

Tolerating the “Doubting Thomas”: How Emphasis of Religious Beliefs versus Practices Influences Anti-Atheist Prejudice

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Introduction

- Numerous studies show a robust association between religion and prejudice against atheists (Cook, Cottrell, & Webster, in press; Gervais, 2013)
- For example, Americans rate atheists as the top group that “does not at all agree with my vision of American society” (39.6%), above other groups that are often targets of prejudice, such as homosexuals (22.6%) and Muslims (26.3%; Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006)
- However, research in this area has almost universally been conducted on US samples, a country with a Protestant majority (and three-quarters Christian; Pew Research Center, 2008)
- Not all religious groups share American, Christian focus on beliefs: Protestants place more emphasis than Jews on *religious beliefs*, while Jews place more emphasis on *religious practices* (Cohen, Siegel, & Rozin, 2003)
- Practices-oriented religions are also more likely to stress the importance of biological descent or ethnic identity, with religious practices and rituals as a means of maintaining group cohesiveness (Cohen & Hill, 2007)

Hypotheses

- If atheists as a group are largely defined by their lack of belief in God (Swan & Heesacker, 2012), then anti-atheist prejudice should be more evident in belief-oriented religions compared to practices-oriented religions
- Conversely, practice-oriented religions should display more prejudice toward non-practicing individuals—particularly when those individuals are perceived to be biological/ethnic members of that religion

Belief-oriented	Protestant Christians, Muslims
Practices-oriented	Jews, Hindus

Study 1

Method:

- Data obtained from 2008 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP Research Group, 2012), surveying 41 countries
- Sample limited to participants who identified as being Protestant ($n = 12,188$), Muslim ($n = 2,167$), Jewish ($n = 1,104$), or Hindu ($n = 203$)
- Participants rated atheists with item “What is your personal attitude towards members of the following religious groups? Atheists or non-believers” (1 = “very positive” to 5 = “very negative”)

Study 1 (cont.)

Results:

- Used multilevel random intercepts model with participants (Level 1) nested within countries (Level 2), to control for between-country effects not related to religion
- Controlled for age, gender, and education in analyses
- Significant effect of religious background, $F(3,8158) = 22.55$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = .016$ (see Figure 1)

