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## How Christians Reconcile Their Personal Political Views and the Teachings of Their Faith: Projection as a Means of Dissonance Reduction

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## Abstract

The present study explores the dramatic projection of one's own views onto those of Jesus among conservative and liberal American Christians. In a large-scale survey, the relevant views that each group attributed to a contemporary Jesus differed almost as much as their own views. Despite such dissonance-reducing projection, however, conservatives acknowledged the relevant discrepancy with regard to "fellowship" issues (e.g., taxation to reduce economic inequality and treatment of immigrants) and liberals acknowledged the relevant discrepancy with regard to "morality" issues (e.g., abortion and gay marriage). However, conservatives also claimed that a contemporary Jesus would be even more conservative than themselves on the former issues whereas liberals claimed that Jesus would be even more liberal than themselves on the latter issues. Further reducing potential dissonance, liberal and conservative Christians differed markedly in the types of issues they claimed to be more central to their faith. A concluding discussion considers the relationship between individual motivational processes and more social processes that may underlie the present findings, as well as implications for contemporary social and political conflict.

## Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## Comments

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# How Christians reconcile their personal political views and the teachings of their faith: Projection as a means of dissonance reduction

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Contributed by Lee D. Ross, December 1, 2011 (sent for review August 12, 2011)

**The present study explores the dramatic projection of one's own views onto those of Jesus among conservative and liberal American Christians. In a large-scale survey, the relevant views that each group attributed to a contemporary Jesus differed almost as much as their own views. Despite such dissonance-reducing projection, however, conservatives acknowledged the relevant discrepancy with regard to "fellowship" issues (e.g., taxation to reduce economic inequality and treatment of immigrants) and liberals acknowledged the relevant discrepancy with regard to "morality" issues (e.g., abortion and gay marriage). However, conservatives also claimed that a contemporary Jesus would be even more conservative than themselves on the former issues whereas liberals claimed that Jesus would be even more liberal than themselves on the latter issues. Further reducing potential dissonance, liberal and conservative Christians differed markedly in the types of issues they claimed to be more central to their faith. A concluding discussion considers the relationship between individual motivational processes and more social processes that may underlie the present findings, as well as implications for contemporary social and political conflict.**

Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error (Romans 1:27, New International Version).

Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me (Matthew 25:40, New International Version).

American Christians, both liberal and conservative, must deal with conflict between the traditional dictates of their faith and their personal political views and allegiances. This tension is most obvious in the case of those who identify with the Christian Right and the Republican Party. The exhortations of altruism, fellowship, and the common bond of all humanity captured in the quotation from Matthew convey a major theme of the New Testament, indeed one arguably much more central to the teachings of Christ than the cultural issues that have served as the rallying call for many Christian churches and television networks (1). However, in the decades since the New Deal, the Republican party, which has become ever more opposed to progressive taxation, expenditures for social services, lenient treatment of illegal immigrants and their families, and other policies designed to ease the burdens of the least fortunate, has enjoyed increasing electoral support from members of the Christian Right (2, 3). Liberally inclined Christians, fewer in number, face a different challenge. They must reconcile their own, typically moderate views on matters such as abortion and gay rights with the traditional teachings of their church and the stern pronouncements of highly visible religious spokespersons, as well as the views of the majority of their fellow Christians.

The links between religious observance and politics has been amply documented in many survey studies. For example, in the 1992 Presidential Election, religious traditionalism proved to be

the best predictor of Republican Party identification, of conservative ideology, and of voting for George H. W. Bush (4). A decade later, during the 2004 Presidential Election, Americans regularly attending religious services were more than three times as likely to characterize themselves as conservative (45.2%) than liberal (13.6%) (5), and, conversely, voters who never attended religious services proved to be much more likely to cast their ballot for John Kerry (63.4%) than for George W. Bush (36.6%). This linkage is particularly clear in the specific case of Christians. Many studies show that devout Christians are, on average, more conservative than less devout Christians and more conservative than secular Americans (2, 4, 6–8), a phenomenon Olson and Green (5) term the "religion gap."

