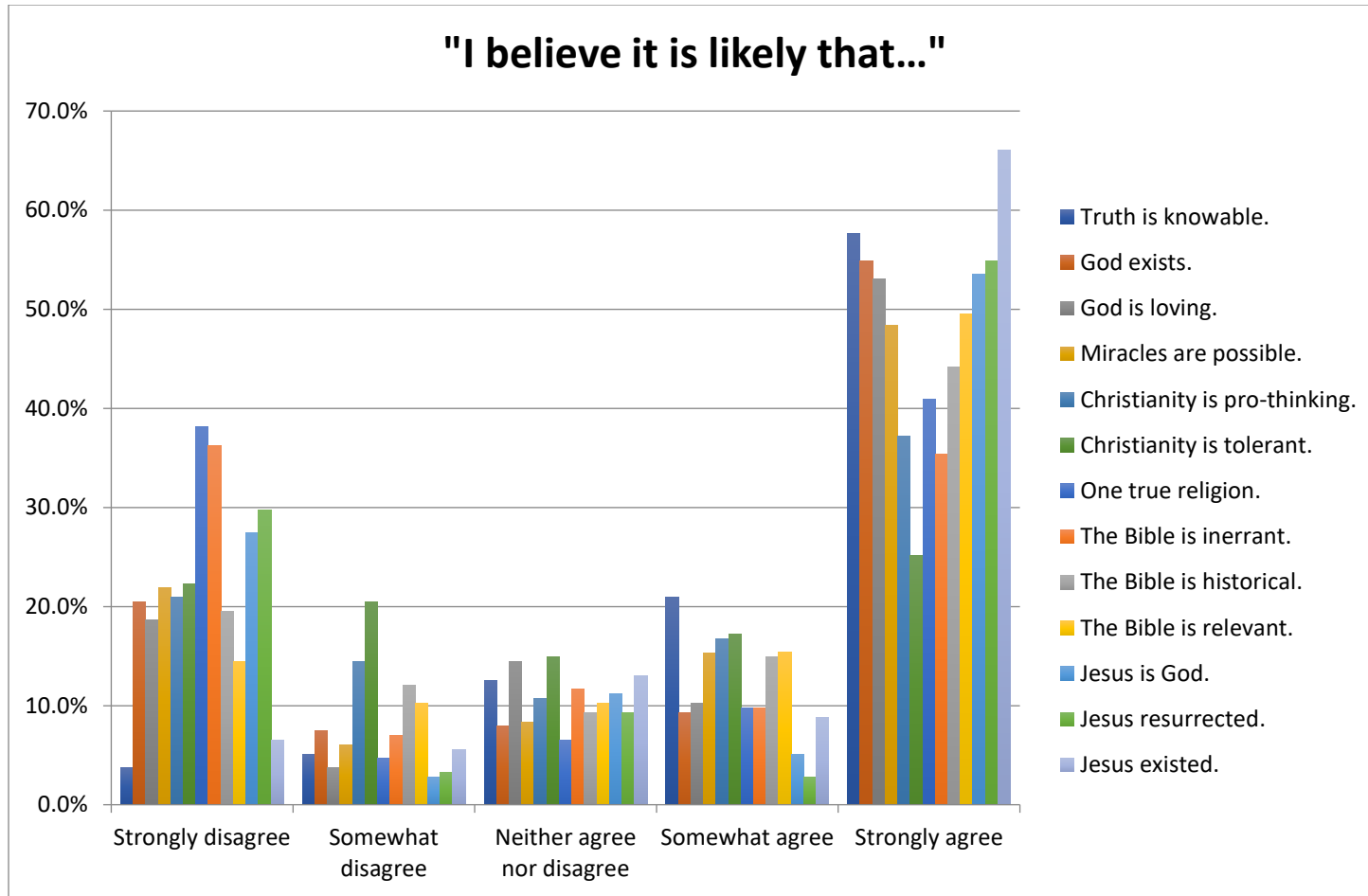


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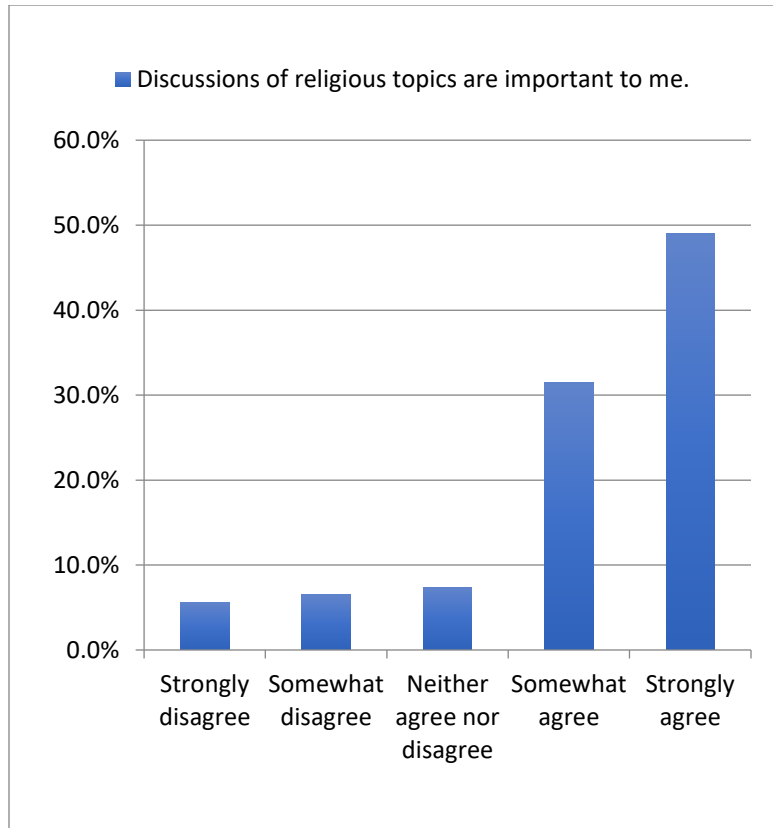


