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## **Religious Affiliation and Internal/External Religious Coping**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*College students from a medium-sized state university identified their religious affiliation and completed the Ways of Religious Coping Scale (WORCS). Participants' affiliations were compared with the American Religious Identification Surveys (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009) finding that the sample differed significantly from the national surveys in that the present sample contained fewer of those who identified themselves as Catholics, fewer mainline Protestants, more Christians, and more Non-Religious. Reported religious affiliations were compared to participants' WORCS scores. The Non-Religious group was found to use internal and external religion as coping devices significantly less than the other groups as would be expected. There was also a significant difference between reported Baptists and reported Catholics with reported Baptists using internal and external religion as a coping device more than reported Catholics.*

**KEY WORDS:** religious coping, religious affiliation, internal religion, external religion, Catholic, Protestant

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### INTRODUCTION

The present research was concerned with two aspects of religion: (1) self-reported religious affiliation, and (2) internal/external religious coping. Further, the relationship between the two was explored. The distribution of self-reported religious labels on a national scale has been reported by Kosmin and Keysar (2009) (see Table 1). The current research asked the question, how does a secular state college campus in Texas differ from the larger distributions?

In the United States the dominant religious label is that of Christianity; therefore, religious affiliation is primarily that of the various denominations within the Christian community. Denominational differences have been found in many areas of human conduct: monetary donation rates (Forbes & Zampelli, 1997), sexual behavior practices among persons with HIV (Galvan, Collins, Kanouse, Pantoja, & Golinelli, 2007), even infant mortality (Wood, Williams, & Chijiwa, 2007), to mention a few; however, the focus usually falls on Catholics vs. Protestants. It would seem that a wider blanket across more denominations would be worth researching. In many respects, one can argue that denominational groups represent a world view, and an examination of these differences would seem to be worthwhile. As the previous research cited, different religious affiliations, denominational groups, do respond differently as they attempt to cope with life events. Researchers (Beatty & Walter, 1984; Park, Cohen, & Herb, 1990) have noted that more research is needed examining how denominational affiliations relate to various attitudinal and behavioral variables. The present research was an attempt to do so.

Religion is a central construct in the lives of most persons within the USA. Diana Eck (2001) has said, “‘We the people of the United States’ now form the most profusely

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religious nation on earth” (p. 5). Research has confirmed that religious participation of adolescents and young adults operates at a fairly high level within American society (Smith, Denton, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002). Although the American Religious Identification Surveys (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009; Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar, 2001) found that the group showing the most growth across the years (1990, 2000, and 2008) was the non-religious group; still, the vast majority of persons chose some religious identification. A 2008 Gallup Poll found that 61% of persons in the United States are members of a church or synagogue (Gallup, 2008). Further, 80% of those in the national survey said that religion was very or fairly important to their lives. These figures have declined over the years; compared with data from 1998, 68% indicated that they belonged to a church or synagogue, and 88% indicated that religion was very or fairly important in their lives (Gallup, 2009; Gallup & Lindsay, 1999). In spite of decline the level is still quite high.

More specifically Kosmin and Keysar (2008) reported that in the USA the number of people who self-report Christianity as their religion has dropped from 86.2% in 1990 to 76.5% in 2001 to 76.0% in 2008; in the same period of time, other religions have grown from 3.3% to 3.7% to 3.9%. The largest increase has been in those who report no religion or refuse to participate: from 10.5% to 19.6% to 20.2%. Nevertheless, with Christians representing over a three-quarters majority of the population, religion still represents a major force within the lives of most Americans.

The variability of religious affiliation in the USA might be questioned (Beaman, 2003) with three-quarters of the population Christian. However, the groups who call themselves Christian vary quite widely in practice and belief. In the data Kosmin and

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Keysar (2009) reported, Catholic (26.2%, 24.5%, 25.1%; 1990, 2001, 2008 respectively) and Baptist (19.3%, 16.3%, 15.8%) made up the largest groups. They would both maintain that they are Christian, yet the two denominations are quite different in church organization, style of worship, and in church dogma. Within the Christian groups there are also Mormon (1.4%, 1.3%, 1.4%), Pentecostal (3.2%, 3.8%, 3.5%), Jehovah's Witness (.8%, .6%, .8%) and many other groups, all representing quite varied approaches to religion.