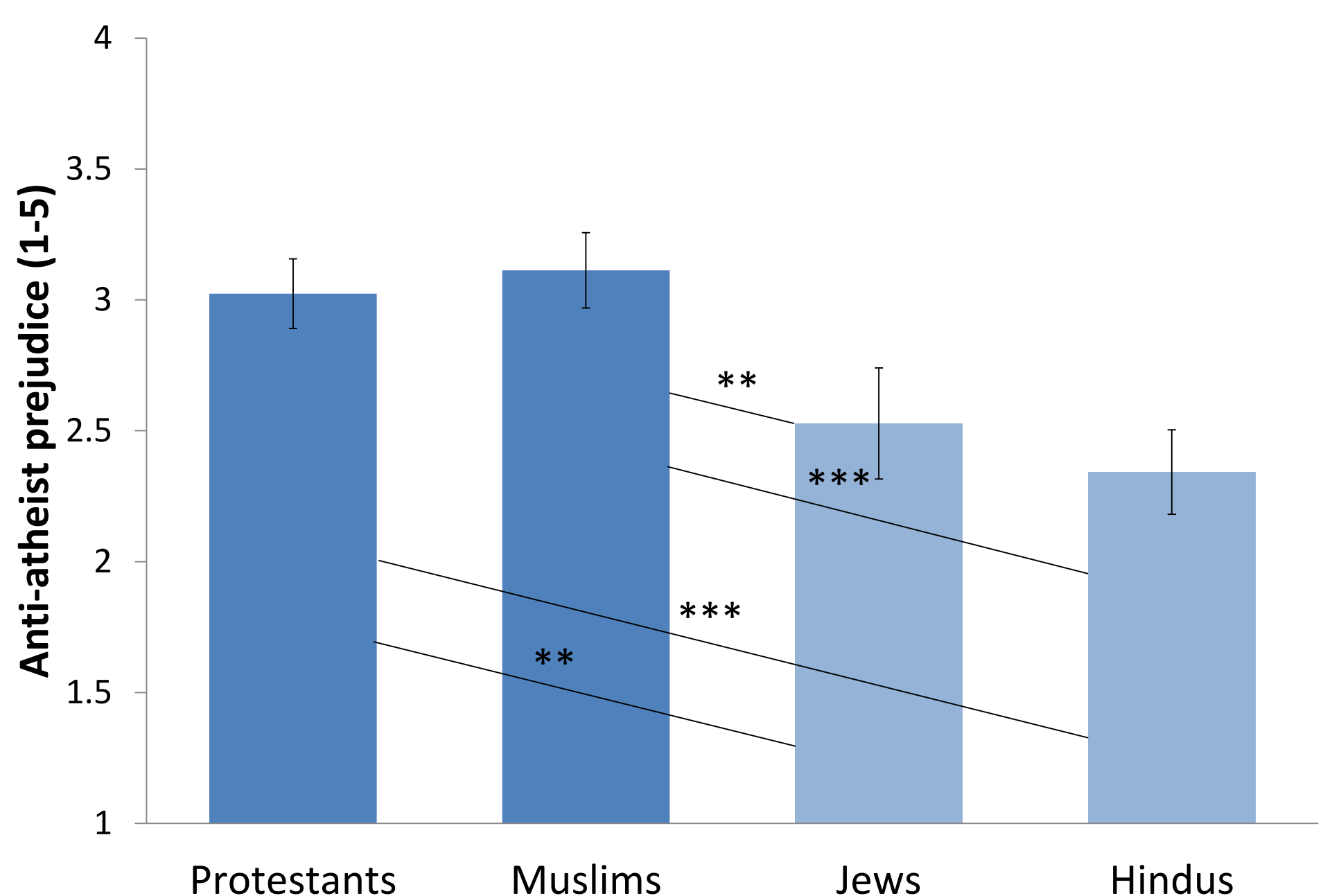


Figure 1. Negative feelings toward atheists, by participants' religious group membership.

Study 2

Method:

- 311 Protestants, 271 Jews from Mechanical Turk
- Participants read short description about target individual named Ruth
- Manipulated **religious upbringing** (Christian vs. Jewish), **beliefs** (does vs. does not believe), and **practices** (does vs. does not practice)
- For example, the believing and practicing target [Christian/Jewish] was described as follows:

Ruth grew up in a [Christian/Jewish] home. She is a teacher at an elementary school in a large American city. She enjoys the process of developing teaching plans, but also appreciates the chance to help students learn and develop. When asked about her religious beliefs, Ruth says that she believes in God, in an afterlife, and believes that [Jesus died and rose again / the Torah came from God]. She attends her local [church/synagogue] regularly, and participates in all major [Christian/Jewish] holidays.

- Participants then answered four questions on a scale from 0–100: how they felt toward Ruth in general, how much they liked Ruth, how similar they and Ruth were, and how trustworthy Ruth was
- These were combined into a score of general attitudes ($\alpha = .91$)

Study 2 (cont.)

Results:

- We found the predicted three-way interactions:
 - Participant religion \times target religion \times target beliefs, $F(1,564) = 6.09$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .011$
 - Participant religion \times target religion \times target practices, $F(1,564) = 3.54$, $p = .06$, $\eta^2 = .006$
- For Protestants:
 - Target religion \times target beliefs**, $F(1,305) = 4.86$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .016$ (see Figure 2)
 - Target religion \times target practices, $F(1,305) = .27$, $p = .60$, $\eta^2 = .001$
- For Jews:
 - Target religion \times target beliefs, $F(1,265) = 1.26$, $p = .26$, $\eta^2 = .005$
 - Target religion \times target practices**, $F(1,265) = 4.12$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .016$ (see Figure 3)

