

# Attributions to God and Satan About Life-Altering Events

Shanna D. Ray, Jennifer D. Lockman, Emily J. Jones, and Melanie H. Kelly  
Lipscomb University

When faced with negative life events, people often interpret the events by attributing them to the actions of God or Satan (Lupfer, Tolliver, & Jackson, 1996; Ritzema, 1979). To explore these attributions, we conducted a mixed-method study of Christians who were college freshmen. Participants read vignettes depicting a negative life event that had a beginning and an end that was systematically varied. Participants assigned a larger role to God in vignettes where an initially negative event (e.g., relationship breakup) led to a positive long-term outcome (e.g., meeting someone better) than with a negative (e.g., depression and loneliness) or unspecified long-term outcome. Participants attributed a lesser role to Satan when there was positive outcome rather than negative or unspecified outcome. Participants also provided their own narratives, recounting personal experiences that they attributed to the actions of God or Satan. Participant-supplied narratives often demonstrated “theories” about the actions of God, depicting God as being involved in negative events as a rescuer, comforter, or one who brings positive out of the negative. Satan-related narratives were often lacking in detail or a clear theory of how Satan worked. Participants who did provide this information depicted Satan as acting primarily through influencing one’s thoughts and/or using other people to encourage one’s negative behavior.

*Keywords:* attributions, Christianity, God, religion, Satan

When faced with a negative life event, people often use their religious beliefs as a framework for understanding and coping with the situation (see Pargament, 1997). Religious coping can involve a number of different behaviors, including seeking spiritual support, soliciting help from clergy, forgiving others, and making sense or meaning out of an event (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998). Using religion to make sense out of an event can buffer its deleterious effects (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Bjorck & Thurman, 2007; George, Ellison, & Larson, 2002). However, adjustment can also be negatively affected if the person perceives him/herself as being a victim of a cruel rather than a kind God (Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey, 2011). Attributions to Satan can also play a coping role, by providing explanations that reduce blame toward God (Beck & Taylor, 2008). Ultimately, whether

meaning-making is adaptive depends on the interpretation that the person has of the event and whether it provides comfort or provokes anger, inspires hope or leads to hopelessness. Therefore, it is important to understand how people make sense of negative life situations. In the present study, we examined people’s use of their faith to understand negative events, exploring the circumstances under which Christians attribute a negative life situation to God or Satan and also exploring the “theories” that they use to explain how God or Satan acted in their lives.

## Prior Research on Attributions to God and Satan

One approach to exploring attributions to God and Satan has been to investigate whether these are competing explanations for natural explanations, filling a gap when no natural explanation is available. Ritzema and Young (1983) explored this issue by pitting supernatural and natural explanations against each other, having participants rate hypothetical events on a 1–9 continuum, where endorsing more God involvement forced one to endorse less natural involvement. Using this method, subjects included more attributions to God (and less to natural causes) when evaluating situations in which evidence for supernatural causation was present. However, when God and natural explanations are not pitted against each other, a different picture emerges. Lupfer, Tolliver, and Jackson (1996) found that when subjects attributed an event primarily to God, 73% of the time they also assigned a high rating to naturalistic causes. This led the authors to argue that religious attributions should not be seen as competing with naturalistic ones. Instead, subjects use supernatural attributions as supplements to naturalistic ones. This result has been corroborated by a number of other studies (Gorsuch & Smith, 1983; Loewenthal & Cornwall, 1993; Lupfer, Brock, & DePaola, 1992; Lupfer, DePaola, Brock, & Clement, 1994; Lupfer & Layman, 1996). Weeks and Lupfer

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Shanna D. Ray, Jennifer D. Lockman, Emily J. Jones, and Melanie H. Kelly, Department of Psychology, Counseling and Family Science, Lipscomb University.

Jennifer D. Lockman is now at the Department of Educational Studies, Purdue University. Emily J. Jones is now at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center, Cincinnati, OH. Melanie H. Kelly is now at Mental Health Cooperative, Nashville, TN.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Shanna D. Ray, Department of Psychology, Counseling and Family Science, Lipscomb University, Nashville, TN 37204-3951. E-mail: shanna.ray@lipscomb.edu

(2000) found that attributions to God increased as people moved from proximal explanations to distal explanations.