Though there is little research on the differences between denominational groups in the use of religious coping, Osborne and Vandenberg (2003) compared Catholics and Disciples of Christ. The results indicated that Catholics were more apt to use negative religious coping strategies, pleading with God and experiencing discontent with God than were Disciples of Christ. Both of these coping strategies were seen as adversely related to successful coping. As might be expected, Chatters, Taylor, Jackson, and Lincoln (2008) found that persons without a religious preference were less likely to endorse religious coping strategies such as prayer. Further, they found that among persons, whom they identified as Caribbean Blacks, Pentecostals were more apt than Baptists to use religious forms of coping. Studying depressed patients, Dervic, et al. (2004) found those with religious affiliation were less likely to engage in suicidal behavior, a very severe form of negative coping.

Park, et al. (1990) found that Catholics, under the stress of events that were perceived as dangerous yet controllable (i.e., the person choosing to end a close relationship or changing one's major), used religious coping which served as a protective device; however, for Protestants, that protection extended to events not so easy to control

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(i.e., marriage of someone close or divorce of parents). So Protestants and Catholics were found to differ in their use of religious coping in varying stressful life situations.

Coping is a construct that increasingly has become a popular topic in the study of psychology of religion (Granqvist, 2005; Pargament, 1997). Various religious coping instruments have been developed such as the Religious Coping Activities Scale (RCAS) (Pargament, et al., 1990) which attempts to measure positive and negative religious coping strategies. The present research, however, chose to use the Ways of Religious Coping Scale (WORCS) (Boudreaux, Catz, Amaral-Melendez, & Brantley, 1995). In examining religious faith, going back to Gordon Allport (Allport, 1966; Allport & Ross, 1967), religious attitudes have been viewed from two varying orientations: intrinsic and extrinsic. Though Allport was examining religious attitudes and we are looking at coping responses the dualistic internal versus external approach seems analogous. In attempting to cope with a situation one may resort to internal responses such as prayer, meditation, private reading of scripture or other materials. Yet, one may also go to the pastor, rabbi, priest, mullah, or other religious leader; join a religious support group; attend religious meetings; or some other sort of external religious function. The WORCS attempts to measure these two styles of coping. Boudreaux et al., in the WORCS measure of religious coping, used this dualistic distinction and have reported that it seems a promising instrument for future research in the area of religious coping. We previously used the instrument and in a study and found that persons more committed to religious pluralism were less likely to use religion as a way of coping, internally and externally, compared to persons less committed to pluralism (Bruce, Menefee, Kordinak, & Harman, 2005). Other researchers using Pargament's scale (e.g., Bradley, Schwartz, & Kaslow,

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2005; Cooper, Bruce, Harman, & Boccaccini, 2009; Kelly, 2003; Pargament, et al., 1990) have demonstrated that religious coping is a useful construct for the examination of religion as an important element in understanding human conduct.

The research questions raised in the present paper were: How does self-reported religious affiliation of students on a Texas state-college campus differ from that of national surveys (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009) of self-reported religious affiliation? Further, we wished to ask: Are there denominational differences in religious coping?

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 285 volunteers from upper level classes, 217 females and 68 males. The sample was drawn from the student population at a midsized state university. The mean age was 24.65 (standard deviation 8.48) with a range of 18 to 58 years. Of the participants 67.92% identified themselves as European American, 15.57% as African American, 11.32% as Hispanic, and 5.19% as other ethnic groups. The majority of the students identified themselves as Catholic, Baptist, or Christian. The distribution of religious affiliation is given in Table 1.

### Materials

Participants completed a short biographical questionnaire which included age, sex, college classification, and an open ended request for identification of religious affiliation. In a manner similar to Kosmin and Keysar (2009), participants were asked to self-identify their religious affiliation using an open-ended question to provide their religious preference without any prompting or follow-up questions.

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Religious coping was measured using the Ways of Religious Coping Scale (WORCS) (Boudreaux, et al., 1995). The WORCS is a 40-item self-report measure of religious thoughts and behaviors. The WORCS has an internal/private scale and an external/social scale. The Internal Scale focuses on activities such as saying prayers and private scripture reading while the External Scale is oriented toward attendance at religious services and interacting with other persons on religious matters. Boudreaux, et al. reported reliability results with WORCS using Chronbach alphas to measure internal consistency: Total Scale .95, Internal Scale .97, and External Scale .93. In the present study the Chronbach alphas were Total Scale .97, Internal Scale .94, and External Scale .96.