Figure 11

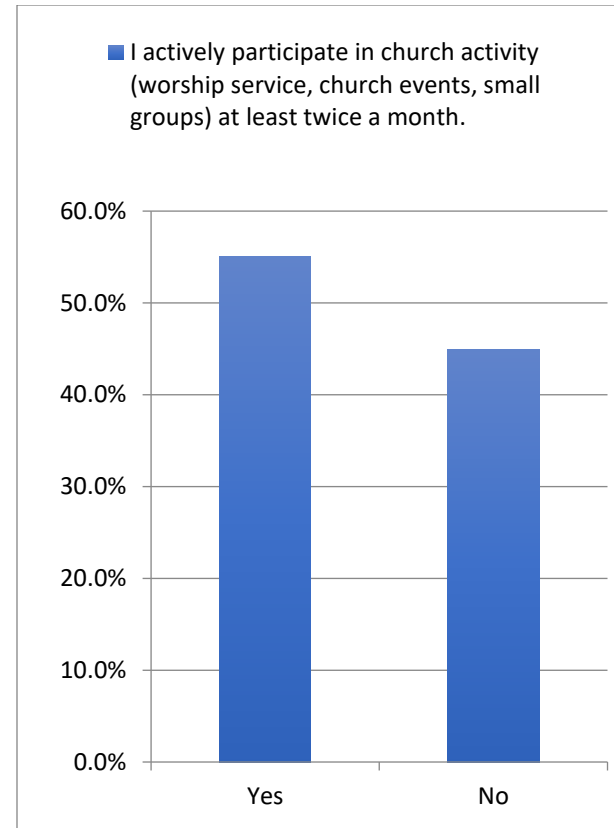


Figure 12

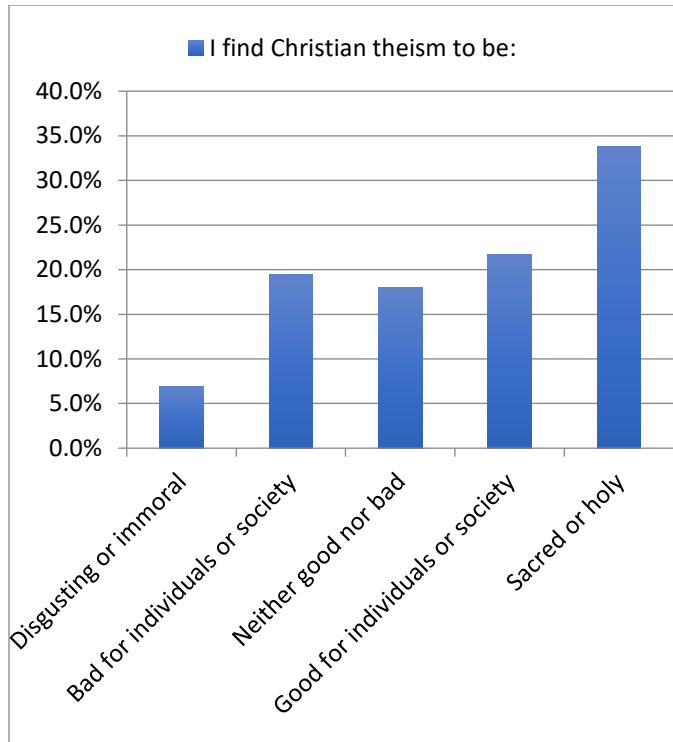


Figure 13

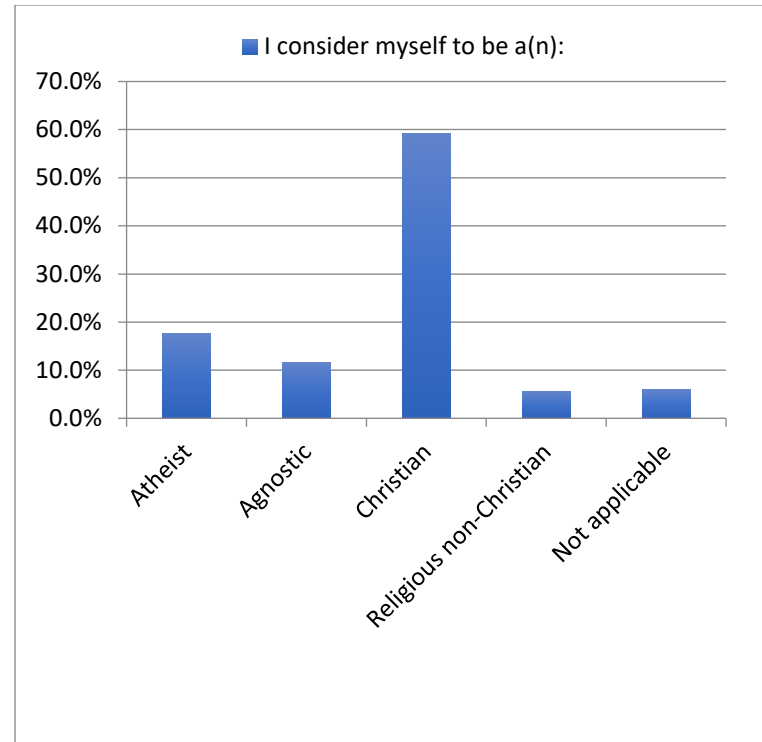


Figure 14

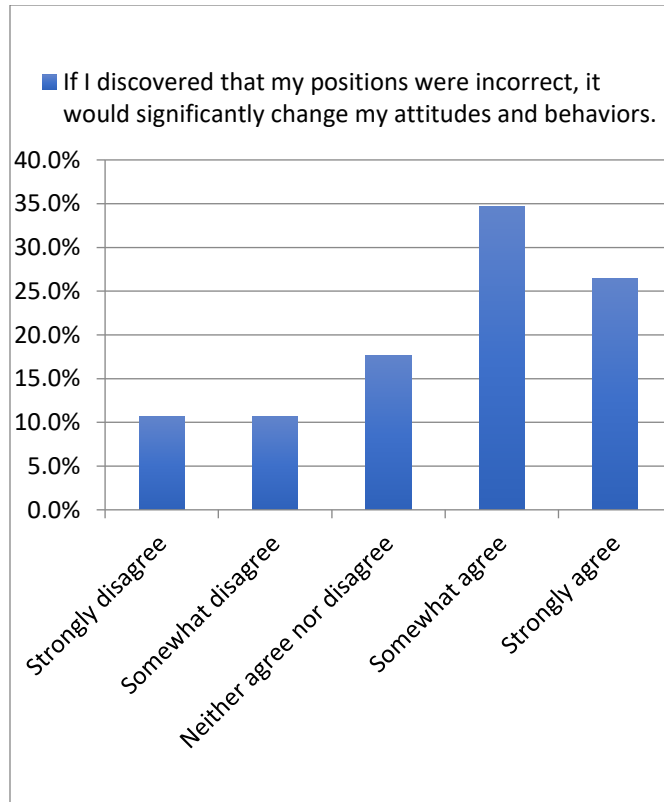


Figure 15

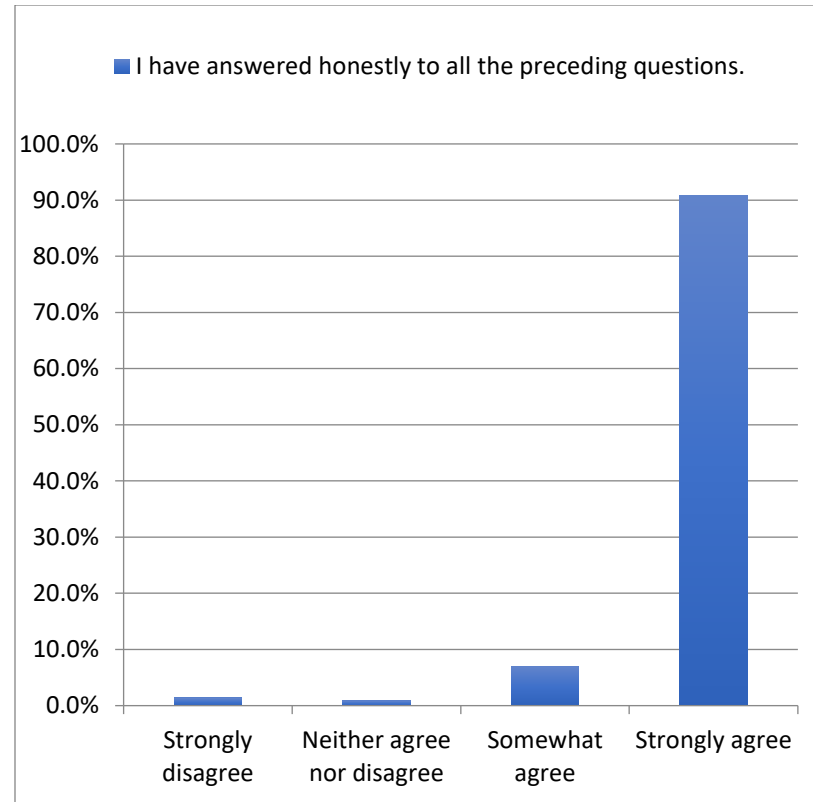


Figure 16

Analysis

In comparing the expert opinion baseline with the aggregate survey ranking results, we see similar rankings between the objection that “God is unloving/immoral” and that the “Bible is not inerrant” (ranked by both as 1st and 2nd, respectively) at the higher end of the spectrum. We also see expert opinion ranking (11th/12th) and aggregate survey ranking (13th) that “Jesus did not exist” at the lower end of the spectrum. In comparing the rankings and attitudes, we see at least four categories in each religious identification (excluding “Not Applicable” identification) approximate to the expert opinion baseline. We found that those identified as agnostic seem to have the closest potential correlation to expert opinion. The mean of their rankings produced four objections that closely approximated the baseline, one objection that was about one rank removed from the baseline, and three objections that were about two ranks from the baseline. (See Table 5.)

We see some statistically significant relationships between demographics and rankings, rankings and attitudes, and demographics and attitudes. For demographics and rankings, we found relationships between religious identification and the objection “God does not exist” (ANOVA; p-value = 0.0224, effect size 0.301) and religious identification and “The