Social scientists have posited two different pathways potentially linking conservative ideology to Christianity (2, 9). First, the same epistemic and existential needs that are served by religiosity may also be served by conservative ideology (10). In particular, both religiosity and conservative ideology provide "coherency, control, and the reduction of ambiguity" (ref. 11, p. 715; refs. 12–14). Second, the Republican Party in general and right-wing politicians in particular increasingly have adopted positions on specific "cultural" or moral issues such as abortion, prayer in public schools, and the restriction of civil marriage to heterosexual partners that are congruent with traditional Christian doctrine. Since the 1980 Presidential election, for example, Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, James Dobson's Focus on the Family, and other like-minded groups comprising the Christian Right have formally endorsed the Republican Party for its stances on such issues. Once in the Republican fold, Christian voters attracted primarily by these positions on cultural issues are disproportionately exposed to, and come to adopt, the economic positions of their political reference group (15, 16). This social identity and peer influence account is further bolstered by evidence that the connection between religiosity and the adoption of conservative issue positions is heavily moderated by political engagement (2, 9, 17).

The influence process, moreover, has been a mutual one. Conservative Republicans are increasingly exposed to and influenced by the views of the Religious Right, and its insistence that the GOP give heavy weight to religiously dictated positions in its platform and choice of candidates (18). Indeed, religiosity has become so linked to political conservatism that some scholars and political pundits refer to the opposition between more devout, religious Americans and those who are more secular as a "culture war" (19–22)—with the main battleground provided by issues of abortion, gay rights, and separation of church and state.

Author contributions: L.D.R., Y.L., and A.G.R. designed research, performed research, analyzed data, and wrote the paper.

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The question of why such a linkage between religion and political conservatism exists, however, is less relevant to our present concerns than the question of its psychological consequences. More specifically, how have conservative Christians dealt with the apparent incongruity between the dictates of their faith and the economic and political policies that they, and their party of choice, espouse? The drive for cognitive consistency has been a central focus of social psychology for more than half a century (23–25), and the phenomenon of rationalization has been noted by philosophers, dramatists, novelists, and other keen-eyed observers of human foibles for many centuries. However, it has been the theory of cognitive dissonance (26), with its postulation of a specific motivational process and its emphasis on clever laboratory experiments and nonobvious predictions and demonstrations, that has been most influential in shaping research (27–29).

An important aspect of dissonance theory is the stipulation of the multiple ways in which dissonance can be reduced, and the notion that the changes in attitudes, beliefs, or behavior most likely to occur are ones that can be changed with least effort and cost—particularly least cost to a positive image of the self (28). Indeed, not just attitudes and behavior but also perceptions of facts and events, and even notions of what is “real,” can be dictated by existing needs, values, and priorities (30–32). Moreover, when other individuals see matters involving important social and political beliefs differently, the result is denigration of those others’ morality and even rationality. Attributions of bias are made for those on the “other side” of issues (33–35).

Conservative and liberal Christians, like all liberals and conservatives, are inclined to denigrate those on the other side of the political spectrum; and each side is convinced that the other side is treated more leniently than their own side in the media, and by other third parties that try to give an objective account of matters under dispute (36–39). However, how have Christians on the two sides of the political divide dealt with discrepancies between their own political positions and the apparent dictates of their faith? Some, no doubt, have felt pressure to moderate their positions to achieve greater congruency with traditional Christian teachings. Others may have narrowed their reference group and, for those whose faith is highly central to their personal identity, engaged in attempts at persuasion and proselytism. However, we argue and attempt to demonstrate empirically, contemporary American Christians also have adjusted their perceptions of Christianity itself. More specifically, they have adjusted their perceptions of the political positions that Jesus of the New Testament would hold if he were alive today.

A provocative series of studies by Epley and colleagues showed that the egocentric tendency to believe that others share one’s beliefs is more pronounced when individuals are asked about God than when they are asked about the average American or various prominent individuals (40). The present research is distinct from those studies insofar as its focus is more specifically on such “projection” in the views and also the priorities that liberal and conservative Christians attribute to Jesus Christ. Our specific hypotheses are very much in the dissonance tradition (26). The dissonance researchers reversed conventional formulations by focusing not on the effects of attitudes on behavior but on the effects of behavior on subsequent attitudes. We essentially reverse conventional formulations by focusing not on the effects of religion on political views but the effects of political views on the content of religious beliefs.

