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Rejecting, Welcoming, Accepting, or Affirming? Theological Orientation, Marginalized Identity, and Attitudes Toward Religion

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Abstract

This study examined how Protestant theological orientation and marginalized social identity influence attitudes toward Christian denominations and religion more broadly. We tried to test whether greater theological openness predicts more affirming attitudes and whether marginalized identity moderates this relationship. A total of 479 adults completed measures of Protestant Theological Orientation (PTS), Attitudes Toward Denominations (ATD), Attitudes Toward Religion (ATR), Defensive Theology (DTS), and Attachment to God (AGI). Regression and MANOVA analyses tested hypotheses regarding the predictive roles of theology and marginalization (non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual status). Contrary to expectations, higher biblical literalism (higher PTS scores) predicted stronger affirming attitudes toward both denominations and religion overall. Marginalized participants expressed significantly lower ATD scores but did not differ in ATR. Interaction analyses revealed that marginalized status moderated the relationship between theology and denominational attitudes, suggesting that literalism was especially affirming for marginalized participants. Marginalized individuals also reported higher defensive theology and greater attachment anxiety toward God. Findings challenge assumptions that theological openness fosters affirmation, instead showing that biblical literalism predicts more positive denominational and religious attitudes, particularly among marginalized groups. Results show the complex interplay of theology, social identity, and spiritual resilience, with implications for counseling, pastoral care, and interfaith engagement.

Keywords: Protestant theological orientation; biblical literalism; marginalized identities; religious attitudes; social identity theory; religious meaning-making

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1. Introduction

Religious affiliation and explicit theological orientations profoundly shape how individuals perceive, evaluate, and relate to religious groups, especially within Christianity (Bader and Froese 2005). Denominational differences serve as both doctrinal boundaries and markers of identity, providing frameworks for inclusion, social positioning, and collective meaning-making (Edgell et al. 2006; Streib and Hood 2016). These denominational distinctions extend beyond theology to influence personal identity, moral reasoning, and social behavior, ultimately affecting mental health, civic engagement, and intergroup relations (Smith and Denton 2005; Park 2013).

Attitudes toward religion influence existential meaning-making and patterns of community participation and social belonging. Religious attitudes vary, influencing how

individuals relate to social groups and institutions. Positive attitudes may coincide with social cohesion and engagement, whereas negative attitudes are sometimes associated with alienation or skepticism toward religious organizations (Park 2013; Hill and Pargament 2008). Religious identification and engagement also intersect with experiences of social inclusion and exclusion in broader public life (Gürsoy Erdenay 2025). Much research connects religious beliefs to societal attitudes (McPhetres and Zuckerman 2018; Francis et al. 2005), but less is known about how attitudes toward religion and denominations develop, especially regarding theological openness (the extent to which individuals hold flexible versus literal biblical interpretations) and how this openness shapes religious attitudes across social identities.

1.1. Protestant Theological Orientation in Context

Protestant theology, rooted in the Reformation of the 16th century, emphasizes key principles such as the authority of Scripture alone (Sola Scriptura), justification by faith (Sola Fide), grace as a divine gift (Sola Gratia), Christ alone as mediator (Solus Christus), and giving glory to God alone (Soli Deo Gloria) (Hunsberger 1996; Streib and Hood 2016). These core tenets have historically shaped denominational identity, belief, and religious practice across Protestant traditions. The translation of the Bible into vernacular languages and the emphasis on personal engagement with scripture encouraged theological interpretation by individuals, leading to many denominational expressions (Edgell et al. 2006). Theological orientation ranges broadly from strict Biblical literalism, which emphasizes a fixed, literal reading of scripture and doctrinal certainty, to theological openness, which endorses flexible interpretation, reason, and engagement with contemporary social and ethical issues (McLean et al. 2025; Murphy 2007).