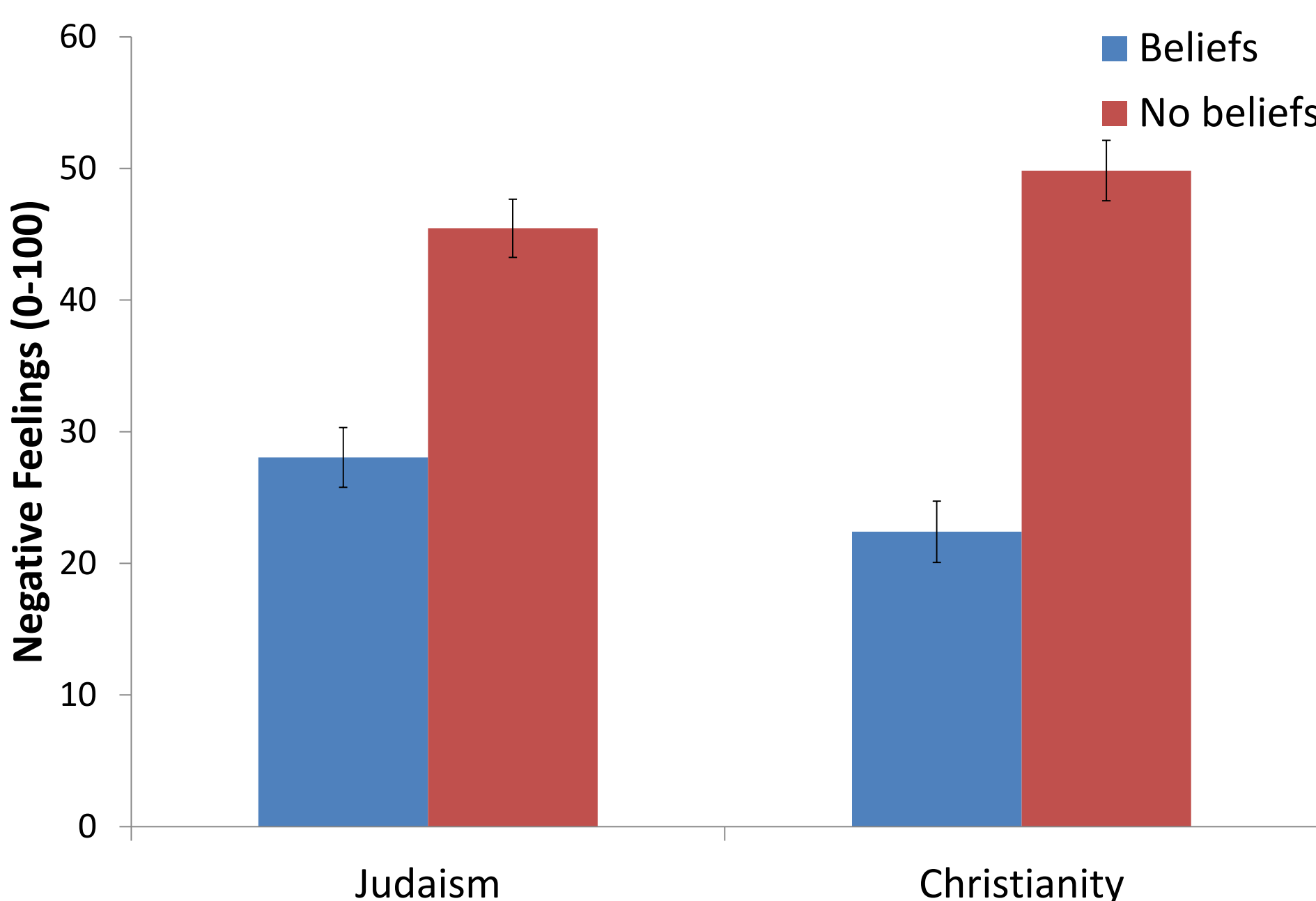


Figure 2. Negative feelings toward target, by target religion and target level of beliefs (**Protestant** participants only).