**Predictions**

First and foremost, we predict that Christian liberals and conservatives will differ in how conservative vs. liberal the views are that they attribute to Jesus.

A second prediction is that the two groups will differ in the issues they see as most central to their notion of Christianity (and presumably the issues that would be most important to Jesus if

he lived today)—issues of fellowship and compassion in the case of Christian liberals and issues of conventional morality in the case of Christian conservatives.

We also predict that, although liberals will claim that Jesus would be more conservative than themselves on morality issues and conservatives will claim that Jesus would be more liberal than themselves on fellowship issues, the groups will differ in the priority they assign to Christian teaching on these issues in a way that serves to reduce potential dissonance with respect to their own views. Specifically, liberals will assign greater priority to fellowship issues and conservatives will assign greater priority to morality issues.

We further predict that the group differences hypothesized here will be more pronounced among individuals who see their Christianity as central rather than noncentral to their personal identity.

A final prediction is one that follows not from dissonance theory but from the idealization of Jesus and the recognition of personal limitations. We predict that, on the issues that most define their religious identity, liberal and conservative Christians alike will impute positions to Jesus that are even more extreme than their own.

**Results**

Our first finding of note (although not one directly relevant to our predictions) is the strong association between participants’ conservatism and the centrality of Christian identity to their sense of self (Table 1). That is, self-identified conservatives (classified on the basis of a simple median split) proved much more likely than liberals to see their religious identity as very central and much less likely to see it as not at all central [ $\chi^2(2, n = 474) = 54.74; P < 0.001$ ]. The strength of the association, we found, is essentially unchanged when more stringent criterion (i.e., top versus bottom tertile) is used to classify participants with respect to political identity [ $\chi^2(2, n = 361) = 55.7; P < 0.001$ ]. The correlation ( $r$ ) between religious identity and political ideology was 0.35 ( $P < 0.001$ ).

**Characterizations of Own Political Ideology and That of Jesus.** As predicted, conservatives and liberals differed dramatically in the way they characterized Jesus’ views “in general” on the relevant rating scale (with a score of 1 representing “extreme liberal” and a score of 100 representing “extreme conservative”). Indeed, as apparent in Table 2, the difference in characterizations of Jesus’ views was almost as great (mean  $D = 56.34$  points) as the difference in self-characterizations on the same scale (mean  $D = 45.84$  points). The correlation reflecting such projection of own views on Jesus was also extremely high ( $r = 0.70$ ) and proved to be stronger ( $r = 0.76$ ) among survey participants who reported themselves to be strongly rather than somewhat or not at all identified with their Christianity ( $r = 0.55$  among those somewhat or not at all identified with their Christianity;  $z = 4.07; P < 0.001$ ). Despite this dramatic difference in perceptions of the overall views of Jesus, the liberal Christians in our sample did characterize Jesus as somewhat less liberal than themselves [ $t(212) = -3.32; P < 0.01$ ], and conservatives did characterize Jesus as somewhat less conservative than themselves [ $t(253) = 2.69; P < 0.001$ ].

Our subsequent analyses, which distinguish “fellowship” and “morality” issues of the sort that currently pit American liberals

**Table 1. Political self-classification and centrality of Christian identity**

Group	n	Christian identity (%)		
		Not at all central	Somewhat central	Very central
Liberals	213	47 (22.1)	88 (41.3)	78 (36.6)
Conservatives	261	16 (6.1)	65 (24.9)	180 (69.0)

**Table 2. Comparison of liberals' and conservatives' characterizations of own vs. Jesus' political views in general**

View	Liberals	Conservatives	Difference
Jesus	26.98	72.82	45.84
Self	20.75	77.09	56.34
Difference	+6.23	-4.27	—

against conservatives, sharpen our appreciation of the views, and of the projections of own views onto those of Jesus, that underlie these in-general ratings.