These theological orientations function not only as frameworks for spiritual meaning and moral reasoning but also as social boundary markers that influence inclusion and exclusion within religious communities (Levy and Edmiston 2014; Fox 2022). For some adherents, theological orientation fosters trust in religious institutions and positive attitudes toward Christian denominations (Beck 2006). For marginalized groups, especially sexual and gender minorities, literalist or rigid doctrinal emphases can exacerbate experiences of exclusion and alienation (Kirschner 2024; White et al. 2020). Thus, Protestant theological orientation serves as a double-edged construct: it provides spiritual resilience and belonging for some while potentially justifying exclusion and hierarchy for others.

Importantly, theological orientation in the present study is conceptualized at the level of individual interpretation rather than formal denominational affiliation. Although the present study focuses on Protestant theological orientation, theology is not treated as synonymously with Protestant identity. Instead, theological orientation is understood as an individual-level approach to scriptural authority, interpretation, and doctrinal certainty (Moreno et al. 2022). Although these dimensions are central to Protestant theology, they are not exclusive to Protestants. Individuals across Christian traditions, including Catholicism, vary substantially in how they relate to biblical authority, tradition, and interpretive flexibility (Black 1985; Merino 2010; Doyah 2024). Consequently, examining theological orientation as a psychological and religious construct allows for the investigation of how scriptural interpretation shapes attitudes toward Christian denominations and religion more broadly, even among respondents who do not identify as Protestant.

1.2. Variation and Inclusion in Religious Communities

Religious theology and institutional practices significantly shape the experiences of both people who align with and those who fall outside normative boundaries. Scholars increasingly frame religious traditions along a "rejecting-affirming continuum" regarding

marginalized groups (Levy and Edmiston 2014; Yip 2005). Conservative Protestant denominations often uphold theological positions that explicitly reject or stigmatize identities considered incompatible with doctrinal purity, such as sexual and gender minorities, but liberal or progressive denominations usually adopt more affirming stances (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000; White et al. 2020).

For marginalized individuals, these theological positions have profound psychological and social implications. Exclusion within religious settings is linked to increased minority stress, social alienation, and negative mental health outcomes (Barnes and Meyer 2012; Sowe et al. 2017). Affirming theological orientations can buffer these negative effects by fostering belonging and resilience (Lease et al. 2005; Pitt et al. 2025). Simultaneously, theologically conservative environments provide social capital, in-group cohesion, and spiritual clarity for those whose identities align with their theology, highlighting the complex and contextual nature of theological influence (Edgell et al. 2006; Smith and Denton 2005).

Although other forms of marginalization—such as racial or ethnic discrimination—often operate through broader social or institutional mechanisms (Oliver 2024; Kalinowski et al. 2024; Perry and Whitehead 2019), sexual and gender minorities frequently experience marginalization that is closely tied to doctrinal interpretations (Killian et al. 2025; Lefevor et al. 2022), leading to unique challenges related to theological dissonance (Muskrat et al. 2025; Wilkins et al. 2022). This focus was chosen because it allows the present study to examine mechanisms of marginalization that are rooted in religious teachings, rather than broader social or structural processes, addressing a gap in the literature. By selecting sexual and gender minority groups, the study investigates how doctrinally based exclusion shapes psychological and social outcomes, while acknowledging that other marginalized populations may experience religion-related stress through different pathways.

1.3. Distinguishing Components of Religiosity

It is important to differentiate attitudes toward specific denominations from broader attitudes toward religion (Streib and Hood 2016). Denominations represent institutional and doctrinal traditions (Van Cappellen et al. 2017), whereas religion encompasses wider existential, cultural, and social frameworks (Pargament 1997). Particularly within Protestantism, denominational boundaries are pronounced and signal theological orientations and communal belonging (Streib and Hood 2016).

This distinction is especially important for marginalized groups: a person may reject a denomination that excludes them but maintain positive religious attitudes, or vice versa. Evidence indicates that individuals often disengage from rejecting denominations yet sustain religious commitment through affirming communities (Pitt et al. 2025; Wilcox 2003). This separation allows a nuanced understanding of how acceptance and rejection at various levels influence overall religious perspectives.