Another issue addressed by prior research is the question of who, specifically, is more likely to make attributions to God and Satan. A consistent finding, perhaps not surprisingly, is that religious subjects perceived God as a causal agent more often than nonreligious subjects (Loewenthal & Cornwall, 1993; Weeks & Lupfer, 2000), especially those with conservative religious beliefs (Lupfer et al., 1992; Lupfer & Layman, 1996; Kunst, Bjorck, & Tan, 2000). Baker (2008), using data from the 2005 Baylor Religion Survey, found that belief in Satan, hell, and demons was correlated with SES, with higher income and education levels predicting less belief in them. Baker found that women and African Americans were more likely to believe in Satan, hell, and demons than other demographic groups. Looking at correlates of attributions to God, Ritzema (1979) found that the individual characteristics and beliefs of the attributer matter. Attributions to God were positively correlated with measures of Creedal Assent (endorsement of Christian beliefs/doctrines), Devotionalism (personal prayer, feelings of closeness to God), and Salience-Cognition (importance of feelings in the person's thoughts and feelings). Gorsuch and Smith (1983) found that those who scored high on a "nearness to God" scale attributed more responsibility to God for all occurrences, especially extreme outcomes.

Jensen (2009) explored the liberal/conservative dimension among religious children, adolescents, and adults by doing semi-structured interviews about God and Satan among evangelical and mainline Presbyterians. More participants believed in God than Satan and people generally regarded God as positive or neutral, whereas Satan was negative. To the conservatives, Satan was real, which was not the case for the majority of the liberal participants. Belief in Satan provided ways of explaining negative things like deception and strife, though control over one's life was not a theme that emerged in their descriptions of Satan. Conservatives and liberals differed in terms of how much control they saw God as having on their lives, with conservatives seeing God as being highly in control, with liberals less so. In the current study, we chose to focus on a population that these studies suggest will have the greatest number of God and Satan attributions, religious people who are from a conservative background.

Research suggests that some events are more likely to involve attributions to God or Satan than others. The typical methodology for this type of study involves presenting people with vignettes describing situations and then asking them to form attributions about the causes of the events. It has been found that causal attributions to God (but not Satan) are more common when explaining occurrences rather than explaining actions and with life-altering rather than everyday occurrences (Lupfer & Layman, 1996). Attributions to God are more common in health-related events rather than occupational, finance, social, or family events (Loewenthal & Cornwall, 1993) and more common with situations that invoke religious values than those that do not (Lupfer et al., 1994).

Of interest to us in the present study is the finding that across a variety of experiments, positive events are more likely to be attributed to God and negative events are more often attributed to Satan (Lupfer & Layman, 1996; Ritzema, 1979). Similarly, Hovemyr (1998) found that attributions to God were more often used with success experiences rather than failure experiences and Lup-

fer et al. (1992) found attributions to God to be more common when the person's behavior elicits a positive rather than negative reaction.

This pattern of attributions may serve a useful role in Christian's spiritual well-being. Beck and Taylor (2008) found that belief in an active Satan as measured by their Strength of the Satan Concept (SSC) scale is associated with higher religious well-being, an attachment to God that is characterized by idealization of God, and lower likelihood of blaming God for suffering in life. Beck and Taylor argue that that negative attributions to Satan serve the purpose of solving the theological challenges inherent in explaining how bad things can happen in a world with a good and omnipotent God. Blaming Satan for negative event allows God to be free from blame and still perceived as a benevolent force. Wilson and Huff (2001), who developed a Belief in an Active Satan scale, found that belief in an active Satan has negative consequences, such as intolerance toward lesbians and gay men. Perhaps a strong view Satan serves both as a strengthener of relationships with God (by absolving God of blame for suffering and bonding the person to God) but might also serve to magnify hostile feelings toward anyone perceived as not consistent with God's will (implying that they are agents of an active Satan).

Though it seems clear from prior research (Beck & Taylor, 2008; Lupfer & Layman, 1996; Ritzema, 1979) that Christians are reluctant to invoke God as a source of pain or distress, in the present study we wanted to explore the possibility that God might be perceived as playing other roles in negative events, such as allowing them or providing comfort in the midst of them. There is limited research on this issue, and most of it does not frame the question in the specific way that we developed it. However, Miner and McKnight's (1999) study of Presbyterians in Australia did investigate whether Christians saw God as directly causing events or working more indirectly. The authors concluded that Presbyterians in this sample had a more *indirect* view of God's sovereignty, with God allowing events rather than directly controlling them.