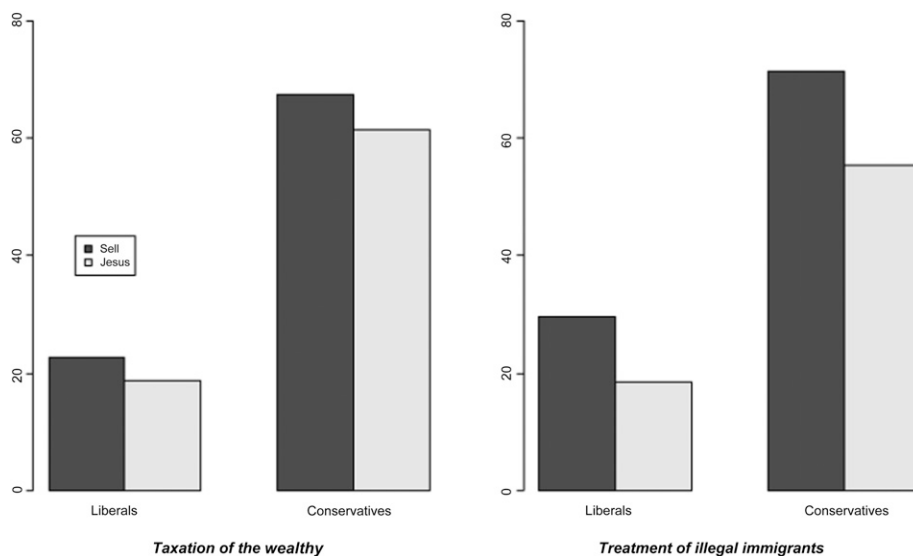
**Characterizations of Own Views and Jesus' Views Regarding Fellowship Issues.** We first consider the two fellowship issues that pertain to matters of economics and generosity to disadvantaged groups—specifically increasing the tax burden on the rich to ease the plight of the poor and easing the ability of current illegal immigrants to gain citizenship and access to social services. On both issues, we again see dramatic evidence of projection of own views onto those of Jesus. In the case of economic redistribution through increased taxes for the wealthy (Fig. 1), we see a liberal-conservative difference of 42.60 points on our 100-point scale with respect to views attributed to Jesus—a difference that is almost identical to the point difference of 44.76 between liberals and conservatives themselves. We also see a correlation (*r*) of 0.69 between own views and those imputed to Jesus (*r* = 0.74 if we include only strongly self-identified Christians). In the case of easing the burdens of illegal immigrants (Fig. 1), we see a pattern of findings that is similar although less dramatic—that is, a mean difference of 36.80 points between self and Jesus and a 41.69-point difference in the two groups' own views, and a correlation between own views and those attributed to Jesus of 0.57 (*r* = 0.59 if we include only strongly self-identified Christians). All these differences in ratings offered by liberals versus conservatives, and related correlations, are statistically significant well beyond the 0.001 level.

Further examination of the means in these two figures reveals that, despite such projection of views, conservative Christians do see their own views as less “liberal” than those they attribute to Jesus and thus at odds with Jesus' teaching on fellowship and compassion for the needy and less fortunate [*t*(236) = -2.72 (*P* < 0.001) and *t*(240) = -6.98 (*P* < 0.001), respectively]. What is

more notable, however, is the discrepancy between own views and those attributed to Jesus by liberals. That is, as predicted, liberals see Jesus' views on these issues as even more extreme in the direction of greater compassion and fellowship—i.e., as even more liberal—than their own [*t*(211) = -2.17 (*P* < 0.05) and *t*(210) = -5.54 (*P* < 0.001), respectively].

**Characterizations of Own Views and Jesus' Views Regarding Morality Issues.** When we turn our attention to the two issues pertaining to moral conduct—opposition to gay marriage and restriction of access to abortion—we see further dramatic evidence of projection of own views onto those of Jesus, with a pattern of specific means that is essentially the mirror image of that seen for the two fellowship issues. In the case of definition of marriage to exclude same-sex couples (Fig. 2), we see a between-group difference of 45.37 points on the 100-point scale with respect to the presumed views of Jesus—a difference that is only modestly smaller than the difference in the two groups of participants' ratings of their own views (54.43 points)—and a correlation between the two ratings of 0.75 (*r* = 0.79 if we include only strongly self-identified Christians). In the case of restricting grounds for abortion (Fig. 2), we see a similar data pattern, that is, a mean between-group difference of 48.16 points with respect to Jesus' views compared with a between-group difference of 31.6 points with respect to own views, and a correlation of 0.63 (*r* = 0.74 if we include only strongly self-identified Christians). All these between-group differences and correlations again are statistically significant well beyond the 0.001 level.