Bible is unhistorical” (ANOVA; p-value = 0.0173, effect size 0.294). Those who identified as atheists gave the objection “God does not exist” an average ranking of 3.74 (median of 1.00; sample = 31). Those who identified as agnostic gave “God does not exist” an average of 5.20 (median 4.00; sample = 15). On a ranked pairwise test, atheists and Christians had the greatest difference in average (-3.02; p-value = 0.00525; effect size = 0.75; samples = 31 atheist, 114 Christian). Those who identified as religious non-Christian gave the objection “The Bible is unhistorical” an average ranking of 9.63 (median = 9.00; sample = 8).

For demographics and attitudes, we found statistically significant relationships between age and religious identification (p-value = <0.00001, effect size = 0.286, sample = 216) as well as age and location (p-value = 0.000164, effect size = 0.257, sample = 216). It was 39.8% likely that the participant identified as a Christian if they were between the ages of 18 and 24, and it was 50.0% likely that a participant identified as a religious non-Christian if they were between the ages of 65-74. It was 43.6% likely that a participant lived in the Northeast (and 30.9% if they lived in the South) between the ages of 18 and 24, 41.7% likely that they were international if they were 35-44, and 36.7% likely that

they lived in the Midwest if they were 65-74. Doing a regression analysis showed that location was a secondary driver and religious identification a primary driver (32% and 68% relative importance) in predicting age (McFadden's R-squared = 23.6%, sample = 216).