1.4. Theoretical Perspectives on Religious Attitude Formation

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) explains that individuals derive meaning and self-concept from their group memberships, with denominational affiliation serving as a key identity marker, especially in Protestant contexts where doctrinal and practical differences are salient (Smith and Denton 2005). This group identification shapes attitudes toward in-group and out-group members, influencing acceptance or exclusion of marginalized identities. Theological openness likely fosters inclusive social identities, encouraging affirming attitudes toward diverse religious communities, whereas more literalist orientations may reinforce exclusivity.

Attribution theory (Exline 2002; Weiner 1986) adds that individuals interpret religious experiences, including exclusion, based on perceived causes, such as divine will or institutional authority. These attributions impact how rejection is appraised, influencing overall attitudes toward religious groups and practices. Theories of religious coping and meaning-making (Pargament 1997; Park 2013) further highlight how theology helps individuals interpret experiences of belonging, suffering, and rejection. Those facing exclusion may experience spiritual struggle or disengagement, but affirming theological frameworks can offer resilience and foster continued religious engagement.

Together, these perspectives suggest that variations in theological orientation and social identity profoundly shape religious attitudes and engagement, particularly for socially marginalized individuals navigating affirmation and rejection.

1.5. Exploratory Constructs: Attachment to God and Defensive Theology

Two more constructs enrich the conceptual framework: the Attachment to God Inventory (AGI) and the Defensive Theology Scale (DTS). The AGI, grounded in attachment theory, distinguishes attachment anxiety (fear of divine abandonment) and avoidance (discomfort with divine closeness), reflecting internalized relationships with God and openness to theological perspectives (Beck and McDonald 2004).

The DTS assesses tendencies toward defensive theology, characterized by a need for certainty, rigid doctrinal adherence, and resistance to ambiguity, especially relevant in debates around Biblical literalism and theological openness in Protestantism (Beck 2006). Higher DTS scores correlate with negative attitudes toward religious diversity and stronger alignment with exclusionary denominational positions. Though not central to the present hypotheses, AGI and DTS provide insights into relational and cognitive processes shaping religious attitudes.

1.6. Current Study

The present study examined how Protestant theological orientation, ranging from theological openness to Biblical literalism, and marginalized group membership influence attitudes toward Christian denominations and broader religious attitudes. Although earlier research shows that theological orientation shapes meaning-making and religious engagement (Hunsberger 1996; Streib and Hood 2016), less is known about its effects across social identities, which is an important topic.

We proposed three main hypotheses. First, individuals scoring lower on the Protestant Theology Scale (indicating greater theological openness) were expected to report more affirming attitudes toward denominations (ATD) and religion (ATR; H1), consistent with studies linking liberal theological outlooks to inclusive religious engagement (Edgell et al. 2006).

Second, participants from stereotypically marginalized groups (non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual) were hypothesized to show lower ATD and ATR scores than non-marginalized individuals (H2), reflecting how exclusionary religious experiences reduce trust and religious engagement (Ammerman 2005; Pargament 1997; Park 2013).

Third, we explored the moderating role of marginalized status on the relationship between Protestant theological orientation (PTS) and attitudes (ATD, ATR) to assess potential differences by social identity. This exploratory goal addresses gaps in understanding how marginalized individuals perceive theological orientations in terms of denominational affirmation or rejection (Ammerman 2005; Masten 2014). Significant interactions would suggest social identity shapes religious meaning-making among historically excluded groups.

2. Results

We conducted a multiple regression analysis, examining Attitudes toward Denominations (ATD) as the outcome, which indicated a significant overall model ($F(3, 473) = 103.74$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 39.7% of variance. Contrary to H1, Protestant Theology Scale (PTS) significantly predicted ATD ($B = 0.61$, $SE = 0.06$, $\beta = 0.46$, $t = 10.27$, $p < 0.001$) such that higher scores (greater Biblical literalism) were associated with more affirming denominational attitudes. Marginalized status was a significant negative predictor ($B = -1.12$, $SE = 0.55$, $\beta = -0.26$, $t = -2.03$, $p = 0.04$), consistent with H2, such that marginalized participants reported lower ATD scores overall than non-marginalized participants did.