Further examination reveals that, despite the relevant projection of views the liberal Christians in our study did see their own views on gay marriage and abortion as more liberal than those they attribute to Jesus [*t*(210) = 8.03 (*P* < 0.001) and *t*(208) = 11.69 (*P* < 0.001), respectively], and thus at odds with the latter (as well as with the views of the most visible leaders of many Christian denominations). What is more notable, in the case of these issues, is the discrepancy between own views and those attributed to Jesus by Christian conservatives. That is, as predicted, conservatives see Jesus' views on these two issues as even more extreme in the direction of stricter morality—i.e., more conservative—than their own [*t*(244) = 5.58 (*P* < 0.001) and *t*(237) = 6.98 (*P* < 0.001), respectively].



**Fig. 1.** Comparison of liberals' and conservatives' characterizations of own versus Jesus' political views with regard to fellowship issues.

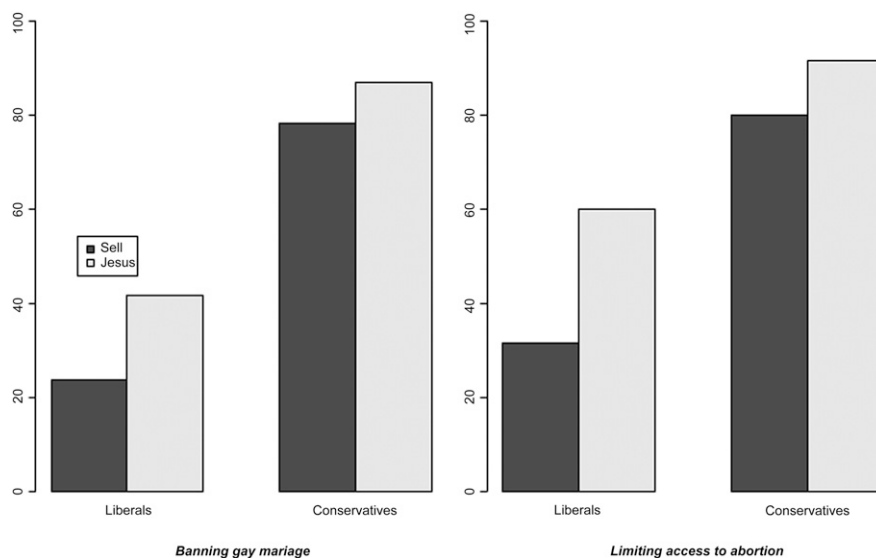


Fig. 2. Comparison of liberals' and conservatives' characterizations of own versus Jesus' political views with regard to morality issues.

**Importance of Morality vs. Fellowship in Personal Views of Christianity.**

How did our survey respondents rationalize the discrepancy between their own political views and the teachings of the Gospel? As predicted, both liberal and conservative Christians did so in part by projecting their own views onto Jesus in a way that reduced such discrepancy. Did they, as hypothesized, further reduce dissonance by projecting their priorities onto Jesus? That is, did they define the issues on which their views were essentially aligned with Christian doctrine as more central to their faith than those on which their views were at odds with such doctrine? Did they, in other words, believe that a contemporary Jesus would share their views about what aspects of Christian teachings are most essential?

A slim majority of our liberal Christian respondents and a somewhat greater majority of our conservative Christian respondents claimed that Jesus' teachings on personal morality and his teachings on fellowship and caring for the less fortunate were equally important aspects of being a good Christian. However, the participants who were willing to claim otherwise offered strong support for our hypothesis (Table 3). In particular, more than three times as many liberals rated fellowship and caring to be more important aspects than morality than vice versa (40.7% vs. 9.1%). By contrast, conservatives were slightly more likely to rated morality as more important (20.6%) than fellowship [13.6%;  $\chi^2(2, n = 451) = 45.72; P < 0.001$ ].