Among attitudes, there were statistically significant relationships between religious identification and church activity (ranked ANOVA; p-value = <0.00001, effect size = 1.18), religious discussion importance (Chi-Squared; p-value = <0.00001, effect size = 0.304, sample = 216), and attitude toward Christian theism (Chi-Squared; p-value = 0.00001, effect size = 0.457, sample = 216). Of those who attend church at least twice a month, 92% identified as Christian. Of those who strongly disagreed that religious discussions were important, 50.0% identified as atheist and 50.0% identified as agnostic. Of those who somewhat agreed, 54.4% identified as Christian; and of those who strongly agreed, 79.2% identified as Christian. Of those who said they find Christian theism disgusting or immoral, 40.0% identified as atheist. Of those who found it bad for individuals or society, 54.8% identified as atheist. Conversely, of those who found it to be good for individuals or society, 85.1% identified as Christian. Of those who found it sacred or holy, 100.0% identified as Christians.

Rank	Expert	Rank	Aggregate	Atheist	Agnostic	Christian	Religious NC
1	God Immoral	1	God Immoral $\bar{x} = 5.26$ $\sigma = 3.52$	No God Exists $\bar{x} = 3.74$ $\sigma = 4.00$	No God Exists $\bar{x} = 5.20$ $\sigma = 4.64$	God Immoral $\bar{x} = 4.73$ $\sigma = 3.36$	Not Inerrant $\bar{x} = 4.57$ $\sigma = 2.26$
2	Not Inerrant	2	Not Inerrant $\bar{x} = 5.84$ $\sigma = 3.22$	Anti-Thinking $\bar{x} = 5.59$ $\sigma = 3.17$	Not Inerrant $\bar{x} = 5.24$ $\sigma = 2.86$	Not Inerrant $\bar{x} = 5.92$ $\sigma = 3.27$	Is Bigoted $\bar{x} = 5.00$ $\sigma = 3.93$
3/4	No God Exists	3	Many Religions $\bar{x} = 6.04$ $\sigma = 3.53$	Not Inerrant $\bar{x} = 5.84$ $\sigma = 3.10$	God Immoral $\bar{x} = 5.25$ $\sigma = 3.09$	Is Bigoted $\bar{x} = 6.09$ $\sigma = 3.64$	Many Religions $\bar{x} = 5.17$ $\sigma = 1.86$
3/4	Anti-Thinking	4	Is Bigoted $\bar{x} = 6.12$ $\sigma = 3.61$	Many Religions $\bar{x} = 6.16$ $\sigma = 3.14$	Anti-Thinking $\bar{x} = 5.50$ $\sigma = 3.31$	Many Religions $\bar{x} = 6.28$ $\sigma = 3.68$	Anti-Thinking $\bar{x} = 5.57$ $\sigma = 3.37$
5/6	Jesus Not God	5	No God Exists $\bar{x} = 6.15$ $\sigma = 4.27$	No Miracles $\bar{x} = 6.27$ $\sigma = 3.65$	Many Religions $\bar{x} = 5.55$ $\sigma = 3.11$	No Miracles $\bar{x} = 6.64$ $\sigma = 3.13$	Jesus Not Risen $\bar{x} = 6.86$ $\sigma = 3.98$
5/6	Not Historical	6	No Miracles $\bar{x} = 6.54$ $\sigma = 3.41$	God Immoral $\bar{x} = 6.32$ $\sigma = 3.55$	Not Historical $\bar{x} = 5.75$ $\sigma = 3.22$	No Truth $\bar{x} = 6.71$ $\sigma = 4.20$	No Miracles $\bar{x} = 7.29$ $\sigma = 4.59$
7/8	Jesus Not Risen	7	Anti-Thinking $\bar{x} = 6.64$ $\sigma = 3.39$	Not Historical $\bar{x} = 6.70$ $\sigma = 2.58$	No Miracles $\bar{x} = 5.89$ $\sigma = 3.48$	No God Exists $\bar{x} = 6.76$ $\sigma = 4.02$	Jesus Not God $\bar{x} = 7.57$ $\sigma = 3.66$
7/8	Is Bigoted	8	No Truth $\bar{x} = 7.17$ $\sigma = 4.30$	Is Bigoted $\bar{x} = 6.78$ $\sigma = 3.35$	Is Bigoted $\bar{x} = 6.07$ $\sigma = 3.57$	Anti-Thinking $\bar{x} = 7.15$ $\sigma = 3.33$	No Truth $\bar{x} = 7.60$ $\sigma = 3.72$
9	Many Religions	9	Not Historical $\bar{x} = 7.60$ $\sigma = 3.17$	Not Relevant $\bar{x} = 7.76$ $\sigma = 2.56$	Not Relevant $\bar{x} = 7.71$ $\sigma = 2.43$	Jesus Not God $\bar{x} = 7.63$ $\sigma = 3.23$	God Immoral $\bar{x} = 7.60$ $\sigma = 2.80$
10	No Miracles	10	Jesus Not Risen $\bar{x} = 7.77$ $\sigma = 3.80$	Jesus Not Risen $\bar{x} = 8.12$ $\sigma = 4.03$	Jesus Not God $\bar{x} = 8.23$ $\sigma = 3.34$	Jesus Not Risen $\bar{x} = 7.64$ $\sigma = 3.73$	Not Relevant $\bar{x} = 8.14$ $\sigma = 1.96$
11/12	No Truth	11	Not Relevant $\bar{x} = 7.85$ $\sigma = 2.91$	Jesus Not God $\bar{x} = 8.40$ $\sigma = 3.57$	Jesus Not Risen $\bar{x} = 8.27$ $\sigma = 3.61$	Not Relevant $\bar{x} = 7.92$ $\sigma = 3.19$	No God Exists $\bar{x} = 8.17$ $\sigma = 4.06$
11/12	No Jesus Existed	12	Jesus Not God $\bar{x} = 7.86$ $\sigma = 3.34$	No Truth $\bar{x} = 8.41$ $\sigma = 4.61$	No Truth $\bar{x} = 8.60$ $\sigma = 3.96$	Not Historical $\bar{x} = 7.97$ $\sigma = 3.12$	No Jesus Existed $\bar{x} = 9.43$ $\sigma = 4.56$
13	Not Relevant	13	No Jesus Existed $\bar{x} = 9.72$ $\sigma = 3.90$	No Jesus Existed $\bar{x} = 9.43$ $\sigma = 3.76$	No Jesus Existed $\bar{x} = 10.04$ $\sigma = 3.67$	No Jesus Existed $\bar{x} = 9.81$ $\sigma = 3.97$	Not Historical $\bar{x} = 9.63$ $\sigma = 3.04$