Boudreaux et al. also reported several correlations in support of the test's validity, .57 with self-reported religious service attendance, and .78 with a self-report of life-importance of religion. The Religious Coping Activities Scale's (RCAS) (Pargament et al., 1990) six scale scores were correlated with Internal Scale and External Scale. The correlations were all in the expected directions providing support for each scale's validity (Boudreaux, et al., 1995). The Internal scale correlated with the RCAS Spiritually Based Coping scale at .86. The External scale correlated with RCAS Good Deeds scale at .75, with the Religious Support scale at .62. The RCAS Discontent scale correlated -.29 with the Internal and -.32 with the External scales.

The scores for the WORCS are summated rating scores. For the Internal Scale there are 14 items and for the External Scale 10. The two factors were developed by Boudreaux et al. using factor analysis. The responses vary from zero (not used at all) to

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four (used always); thus, the total score could vary from zero to 160, Internal Scale score from zero to 56, and the External Scale score from zero to 40.

### **Procedure and Materials**

In a classroom setting, after reading and signing an informed consent document, the participants were given the questionnaires and asked to respond individually to the questions. The procedure took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The packet of questionnaires contained the demographic questions and the WORCS (Boudreaux, et al., 1995).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In the present study the female participants outnumbered the male participants by a considerable margin. The WORCS scores were examined in relation to gender. The External Scale scores did not reach a statistical level of significance (means for males 19.50 and for females 21.51; standard deviations 19.64 and 18.42 respectively). The difference for the Internal Scale, however, did reach statistical significance, ( $t(283) = -2.10, p = .037, partial \eta^2 = .02$ ; mean for males 21.82 and for females 27.19; standard deviations 17.19 and 18.82 respectively). These results indicate that the females within our study used Internal religious coping (prayer, private reading of scripture, etc.) to a greater extent than did their male counterparts. As stated previously, external religious coping scores were not significantly different. However, even with the significant effect for the Internal Scale the effect size was quite small.

We examined each of five self-identified religious groups—Catholic, mainline (such groups as Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, etc.), Baptist, Christian, and non-religious—in regard to their gender differences on the Internal Scale scores. Only the

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Catholic group yielded a significant difference ( $t(50) = -2.06, p = .048, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .08$ ; mean for males 27.92 and for females 37.00; standard deviations 12.57 and 14.419 respectively). Perhaps within the Catholic community it is considered more standard for females to offer prayers, meditate, and read devotional materials than for males. For the analyses thus far, it should be noted that the partial  $\eta^2$  scores were quite small indicating that the results should be viewed with caution.

The results of the self-identification of religious affiliation distribution from the present study were compared with Kosmin and Keysar (2009) distributions for 1991, 2001, and 2009. The results indicated that our distribution differed significantly from all three (1991  $\chi^2(4, n = 253) = 229.25, p < .01$ ; 2001  $\chi^2(4, n = 253) = 109.82, p < .01$ ; 2009  $\chi^2(4, n = 253) = 93.33, p < .01$ ). In an attempt to determine where the chief differences were, a standard residual procedure was used. A standard residual of 2.00 or greater indicates significant influence on the  $\chi^2$ . The results, comparing our distribution with Kosmin and Keysar's distributions, revealed reported Catholics to be significantly fewer in our distribution (1990, -2.62; 2001, -2.13; and 2008, -2.31) and reported Christians to be more prevalent (1990, 14.06; 2001, 10.14; and 2008 9.34). In other words our sample had significantly more persons self-reporting a Christian identity and significantly fewer persons reporting Catholic identity. There also was a standard residual effect of significantly fewer reported Mainline persons for 1990 (-2.08) and significantly more Non-Religious in 1990 (4.47) in our study compared to Kosmin and Keysar. All others residuals fell below 2.00. Kosmin and Keysar found only Catholic and Baptist in double digit percentages while the present study found Catholic, Baptist, and additionally Christian in double digits. In our survey, the Non-Religion category

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continues to show an increase in the number of persons referring to themselves in this manner. The researchers, from the national surveys, showed 8.2% in 1990, 14.1% in 2001, 15.0 in 2008, and we showed 16.5% in our data. Pentecostal and Church of Christ self-identifications were much lower with our group (0.7% for Pentecostal) compared to Kosmin and Keysar (3.2%, 3.8%, 3.5%) and (0.0% for Church of Christ) compared to (1.0%, 1.2%, .8%). For the comparison of these distributions see Table 1.