Moreover, this difference between liberal and conservative Christians proved to be more apparent among those who claimed Christianity to be "very central" to their identity than to those who claimed it to be only "somewhat central" or "not at all central" to their identity. Among those claiming Christianity to be very central, 10 times as many liberals rated fellowship teaching as a more important aspect of their faith than morality teaching (i.e., 39.5% vs. 3.9%), whereas fewer such conservatives (11.4%) thought fellowship teaching to be more important than morality teaching than vice versa [i.e., 11.4% vs. 19.5%;  $\chi^2(2, n = 242) = 30.30; P < 0.001$ ]. In the case of participants assigning a less central role to their faith, only three times as many liberals rated fellowship teachings as more important than morality teachings (i.e., 41.40% vs. 12.03%), and the same percentage of conservatives rated fellowship teaching as more important than morality teachings as vice versa [i.e., 20.4% in both cases;  $\chi^2(2, n = 209) = 12.48; P < 0.01$ ].

**Catholics vs. Protestants.** In reporting results, we have not distinguished between Protestants and Catholics (or between different Protestant denominations). However, it is worth noting at least parenthetically that, although Catholics and Protestants were equally likely to identify as conservative rather than liberal [ $\chi^2(2, n = 409) = 0.37$ ], the projection of views we have described was generally more pronounced among Protestants than Catholics. Across the four issues considered, the average absolute difference between a given participant's own self-reported conservatism on the issue and that attributed to Jesus was 23.58 points among Catholics and only 19.41 points among Protestants [ $t(400) = 2.48; P < 0.05$ ]. Also, the tendency for conservatives to attach relatively greater importance to morality than fellowship issues than liberals was more pronounced in the case of Protestants (means of 3.73 and 4.50, respectively) than in the case of Catholics (means of 3.83 and 4.08, respectively). When these responses were regressed on ideological identity, Christian denomination, and the interaction between the two, the interaction effect we found approached statistical significance ( $b = 0.52; P = 0.06$ ).

**Discussion**

Our survey data speak to the dissonance that contemporary American Christians, whether liberal or conservative, confront between their own political views and the traditional teachings and tenets of their faith. They also shed light on the differing views that the two groups attribute to the central figure of their faith—and in so doing reduce their dissonance and maintain their sense of personal coherence and integrity.

Consistent with the reports of previous researchers, conservative views were more common than liberal ones among our respondents. Moreover, greater centrality of Christian identity among participants was associated with greater self-reported

Table 3. Rated importance of Jesus' teachings on fellowship versus morality

Group	Relative importance (%)		
	Fellowship more important	Equally important	Morality more important
Liberals	85 (40.7)	105 (50.2)	19 (9.1)
Conservatives	33 (13.6)	159 (65.7)	50 (20.6)

conservatism. However, our most dramatic finding involved the marked projection of own views onto those attributed to Jesus. Indeed, the difference in the views that liberal and conservative participants claimed that Jesus would espouse were he alive today were almost as great as the difference that these groups reported with respect to their own views—both in general and with respect to the four specific issues that divide contemporary liberals and conservatives.

As one might expect, Christian conservatives acknowledged that their views deviated somewhat from those they attributed Jesus and the Gospels with respect to “fellowship” issues of reducing economic inequality through taxation and more generous treatment of illegal immigrants. Liberal Christians acknowledged similar deviation with respect to the “morality” issues of abortion and gay marriage. However, a less obvious discrepancy was also noteworthy. Liberals claimed that Jesus would be even more liberal than themselves on the two fellowship issues, and conservatives claimed Jesus would be even more conservative than themselves on the two morality issues. The former is perhaps to be expected given that charitable treatment of the less fortunate is so central a tenet of the Gospel and the specific teaching of Jesus—one which most Christians, liberals and conservatives alike, would admit that they do not honor to the extent called for in those teachings. The latter is less obvious. Although the biblical injunctions on these morality issues are prominent in the Christian bible, they are not obviously tied to the specific teachings of Jesus. (Indeed, note the famous injunctions in John 8:7, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone”; and in Matthew 7:1, “Judge not lest ye be judged.”)