(Expert = Baseline; Yellow = ~2 ranks from baseline, Green = ~1 rank from baseline, Blue = ~Baseline)

Table 5

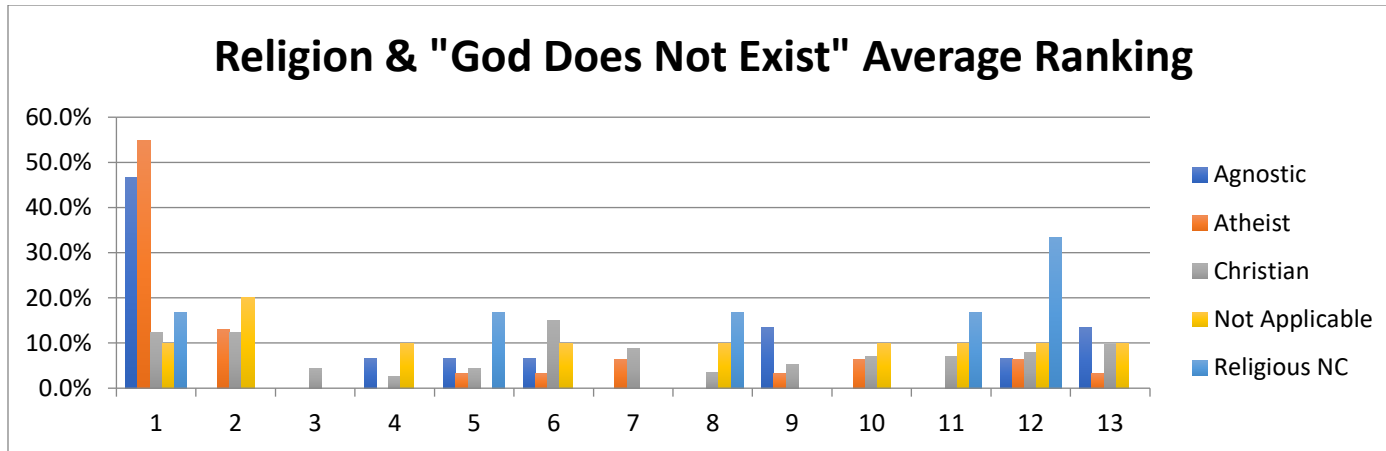


Figure 17

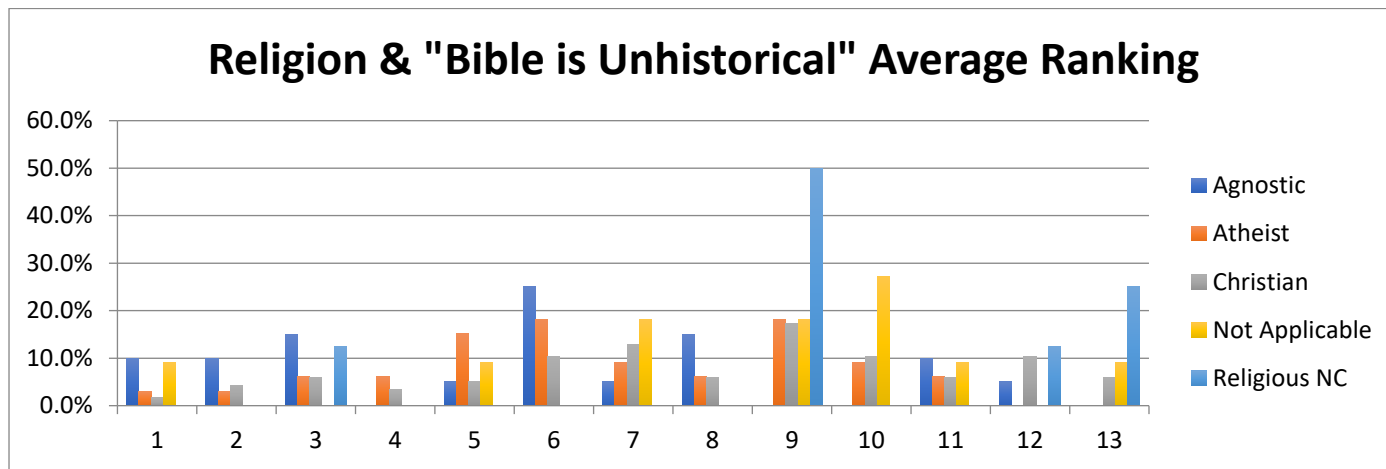


Figure 18

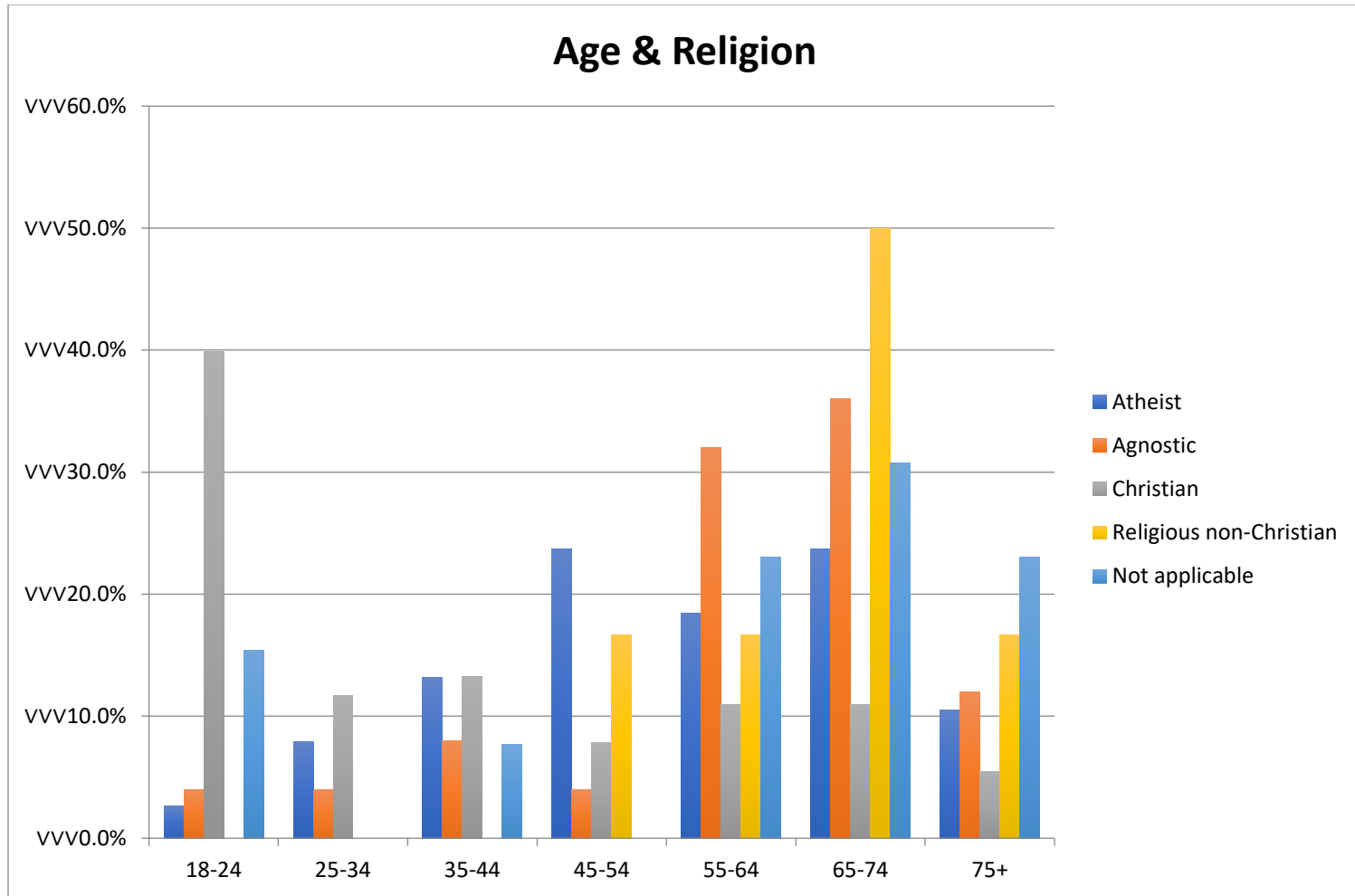


Figure 19

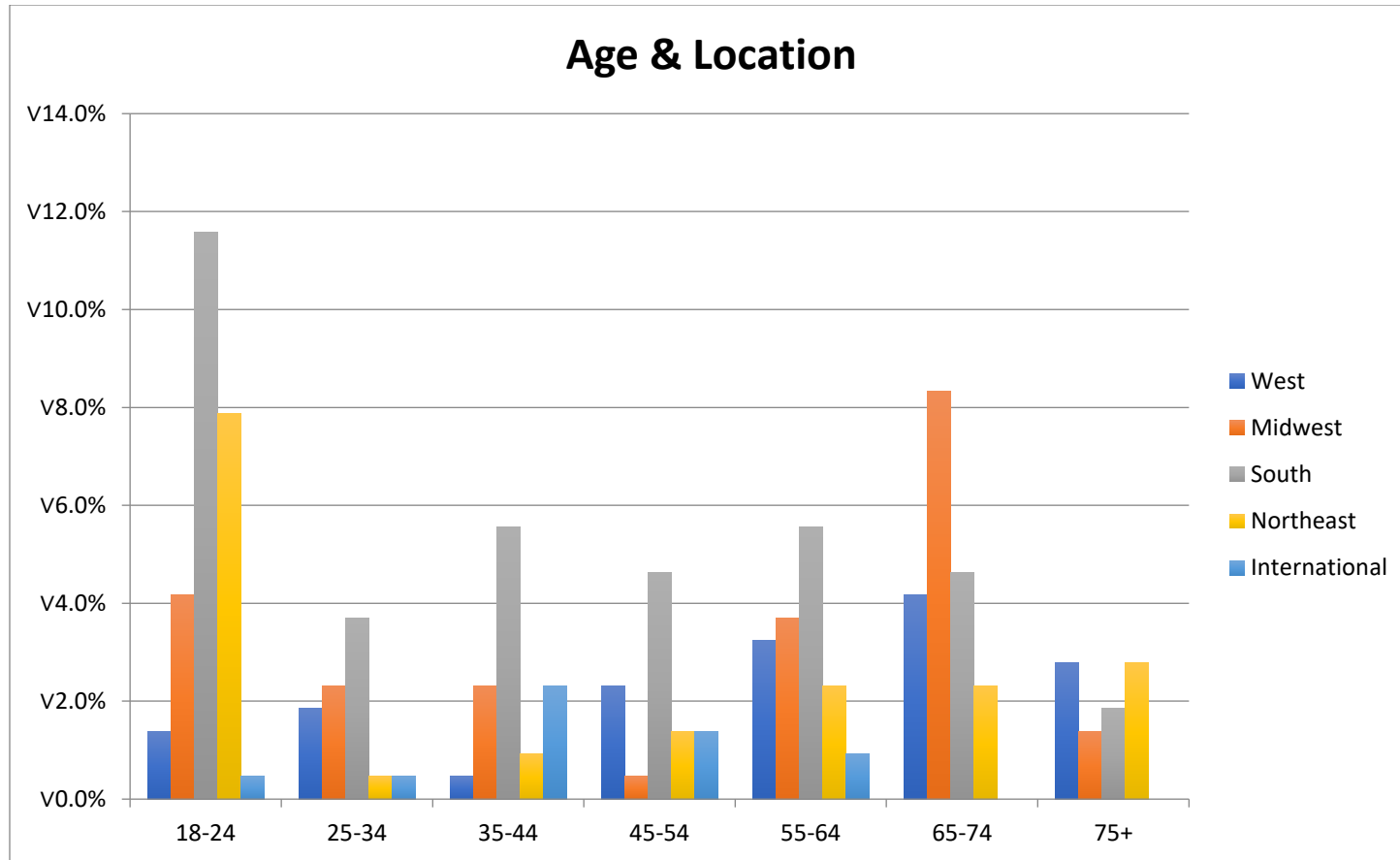


Figure 20

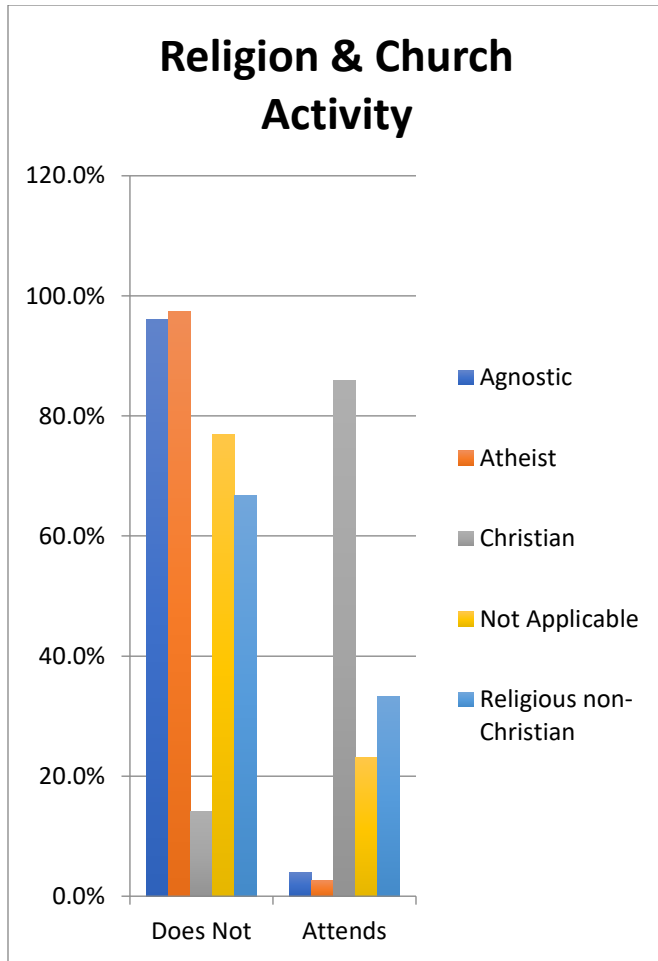


Figure 21

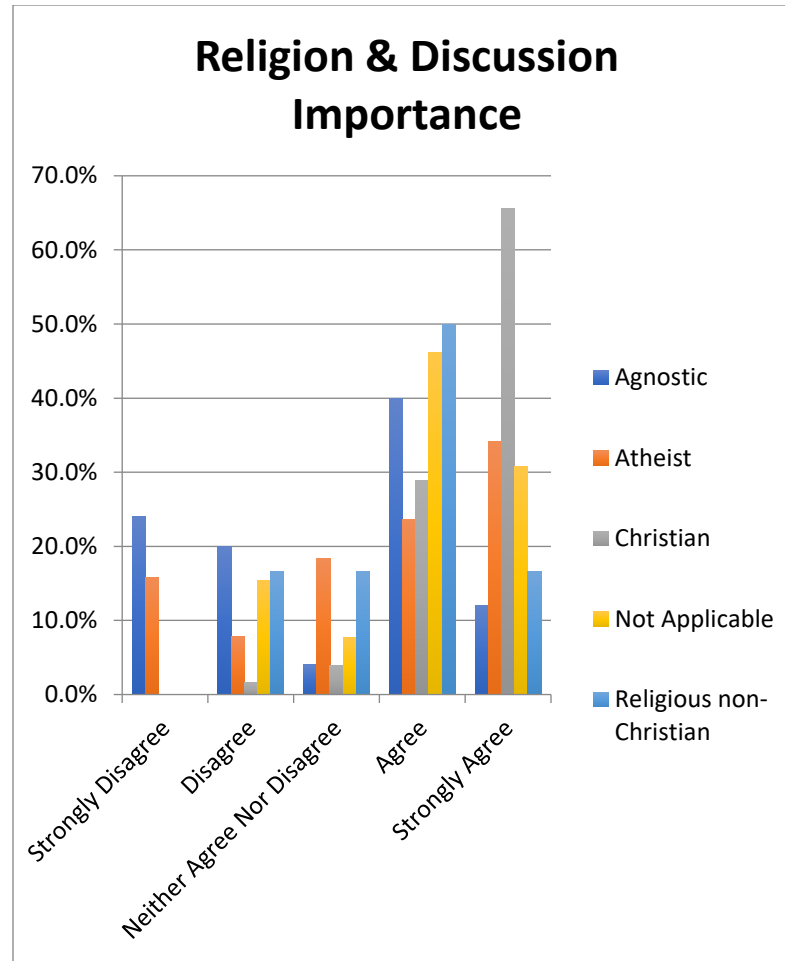


Figure 22

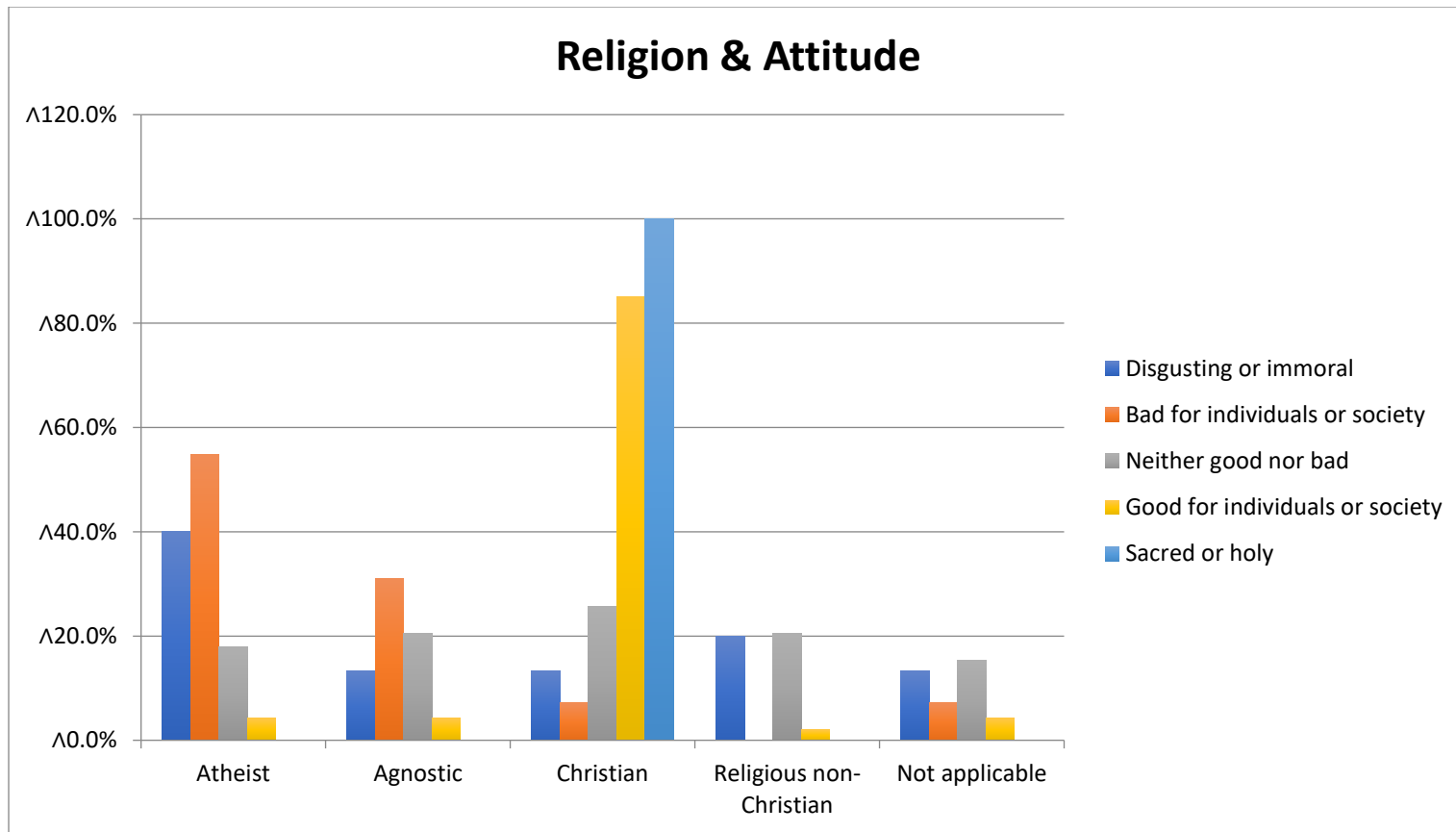


Figure 23

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. First, we did not distinguish between cognitive, affective, and behavioral objections in the literature review for the baseline expert opinion nor the ranking objections section of the survey. We chose the words “power,” “persuasive,” and “strength” to illicit how a participant responds in ranking the objections (rather than distinguishing between cognitive, affective, and behavioral reasons).