For Attitude Toward Religion (ATR), a parallel regression revealed a significant overall model ($F(3, 475) = 23.29$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 12.8% of variance. PTS positively predicted ATR ($B = 0.21$, $SE = 0.03$, $\beta = 0.36$, $t = 6.67$, $p < 0.001$), contrary to H1, such that higher scores (greater Biblical literalism) were associated with more positive attitudes towards religion. Marginalized status ($B = -0.02$, $SE = 0.29$, $\beta = -0.01$, $t = -0.08$, $p = 0.94$) was not significant for ATR, providing no support for H2 on broader religious attitudes.

2.1. Exploratory Analysis

We also explored whether marginalized status (non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual identities) influences the relationship between PTS scores and attitudes toward denominations and broader religious attitudes. The interaction between PTS and marginalized status was significant for ATD ($B = 0.373$, $SE = 0.103$, $\beta = 0.485$, $t = 3.628$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that the association between theological orientation and denominational attitudes differs for marginalized versus non-marginalized participants. Because higher PTS scores reflect Biblical Literalism and lower scores reflect Theological Openness, this suggests that marginalized participants respond differently to literalist versus open theological orientations when evaluating denominations. However, the interaction was not significant for ATR ($B = -0.09$, $SE = 0.054$, $\beta = -0.26$, $t = -1.60$, $p = 0.11$), showing no detectable difference in the relationship between PTS and broader religious attitudes by marginalized status. These findings are descriptive and exploratory, providing initial evidence that marginalized status may shape how theological orientation relates to attitudes toward denominations, whereas broader religious attitudes appear less sensitive to this interaction.

2.2. Exploratory Descriptive Analyses: DTS, AGI, and ATR Context

To provide more context regarding participants' theological and relational profiles, a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with marginalized status (non-marginalized = 0; marginalized = 1) as the independent variable and these dependent variables: Attitudes Toward Denominations (ATD), Protestant Theology Scale (PTS), Defensive Theology Scale (DTS), Attachment to God Inventory subscales (AGI Anxiety and AGI Avoidance), and Attitudes Toward Religion (ATR). Using Wilks' Lambda, the overall multivariate effect of marginalized status was significant (Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.863$, $F(6, 471) = 12.46$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.14$), suggesting systematic differences between marginalized and non-marginalized participants on the combined dependent variables.

Follow-up univariate analyses revealed that marginalized participants reported significantly higher scores on ATD, PTS, DTS, and both AGI subscales: Anxiety and Avoidance. Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics for these analyses. Specifically, for the AGI, marginalized individuals showed greater anxiety regarding their relationship with God, characterized by fears of divine abandonment and worries about acceptance ($F(1, 476) = 47.29$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.09$). They also reported modestly but significantly greater avoidance of emotional closeness and dependence on God ($F(1, 476) = 6.00$, $p = 0.015$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.012$). Marginalized participants reported slightly lower attitudes toward religion (ATR).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Attachment to God and Related Scales by Marginalized Group Status.

Measure	Marginalized Group Status	*M*	*SD*	*N*
God Anxiety	No (0)	53.84	21.49	312
	Yes (1)	68.01	21.40	166
	Total	58.76	22.47	478
God Avoidance	No (0)	56.98	13.57	312
	Yes (1)	59.80	8.16	166
	Total	57.96	12.04	478
ATD Total	No (0)	6.03	1.88	312
	Yes (1)	7.31	2.16	166
	Total	6.48	2.07	478
DTS Total	No (0)	4.15	1.20	312
	Yes (1)	4.50	1.02	166
	Total	4.27	1.15	478
PTS Total	No (0)	4.69	1.54	312
	Yes (1)	5.35	1.50	166
	Total	4.92	1.56	478
ATR Total	No (0)	5.38	0.99	312
	Yes (1)	5.03	0.66	166
	Total	5.26	0.90	478

Note: Dichotomous predictors were dummy coded (0 and 1) so that regression coefficients represent the expected difference in the outcome between groups.