Beyond projection of their own views on specific issues to Jesus, many of our participants displayed an additional source of dissonance reduction. A slim majority of liberals and a clear majority of conservatives claimed Jesus’ teachings (and the tenets of their religion) on fellowship and on morality were equally central to their personal religious views. However, among survey respondents who claimed otherwise, especially those who claimed their Christianity to be central to their personal identity, liberals were much more likely to attach greater weight to teachings and tenets involving issues of fellowship, whereas conservatives were somewhat more likely to attach greater weight to teaching and tenets involving issues of morality.

**Issues of Generalizability.** An obvious caveat is in order because of our reliance on SurveyMonkey to generate our sample of respondents, and thus the potential problem of self-selection. Although any survey obviously involves a degree of self-selection (especially one on religious and political views), the use of this relatively inexpensive service in research is still quite new, and the particular biases it introduces have yet to be systematically studied. However, there is no obvious reason why our sample would be particularly prone to show the types of projection and dissonance-reducing expressions of religious priorities documented in the present study.

A further issue involves the extent to which our findings reflect something about the specific nature and history of American politics and its links to religious faith. Would similar patterns of response on the part of conservative versus liberal Christians be equally evident in countries like Canada or Australia, which share religious affiliations and most important aspects of culture with the United States but not a political divide that assigns so prominent a role to the specific issues of abortion and gay marriage? Answering this empirical question would help to clarify the role that political and social processes play in promoting dissonance-reducing views about the views of Jesus. Another question of generalizability arises because liberal and conservative Christians in the United States typically belong to different churches, are exposed to different sermons, and are subject to the social influence of very different reference groups.

Examining liberal and conservative Christians’ views outside the United States about other issues that have been a particular focus in American politics might be similarly instructive.

Framing issues are obviously important as well. Christian conservatives who oppose economic redistribution donate heavily to charitable causes endorsed by their denominations. Moreover, conservatives within some Christian denominations, whom one might expect to share general conservative views about environmental protections policies advocated by governmental bodies and the science community at large, have responded positively to messages framed in terms of the obligation of “stewardship” or “creation care.”

**Causal Direction and Individual vs. Collective Processes.** The most obvious question raised by our specific findings and the more general correlation between religious and political views is that of causal direction. To some extent, liberal and conservative Christians may, as we postulate, have made dissonance-reducing adjustments in their perceptions of the teachings of Jesus and their views about what is central vs. noncentral to their personal faith. However, to some extent, liberal and conservative Christians may have responded to fellowship and moral issues in a manner that reflects the differing importance members of these two groups personally attach to particular aspects of Christian doctrine. Also, some third variable—in particular, the nature of the reference groups provided by family and community, or perhaps some psychological factor like deference to authority—may, to some extent, have mediated both.

We obviously cannot assess the relative importance of these alternatives with the type of correlational data provided by our present survey. Moreover, we suspect that the answer to this question is unlikely to be a simple one. Family and reference group and perhaps even chance can influence the view of Christianity to which the individual is exposed. Subsequent experiences and subsequent reflection can reinforce earlier views or can lead to a questioning of earlier religious and/or political views and prompt a change in group membership. In either case, as we have noted, liberal and conservative Christians face problems of dissonance reduction. In this regard, it is important to note that, whereas dissonance theory emphasized processes assumed to take place in the mind of the individual, when religious and political views are involved, it is likely that dissonance reduction takes place as a collective enterprise. Denominational leaders emphasize or deemphasize particular teachings and tenets, and in so doing, increase or decrease pressures on individuals to confront particular discrepancies between those teachings and tenets and their personal views and practices. The faithful discuss matters among themselves, and are apt to reinforce each other’s ways of justifying those views and practices, and particular sins of omission and commission.

Although our present data do little to resolve this question of causal direction, their main import lies in documenting the strength of the claimed correspondence between own views and priorities and those attributed to Jesus—a correspondence, whatever its origins, that can obviously serve to help individuals avoid or reduce potential dissonance. Future research in which investigators manipulate the salience of potential discrepancies between participants’ own views and scriptural dictates could tell us whether increasing the magnitude of dissonance increases such projection. However, such research would not really tell us how important that causal pathway has been relative to other causal pathways in producing the strikingly different ways in which contemporary liberal and conservative American Christians construe the teachings of Jesus.