The ambiguity of these words has advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantage in the literature review is that it may skew the baseline ranking. The disadvantage in the questionnaire is that respondents may have focused on one of the three areas without giving us a measurable endpoint. The advantage of the ambiguity in the literature review is that it accounts for more accentuated contours of the data without prejudice before averaging the general population. The advantage of the ambiguity in the questionnaire is that it was leading.

Second, we did not distinguish between an objection being powerful/persuasive/strong to the respondent and how the respondent believes others to perceive the objection’s power/persuasiveness/strength. The advantage is that this leads the respondent to answer from an ideal observer’s third-person perspective (more objectively) than their individual first-person perception (more subjectively). The disadvantage was that we could not capture whether or not they were answering with the more objective or more subjective perspective in mind.

Third, there was a bias in the literature review having only included Christian authors—especially Evangelical (or at least Protestant). This was due to the dearth of literature purporting to have listed the most “common” objections. The inclusion of a significant number of non-Christian (and Christian non-Protestant) authors would have helped to mitigate this bias. In any case, the expert opinion was merely a baseline to compare against.

Future Research

The following are considerations for future research. Future studies will conditionalize the priors set forth in this study or override it by accounting for more confounders. We recommend blinding to prevent the Hawthorne effect and undue influence by the rhetorical ethos of authors. Future studies will also include

experimenter and statistician blinds and will home in on more demographic and attitude variables with more direct correlations and statistical significance. We suggest focusing on age, including opposing openness questions directed at particular religious identifications and making religious identification a demographic (rather than attitudinal) data point. Finally, studies focusing on causality may be interested in collecting data more fit to do synchronic or diachronic regression analysis on interventions purported to change belief rankings and attitudes toward Christian theism.

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