3. Discussion

This study examined how Protestant theological orientation, operationalized through the Protestant Theology Scale (PTS), and marginalized identity (non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual status) relate to attitudes toward Christian denominations and religion broadly. Drawing on foundational theories of religious meaning-making and the social consequences of exclusion (Ammerman 2005; Hunsberger 1996; Park 2013; Streib and Hood 2016), these findings highlight complex interactions between doctrinal orientation and social identity intersect to shape religious attitudes within contemporary Protestant contexts.

3.1. Protestant Theological Orientation, Denominational Engagement, and Religious Attitudes

Contrary to our initial hypothesis that greater theological openness (lower PTS scores) would predict more affirming denominational and religious attitudes, results indicated the opposite: individuals with higher PTS scores, reflecting greater Biblical literalism and doctrinal conservatism, reported stronger affirming attitudes toward Christian denominations and religion overall. Although unexpected, this finding resonates with past studies linking Biblical literalism to enhanced denominational loyalty and positive religious engagement (Biehl 2013; Fullerton and Hunsberger 1982; Leege and Kellstedt 2016). Biblical literalism usually establishes clear interpretive frameworks that reinforce cohesive denominational identity and foster strong affiliation and positive evaluations (Streib and Hood 2016). Thus, more conservative theological views may give individuals interpretive certitude that supports and enhances their evaluative affiliation with faith communities.

3.2. Marginalization, Denominational Engagement, and Religious Attitudes

Hypothesis 2 stated that marginalized participants would report lower affirming attitudes toward Christian denominations and religion overall, consistent with extant literature on exclusion and religious disengagement (Ammerman 2005; Park 2013). The present findings confirmed this expectation for attitudes toward Christian denominations: marginalized participants viewed denominational communities as less affirming than non-marginalized participants did. This is congruent with research documenting that

marginalized individuals, especially sexual and gender minorities, often encounter theological rejection, institutional exclusion, and cultural stigma within many denominational settings (Westwood 2022). Experiences of exclusion and perceived negative stereotypes, such as assumptions about Christianity's incompatibility with LGBTQ identities, contribute to these more critical denominational attitudes (Westwood 2022).

However, contrary to the expectation of a parallel decline in broader attitudes toward religion, marginalized participants did not uniformly show reduced attitudes toward religion at large. This divergence aligns with resilience literature showing that marginalized individuals often maintain personal faith and spiritual attachment despite institutional critiques (Masten 2014; Hertzke 2018). Such patterns reflect a strategic differentiation: although denominational bodies may be perceived as exclusionary or hostile, religion as a broader existential and cultural system remains a source of meaning, identity, and spiritual connection. This nuanced stance highlights the complex ways marginalized people negotiate faith: by adapting and redefining religious engagement to maintain hope, resilience, and personal spirituality beyond institutional trust (Hertzke 2018; Emmons 2005).

3.3. Marginalization as a Moderator: Insights and Surprises

Exploratory analyses revealed that marginalized status moderated the association between theological openness/Biblical literalism and attitudes toward Christian denominations. Specifically, the positive relationship between Biblical literalism and affirming denominational attitudes was stronger for marginalized participants compared to non-marginalized ones. This pattern is supported by findings that individuals with higher Biblical literalism often draw on clear doctrinal boundaries and a sense of scriptural inerrancy to reinforce denominational loyalty and positive affiliation, particularly in Evangelical traditions (Oberlin and Scheitle 2019; Smith and Tuttle 2013; Village 2005). For marginalized individuals who may experience exclusion or doctrinal conflict within their communities, greater Biblical literalism seems to provide a stable interpretive framework and a form of religious identity "anchoring," offering structure and belonging in response to social adversity (Biehl 2013; Hertzke 2018; Village 2005). This resonates with research showing that literalist beliefs can serve as protective schema against perceived threats and can help with social engagement with one's faith tradition even when broader institutional experiences are ambivalent or strained (Oberlin and Scheitle 2019; Smith and Tuttle 2013; Village 2005).

