



# The Influence of Religious Beliefs on False Memory

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## Introduction

Following Loftus' seminal studies (Loftus & Palmer, 1974) on false memories, researchers have been interested in the factors that can bias memory.

Memory can be biased by preexisting beliefs (Macrae, Scholerscheidt, Bodenhausen, and Milne, 2002) and information favoring one's own group (Van Bavel & Cunningham, 2012).

Frenda et al. (2013) found that Democrats and Republicans were more likely to recall a fabricated event consistent with their political views and attitudes toward the events.

The current study seeks to extend the findings of Frenda et al. by assessing the effects of religious attitudes on memory. It is expected that religious individuals are more likely to falsely remember an event that depicts religion positively or atheism negatively, whereas nonbelievers should show the opposite pattern.

Thus, we presented participants with images of 16 events, half that were actual events and half that were fabricated. Half of each category of events were positive and half were negative towards either religious or atheist groups. We then asked participants to report confidence in memory for their events and their attitude toward the events.

## Methods

### Participants

599 psychology students (480 female; 489 religious) completed the study online in exchange for course credit.

### Procedure

**Questionnaires.** Participants answered demographic questions about gender, GPA, religious and political affiliation. They were then administered the True Religious Beliefs Scale (Zeigler-Hill, Memering, Shackelford & Vonk, in preparation) and the Religious Fundamentalism Scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992) to assess strength of religious beliefs. To assess for cognitive rigidity more broadly, participants were also administered the Need for Closure Scale (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) and the Dogmatism Scale (Rokeach, 1956). All questionnaires utilized a 5 point Likert scale.

**Memory Task.** Participants were presented with eight images corresponding to news stories that depicted four actual events and four fabricated events. Events from each category depicted a positive and negative religious event and a positive and negative atheist event. Participants responded as to how strongly they recalled the event on a four point Likert scale (not at all to very well) and how they felt about the event on a five point Likert scale (very negatively to very positively).

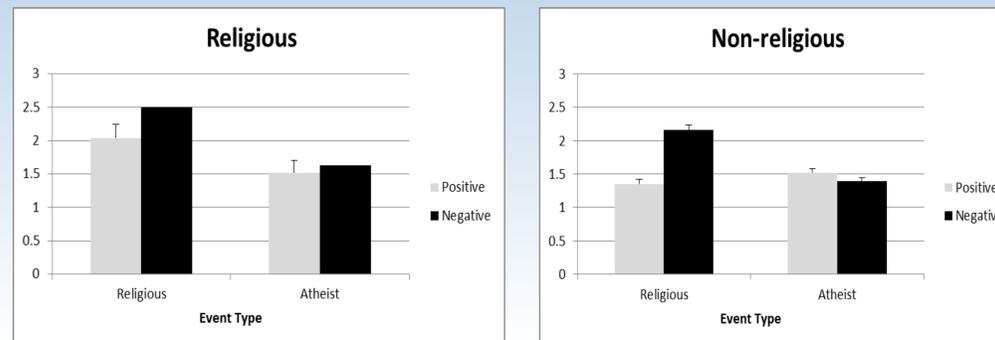
## Discussion

Contrary to our hypothesis, religious people appear to remember both true and false events depicting religion negatively, more than those depicting religion positively (although this two-way interaction was not significant).

For non-religious individuals the same effect was significant.

It appears that events depicting religion negatively are more salient for both religious and non-religious individuals compared to events depicting religion positively, or atheist related events.

## Results



Strength of self-reported memory by religious (left) and non-religious (right) participants as a function of type of event (religious, atheist) and valence (positive, negative)

## References

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