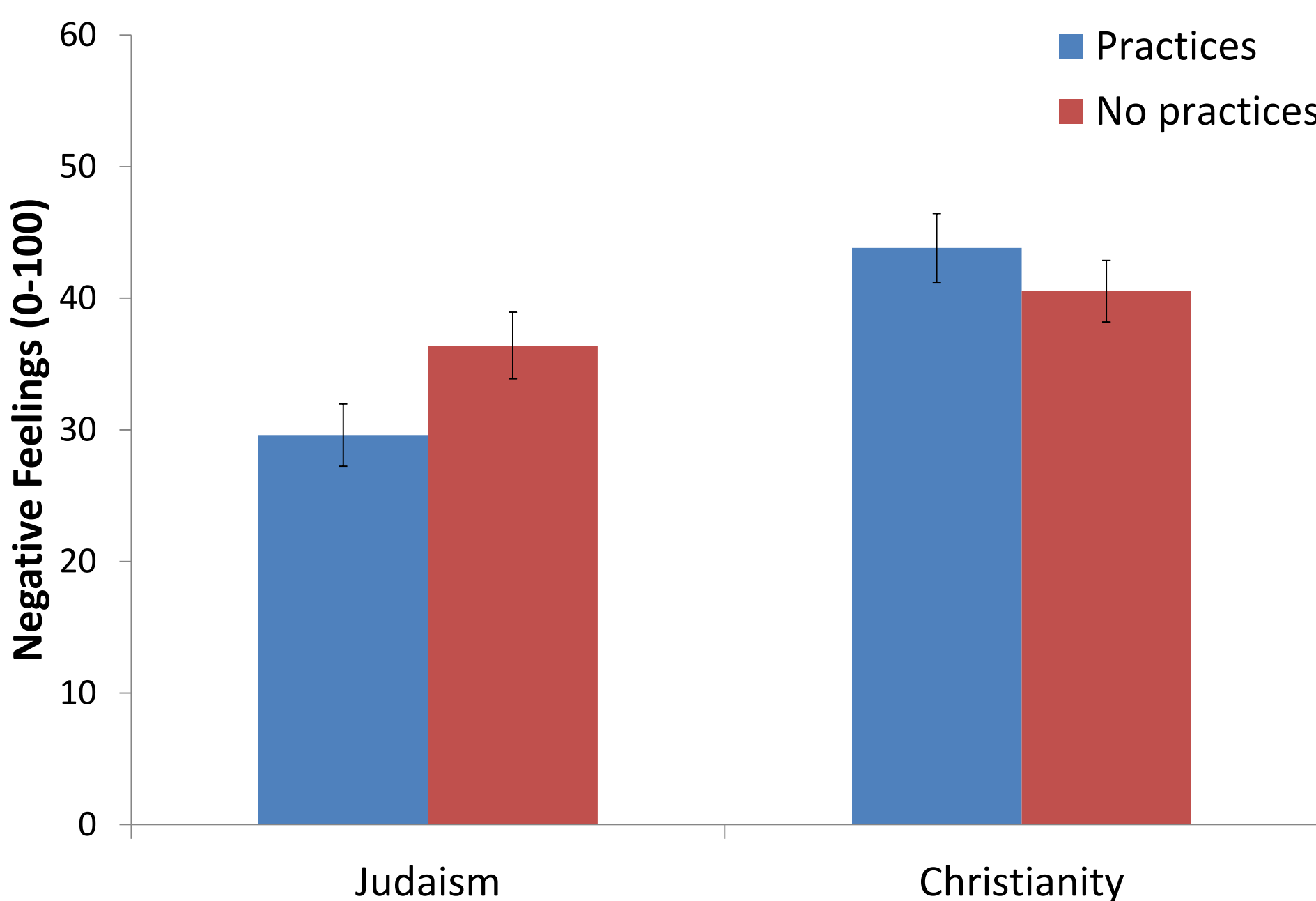


Figure 3. Negative feelings toward target, by target religion and target level of practices (**Jewish** participants only).

Conclusions

- Religious groups with different emphases on beliefs vs. practices have differing attitudes toward atheists, as well as non-believing and non-practicing individuals more generally
- Protestants used information about beliefs in forming attitudes, but generally were insensitive to group membership
- In contrast, Jews used information about practices in forming attitudes, but only if the target was also Jewish
- Other studies not shown here have ruled out political conservatism and religious fundamentalism as explanations for these results

Implications

- Part of the reason for anti-atheist prejudice found in research on US samples could be due to the strong emphasis of Protestants on belief
- The criteria religious groups use to determine who belongs in the ingroup may influence how accepting they are toward outsiders, as well as what behaviors are acceptable or unacceptable within the religious community
 - Religious groups emphasizing beliefs may be more tolerant toward deviance in practices (e.g., a Christian not attending church)
 - Religious groups emphasizing practices may have more tolerance for dissent in beliefs (e.g., a “doubting Thomas”)

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