Moreover, research suggests that Biblical literalists often rely on propositional interpretations of scripture and view scriptural authority as essential for religious practice and belonging (Smith and Tuttle 2013; Village 2005). Such approaches may help marginalized individuals reconcile experiences of exclusion by focusing on unambiguous religious commitments and identity markers endorsed by their faith communities, sustaining denominational affirmation in contexts that might otherwise be alienating.

3.4. Contextual Insights from Attachment to God and Defensive Theology

The significant multivariate effect of marginalized status across these theological and relational measures illustrates important group differences in religious experience and orientation. The elevated AGI Anxiety among marginalized individuals suggests heightened spiritual concern and preoccupation with divine acceptance, consistent with past literature linking social and institutional rejection to spiritual distress and insecure attachment patterns (Ellison et al. 2012; Pirutinsky et al. 2019). Increased AGI Avoidance indicates some tendency toward emotional distancing or reluctance to rely fully on God, which may function as a protective coping mechanism amid perceived religious exclusion.

Together, these attachment profiles enrich understanding of how marginalized people negotiate faith in the face of adversity, supporting attachment theory's proposition that secure attachment fosters well-being, but insecure attachment, manifested in anxiety and avoidance, signals spiritual struggle (Beck and McDonald 2004; Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2013). When combined with findings of heightened theological conservatism (PTS) and defensive postures (DTS), these results suggest a complex interplay of faith, spiritual vulnerability, and protective boundary maintenance strategies within marginalized groups, supported by earlier literature (Miller and Stark 2002; Levy and Edmiston 2014). This pattern highlights the need for differentiated approaches in pastoral care and religious engagement that recognize the nuances of marginalized individuals' spiritual attachment and theological orientation.

3.5. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Taken together, the literature suggests that theological orientation, ranging from theological openness to Biblical literalism, functions not only as a foundation for meaning and resilience but also as a critical lens shaping selective, strategic engagement within religious contexts (Biehl 2013; Masten 2014). Biblical literalism, characterized by a commitment to the Bible's inerrancy and literal interpretation, usually provides clear interpretive boundaries and doctrinal certitude, which can support religious identity and affiliation, especially among marginalized individuals navigating social exclusion (Fullerton and Hunsberger 1982; Leege and Kellstedt 2016). Theological openness allows for more flexible, metaphorical, or contextual interpretations of scripture, which may foster different modes of religious engagement.

Empirical and theoretical scholarship affirm the importance of distinguishing between the roles of personal theological orientation, denominational affiliation, and institutional trust in understanding contemporary religious participation and adaptation, particularly among marginalized groups (Streib and Hood 2016; Park 2013). These findings challenge monolithic models of religious engagement, calling instead for multidimensional frameworks attuned to identity, context, and meaning-making processes as shaped by varied theological perspectives.

3.6. Limitations and Future Research

This study shares common limitations with prior research, including its cross-sectional design which limits causal inference, and the focus on sexual and gender identity marginalization, excluding other social dimensions. Uneven sample sizes between marginalized and non-marginalized groups may have affected statistical power and the precision of group comparisons, justifying caution in generalizing results. Future studies using longitudinal, qualitative, and intersectional designs with more diverse and balanced samples can deepen our understanding of how theological orientation and marginalized identities interact over time to shape religious meaning-making and engagement.