Other researchers (Pargament et al., 1988) have explored this issue by studying the different ways that people relate to God as they cope with problems. They found 3 styles of coping that reflect different understandings of the way God works. A self-directing style assumes that it is the individual's job to solve problems, without a great deal of input from God. With the deferring style, individuals defer the responsibility for problem solving to God rather than actively solving problems themselves. In the collaborative style, God is seen as a partner that the person collaborates with to solve problems. This conceptualization was expanded on by Wong-McDonald and Gorsuch (2000) when they proposed a fourth style, surrender to God. This style involved an active choice to surrender to God's will rather than a passive waiting for God to solve problems. In the present study, we wanted to understand other ways that people see God and Satan as working in real situations in their lives, both as causal agents of events but in other roles such as allowing events, using events to bring about a purpose, and so forth.

In addition to exploring these various understandings of God and Satan's activity, we were also interested in the contextualized nature of real-life events. Previous research (Lupfer & Layman, 1996; Ritzema, 1979; Loewenthal & Cornwall, 1993; Miner & McKnight, 1999) has generally involved presenting participants with vignettes describing an event and then asking whether it was

caused by various supernatural agents. A limitation of this method is that real experiences may not occur as discrete events, lacking a history, long-term ramifications, or indications that supernatural forces are implicated. Attribution theorists (cf. Kelley, 1967) have found that subjects do not merely interpret human actions in isolation, but consider factors such as how common the behavior is among people in general, how consistent a person's behavior is, and how distinctive a behavior is. In the same way, perhaps conservative Christians—who view God as an individual with agency and purpose (Jensen, 2009)—may interpret God's actions in relation to their overall history and context. This means that a specific occurrence (e.g., losing a job) may not have an inherent interpretation, but a meaning derived from the person reasoning about the event in the context of earlier or later circumstances.

### The Present Study

In the present study, we used a mixed-methods design to explore conservative Christians' attributions to God and Satan. In the quantitative portion, we presented participants with vignettes depicting hypothetical situations that had a core event that was consistent across conditions, but context which varied depending on condition. The first contextual factor was the circumstance leading up to the event. For this factor, we varied whether the person described in the vignette (a) prayed before the event, (b) had hopes/wishes before the event, or (c) neither of the above (nothing was specified to the reader). We wanted to know whether participants were more likely to attribute events to God when there had been a prior history of prayer about the matter, creating the perception that the event was an answer to prayer rather than a random occurrence. The second factor we varied was long-term outcome. For this factor, the long-term outcome of an initially negative event was depicted as being either (a) negative, (b) positive, or (c) not specified. We hypothesized that participants would be more likely to attribute a negative event to God when it was preceded by a prayer for God's action (Hypothesis 1), be less likely to attribute an event to Satan if it were preceded by prayer (Hypothesis 2), allow a role for God in a negative event if the event was interpreted as being used for a long-term positive purpose (Hypothesis 3), and would attribute the negative event to Satan when the long term outcome was negative (Hypothesis 4).

For the qualitative portion, we were interested in moving beyond a methodology that explores reactions to hypothetical events by asking participants about experiences in their own lives that they believed were related to God and Satan. Using participants' descriptions of events in their lives, we explored the methods that they saw God and Satan using to interact with and influence them.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 109 students (66% female, 34% male) recruited from introductory psychology courses at a Christian university affiliated with the Churches of Christ in the southeastern United States. They ranged in age from 18 to 20 years, with an average age of 18.9. The majority of the participants were Caucasian (91.7%). Participants all reported preference for Christianity, with 20.2% expressing no specific denominational affiliation; the

remaining participants identified with Church of Christ (64.3%), Baptist (10.1%), Methodist (2.8%), Roman Catholic (1.8%), and Presbyterian (0.9%) groups. The largest group, Church of Christ, is known for an emphasis on the Bible as an accurate and complete revelation from God and adheres to doctrines that are usually classified as conservative (Mead, Hill, & Atwood, 2010). The second largest group, Baptist, is a category of denominations; we did not collect data on the specific Baptist denominations that constituted our sample, however the sample was located in a city where the Southern Baptist Convention is the largest Baptist denomination (Association of Religion Data Archives, 2014).

### Measures and Procedure

Participants were given a packet of questions during their introduction to psychology class. They completed the packet outside of class and returned it during the next class period to receive extra credit in their course. Students were informed that that participation was voluntary and that other ways to obtain the extra credit were also available.

**Demographic questions.** Participants answered a series of questions about their age, sex, race, and level of education.