The various religious affiliations were compared in their responses on the WORCS instrument. The largest groups: Baptist ( $n = 50$ ), Catholic ( $n = 52$ ), Christian ( $n = 64$ ), Mainline Denominations (Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, and Lutheran) ( $n = 42$ ), and Non-Religious (agnostic, atheistic, none, or did not indicate a religious category) ( $n = 45$ ) were used in the present analysis yielding significant results for the external scores ( $F(4, 248) = 14.21, p < .01, partial \eta^2 = .19$ ) and for the internal scores ( $F(4, 248) = 29.161, p < .01, partial \eta^2 = .32$ ). The significant differences for the External Scale, as determined by the Tukey procedure, were between those who indicated Non-Religious and all other groups ( $p < .01$ ). The Catholic and Baptist were also significantly different from one another ( $p < .01$ ) with scores of reported Catholics being lower. The other differences failed to reach our .05 level of significance. These results imply that Catholics have an orientation style that values attendance at religious services, interacting with other persons on religious matters, and participating in religious activities at a level less than that of the Baptist group. The Baptist group would seem to find these external coping methods of greater value than the Catholic group.

For the Internal Scale scores the significant differences were between the Non-Religious group and all other groups ( $p < .01$ ). Again, Catholics scored significantly

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lower than the Baptist group. None of the other comparisons reached a statistical level of significance ( $p < .05$ ). For both internal and external scores Baptists indicated the highest level of religious coping while the Non-Religious group was the lowest. Therefore, one might conclude that in the realm of internal coping, which would include saying prayers and private reading of scripture, all religious groups valued this aspect to a higher degree than the Non-Religious group. Further, the reported Baptists valued this approach to a greater extent than did the reported Catholics.

One would expect that persons identifying themselves as belonging to a religious group would tend to use religion more for coping than those who do not. Other researchers have also found a tendency for Catholics to show less usage of religion as a coping device compared to Protestants (e.g., Osborne & Vandenberg, 2003; Park, et al., 1990). The distinction between external and internal styles of religious coping was hoped to delineate some of the differences between the various denominational groups examined here; yet both measures revealed similar patterns in this research.

Future research might focus on other varieties of religious experiences. Denominational affiliation is a beginning, and the variety of beliefs within each denomination perhaps would point us toward more precise measures of belief structure.

The questions used in the current study limited the outcome. Perhaps the use of a more thorough interview of religious views and activity would produce more precise and, perhaps, different results. The fact that there were a greater number of female participants may have biased the outcome. The population from which the participants were drawn was college students, a group not noted for its religiosity. The participants

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were all persons taking psychology courses, which further limited the generalizability of this research.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

From this research we think we can draw two conclusions. One, the Kosmin and Kesyar (2009) distribution of religious designations can be used to compare various religious distributions in more restricted samples. Although, this may seem trivial, having a comparison group provides a template for differentiating groups. Our Texas distribution reflected differences among Catholic, Baptist, and Christian designations. The second conclusion is that the Baptist group seemed to be much more apt to use religion as a coping device, as measured by the WORCS, compared to the Catholic group. Further research needs to be conducted to determine, in finer detail, what this affiliation/coping relationship means.

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**TABLE 1**

*Percentage scores for self-identified religious labels from the Kosmin and Keysar (2009) research and the current sample*

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<b>Religious Affiliation</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>Present Study</b>
Catholic	26.2	24.5	25.1	18.6
Baptist	19.3	16.3	15.8	17.6
Protestant	2.6	2.2	3.1	2.1
Methodist	8.0	6.8	5.0	6.0
Lutheran	5.2	4.6	3.8	4.2
Christian	4.6	6.8	7.4	23.8
Presbyterian	2.8	2.7	2.1	2.5
Pentecostal	1.8	2.1	2.4	.7
Episcopal	1.7	1.7	1.1	2.5
Mormon	1.4	1.3	1.4	1.4
Churches of Christ	1.0	1.2	0.8	.0
Non-denominational	0.1	1.2	3.5	4.2
Other Religious Groups	3.3	3.7	3.9	0.7
Non-Religious	8.2	14.1	15.0	16.5

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**TABLE 2**

*Internal and External WORCS mean scores and standard deviations for the various religious groups*

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	<b>External WORCS</b>	<b>Internal WORCS</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>Baptist</b>	16.84 (11.41)	44.26 (13.06)	50
<b>Catholic</b>	8.65 (8.76)	34.73 (14.42)	52
<b>Mainline/Protestant</b>	11.52 (9.46)	36.38 (13.04)	42
<b>Christian</b>	12.02 (10.61)	39.98 (14.51)	64
<b>Non-Religious</b>	2.44 (6.84)	15.36 (15.35)	45

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