Importantly, the present findings should be interpreted with attention to the specific form of marginalization examined. Sexual and gender minority status can involve experiences of religious marginalization that are often rooted in doctrinal interpretations, whereas racial and ethnic marginalization may more commonly manifest through institutional or societal mechanisms (Killian et al. 2025; Lefevor et al. 2022; Oliver 2024; Kalinowski et al. 2024; Perry and Whitehead 2019). In some contexts, racially marginalized groups maintain affiliation with religious traditions and may endorse literalist interpretations of scripture (Salazar et al. 2019), while sexual and gender minorities more frequently encounter theological dissonance within Christian settings (Muskrat et al. 2025; Wilkins et al. 2022). Focusing on sexual and gender minority respondents allows for closer examination of

how doctrinally rooted marginalization affects psychological and social outcomes, without assuming uniform experiences across other marginalized populations.

Additionally, the denominational composition of the sample warrants consideration. Because a majority of participants identified as Catholic, the findings should not be interpreted as reflecting Protestant identity or denominational behavior per se. Rather, they illuminate how theological orientation toward scripture relates to religious attitudes across respondents. Future research explicitly focused on distinguishing between specific theological frameworks may benefit from adopting designs that compare these associations within more clearly delineated denominational subsamples.

This research highlights the nuanced and critical interplay between theology and social identity in shaping religious attitudes, particularly within marginalized populations. By revealing how Biblical literalism can serve as both a stabilizing and complex influence on faith affiliation, this study advances our understanding of religious meaning-making in contemporary Protestantism and highlights the need for inclusive, contextually aware approaches in both scholarship and religious practice.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Participants

Four hundred eighty individuals were recruited primarily through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (84.4%), with more participants from Facebook (9.6%) and Sona-Systems (a system used to recruit and manage undergraduate university student participants in exchange for course credit; 3.3%). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 86 years (M = 35.00, SD = 12.17). The sample was predominantly White (84.2%), with smaller proportions identifying as Black/African American (6.9%), Asian (3.3%), Hispanic/Latino(a) (2.9%), multiracial (1.5%), American Indian/Alaska Native (1.0%), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (0.2%). After excluding incomplete or ineligible responses, the final samples included 479 for regression and 477 for MANOVA analyses. Regarding gender identity, 62.1% identified as cis-male and 36.5% as cis-female, with small percentages identifying as transgender or gender non-conforming. Sexual orientation included 65.4% heterosexual, 29.2% bisexual/pansexual, 3.5% asexual, and 1.7% gay/lesbian. Religiously, most identified as Christian (61.3% Roman Catholic, 3.5% Baptist, 3.3% Methodist, others), followed by atheist (5.8%), agnostic (7.5%), or other affiliations. Although most respondents identified as Catholic, participants were retained in the analytic sample because the central construct of interest was theological orientation rather than denominational affiliation.

Politically, 57.9% were Democrat, 21.7% were Republican, and 16.7% were Independent; 60% reported voting for Biden in 2020, and 24% voted for Trump. Participants went to religious services an average of 10 days per month (SD = 15.00) and engaged in other religious activities (e.g., prayer) an average of 12 days per month (SD = 20.00). A binary variable categorized 165 participants as "stereotypically marginalized" based on non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual identity.

4.2. Materials

The study included measures capturing multiple parts of religiosity, theological orientations, and attitudes toward religion. Key constructs were the Protestant Theological Scale (PTS), Attitudes Toward Denominations (ATD), and Attitudes Toward Religion (ATR). Additional descriptive measures included Defensive Theology (DTS) and Attachment to God (AGI). A single-item belief in God measure was also collected but not analyzed. Participants provided demographic information including age, gender, sexual orientation, and political affiliation. Marginalization within conservative Christian contexts was operationalized as a binary variable indicating whether participants belonged to groups historically stereotyped

as excluded (e.g., non-cisgender, non-heterosexual), allowing for the examination of group differences in religious attitudes.

4.2.1. Religious Attitudes

A 14-item scale was developed for this study to assess perceived warmth toward a range of Christian denominations (e.g., Roman Catholic, Southern Baptist). Participants rated each denomination on a 4-point scale (1 = Rejecting to 4 = Affirming). Scores were averaged such that higher scores reflected greater affirmation of Christian denominations. The scale showed excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.96$).