**Implications of Residual Dissonance for Intergroup Conflict.** How do American Christians of the left and right deal with discrepancies that remain between important tenets of their religion and their

politics? Liberals can comfortably embrace the fellowship message of the Gospels—even conceding that they personally fall short of its demands—and insist that the Christian Right’s pronouncements on homosexuality and abortion are not the tenets of Christianity that they choose to embrace or the ones most emphasized in the teachings of Jesus. Conservatives, especially insofar as they report their faith and their personal relationship with Jesus to be so central to their identity, face a more difficult dilemma. They can hardly claim that their allegiance is less to the New Testament, which is the main authority for their cultural views, than to the Old Testament.

Does the heated rhetoric that conservatives use in derogating liberals—including fellow Christians—and the energy they devote to proselytism reflect further attempts at dissonance reduction? In this context, it is worth recalling that, before the 1970s, Christian political movements in the United States were largely progressive. Notably, the Christian leaders in the North were the most vocally opposed to slavery in the New World; and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, headed by Martin Luther King, was similarly associated with the left in its efforts at desegregation and addressing the needs of minorities and the poor. Elements of the Catholic Church in America (including the Catholic Workers Party founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in 1933) similarly have long been associated with workers’ rights and antiwar movements.

Is the relative weakness of the once-powerful Christian left a sign that the many liberals of Christian background have reduced dissonance by moving away from the mainstream of their church and focusing on more secular values? Is their derogation of Christian conservatives as hypocrites or dupes of wealthy GOP supporters who care more about their pocketbooks than the teachings of Jesus a reflection of further dissonance reduction on their part? Again, our present findings do not answer these questions. However, we hope they can serve as an impetus to research that seeks such answers.

## Materials and Methods

Survey participants were 1,256 respondents from the SurveyMonkey.com panel. The panel consists of many thousands of individuals who participate in surveys in exchange for a small donation to a charity of their choice as well as

a chance to win \$100. The present survey was randomly assigned to a subset of the SurveyMonkey panel.

Of the 1,256 respondents, 787 identified themselves as Christian, and those that did so were asked to further specify their denomination. Of these Christian respondents, 440 (56%) identified themselves as Protestant and 221 (28%) identified themselves as Catholic—proportions quite comparable to those reported for these two major Christian denominations by major survey organizations. Respondents who had indicated that they were Christian were also asked, “How central is Christianity to your identity?” (very central, somewhat central, not at all central). The data analyses reported here deal solely with the responses of this sample of self-identified Christians.

Participants were also asked about their beliefs about the existence of an afterlife, their view about the divine or nondivine status of the scriptures, and the frequency with which they pray. However, this report does not consider responses to these items. Rather, it focused on the questions that asked them to characterize the liberalism/conservatism of their own political views and the views they thought would be expressed by Jesus (if he were alive today) by using a series of 100-point scales (with a score of 1 representing the most extreme liberal and a score of 100 representing the most extreme conservative). The first such item pertained to views in general. The other four items pertained to views on two hotly debated issues that pertained to matters of fellowship and serving the needy and disadvantaged (i.e., “increasing the tax burden on the rich to ease the plight of the poor” and “easing the ability of current ‘illegal immigrants’ to gain citizenship and access social services”) and to views on two that hotly debated “cultural/moral” issues (i.e., “restricting abortion access” and defining marriage to include only that between a man and a woman, i.e., no “gay marriage”). Respondents were further asked to indicate, on a seven-point scale, whether, in their view, Jesus’ “teachings on personal morality or teachings on fellowship and caring for the less fortunate” constituted the most important aspect of being a good Christian (with 1 representing a view that morality is much more important and 7 representing a view that fellowship is much more important).

Participants also indicated their assessment of political views of the Fox News and CNN. Those rating Fox News as more liberal “in general” than CNN ( $n = 112$ ) were removed from all analyses because we could not be confident that they had closely attended to, and understood, the content of questions posed or had not deliberately offered perverse responses in the remainder of the questionnaire. An additional 174 participants were excluded in comparisons of liberals and conservatives because they placed themselves at the exact midpoint of our scale.

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