Participants completed the Attitudes towards Religion Scale (ATR) (Piazza and Landy 2013) as well. The ATR is a 12-item measure, with half of the items reverse-coded, that evaluates participants' attitudes toward the social role of religion (e.g., "Religion promotes tolerance"). Responses were made on a 7-point scale (1 = disagree to 7 = agree). Following reverse-coding, the scale showed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.73$), though lower than previously reported ($\alpha = 0.94$) (Piazza and Landy 2013).

4.2.2. Defensive Theology

The Defensive Theology Scale (DTS) (Beck 2006) is a 22-item measure of rigid theological beliefs emphasizing divine determinism and control (e.g., "God controls every event, down to the smallest details"). Responses were made on a 7-point scale (1 = Disagree strongly to 7—Agree strongly). In the present sample, the scale showed strong reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$), consistent with work reporting coefficients above 0.85 (Beck 2006). This scale was reported descriptively to contextualize theological orientation but was not used in primary hypothesis testing.

4.2.3. Protestant Theology

The Protestant Theology Scale (PTS) (McLean et al. 2025) is an 18-item measure developed to assess core theological orientations within Protestantism, based on a framework (Murphy 2007) distinguishing theological openness and Biblical literalism. The scale integrates items across scripture, doctrine, and authority into a single dimension, rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree). In the current study, there was excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.97$). Higher scores indicate greater Biblical literalism, whereas lower scores reflect greater theological openness.

4.2.4. Attachment to God

The Attachment to God Inventory (AGI (Beck and McDonald 2004)) is a 28-item self-report measure assessing two dimensions of spiritual attachment: Avoidance of intimacy with God and Anxiety about abandonment by God. Participants rate items on a 7-point Likert scale, with composite scores computed separately for each subscale. Previous research showed good internal reliability for both subscales (Avoidance $\alpha \approx 0.86$; Anxiety $\alpha \approx 0.84$) and low shared variance, supporting distinct constructs (Beck and McDonald 2004; Pirutinsky et al. 2019). In the current sample, internal consistency was excellent for Anxiety ($\alpha = 0.95$) but moderate for Avoidance ($\alpha = 0.67$).

4.3. Procedure

Participants completed an online survey comprising several self-report questionnaires, taking about 30 min. After providing informed consent, measures were presented in randomized order, including ATD, DTS, PTS, AGI, ATR, and demographic questions. Compensation varied by recruitment source: students received course credit towards a requirement of four credits, MTurk workers were paid following submission approval within 72 h, and Facebook recruits could enter a draw for a $25 Amazon gift card by

providing their email. All participants received a debriefing and thank you message upon completion.

5. Conclusions

This study advances our understanding of religious attitude formation by demonstrating that Protestant theological orientation and marginalized social identity interact in complex and sometimes counterintuitive ways. Contrary to assumptions that theological openness necessarily fosters more affirming religious attitudes, greater biblical literalism predicted stronger affirmation of both Christian denominations and religion overall, particularly among marginalized individuals. These findings suggest that theological conservatism may function as a stabilizing and identity-anchoring framework that supports meaning-making and denominational engagement, even among those who experience social or institutional exclusion. At the same time, marginalized participants' lower evaluations of denominations—paired with stable attitudes toward religion more broadly—underscore the importance of distinguishing institutional affiliation from personal faith and spiritual meaning. Together, the results highlight the multidimensional nature of religiosity, illustrating how theology, identity, attachment, and defensiveness converge to shape religious engagement. By challenging linear models of inclusion and belief, this study calls for more nuanced theoretical, pastoral, and empirical approaches that recognize both the protective and problematic roles theology may play in the lives of marginalized believers.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: We reported how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations (there were none in this study), and all measures in the study. We followed JARS (Kazak 2018). All data and research materials are publicly available on the Open Science Framework in (Moreno et al. 2022). Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 29). This study's design and its analyses were not pre-registered.

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