**Preliminary belief questions.** Participants answered questions about their denominational preference, how often they pray, how religious they considered themselves to be, how often they attended religious services, and about how often they lived their life according to their religious beliefs. They also responded to a series of statements relating to beliefs about how God and Satan influence the world and people's lives. For example, they were asked to rate their degree of agreement or disagreement (on a 1 to 5 Likert scale) with statements such as *God causes positive events to happen in life to bring about a purpose*. The complete list of statements can be found in Table 1.

**Vignettes.** Participants read 9 vignettes describing a protagonist who experiences a negative event. The stories involved the following topics: a relationship break-up, a natural disaster, infertility problems, alcoholism, business failure, job loss, intimate partner violence, and a medical crisis. A sample vignette can be found in the Appendix. To obtain a copy of all vignettes, contact the first author.

Each vignette contained a core story that was present in all versions of the vignette, with a beginning and end that varied. Two contextual factors were varied for each vignette. The first was the prior action leading up to the event. For the Prior Action (PA) factor, we varied whether the person described in the vignette was depicted as (a) praying before the event, (b) having hopes/wishes before the event, or (c) nothing was specified to the reader. The second factor we varied was long-term outcome. For the Long-Term Outcome (LTO) condition, the long term outcome of the initially negative event was either (a) negative, (b) positive, or (c) not specified.

The three levels of the PA factor (prayer, wishing, unspecified) were combined with all three levels of the LTO factor (positive, negative, unspecified) to produce 9 possible versions of each vignette (i.e., prayer PA-positive LTO, prayer PA-negative LTO, prayer PA-unspecified LTO, wishing PA-positive LTO, etc.). Each participant read all the 9 stories and received one example of each of the 9 conditions; however,

Table 1  
*Preliminary Belief Questions: Percent Agreeing/Disagreeing With Each Statement*

Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	No opinion	Agree	Strongly agree
I believe that God or an equivalent higher power exists.	0.0	0.0	1.8	2.8	95.4
God causes positive events to happen in life to bring about a purpose.	0.0	0.0	7.3	17.4	75.2
God causes negative events to happen in life to bring about a purpose.	11.0	6.4	15.6	20.2	46.8
God will give people guidance if they ask for his wisdom.	0.9	0.0	2.8	26.6	69.7
God is active in people’s individual lives.	0.0	0.0	4.6	11.9	83.5
Even the details of life are controlled by God to bring about his purposes.	2.8	5.6	16.7	20.4	54.6
Praying about an event can influence the outcome of a situation.	0.0	1.8	4.6	31.2	62.4
I believe that Satan or an equivalent power exists.	0.0	0.9	5.5	11.9	81.7
Satan has the power to cause negative events to happen in life.	1.8	3.7	11.9	29.4	53.3

Note. *n* = 109 for all questions.

across the sample, the 9 stories appeared equally often in each of the conditions. This resulted in 9 different versions of the survey, organized so that each condition appeared equally often in each position (i.e., 1/9th of the time the prayer PA-positive LTO story would be in the first position, 1/9th in the second position, etc.). The actual core stories appeared in the same sequence across participants, something that we thought would not affect our results because the stories were evenly distributed in each condition. After reading each vignette, participants indicated the extent to which God and Satan “played a role in” the core event on a 1 to 5 scale, ranging from *not at all* to *a lot*. They could also choose *I don’t know* as an option.

**Qualitative portion/participant narratives.** The final section consisted of the following open-ended question: *Please think of a situation that has happened in your personal life in which you believe strongly that God specifically influenced the progression and/or outcome of the event. In the space provided below, please describe this event in detail, elaborating upon the background of the event, who was involved, how the event ended, and specifically WHY you felt that God influenced the event in some way.* Participants were asked the same question about Satan. They were given [1/2] page for writing their responses but were encouraged to use the back page for additional room if needed.

**Qualitative Coding Procedures**

The narratives were analyzed in several steps. First, a coding tool and coding guide was developed by the research team (consisting of graduate and undergraduate students collaborating with the primary investigators) who examined examples of 20 narratives provided by undergraduate psychology students from Ray, Lockman, and Hawkins (2008), where the same questions were asked to students at the same university. These narratives were not used for the final analysis but were only used to develop a coding tool and guide. As narratives were examined, the following questions were discussed by the group: *What types of details are mentioned regularly? What information should we capture with our coding?* In addition to this inductive approach, we also added questions related to our specific research questions. The final set of coding questions for the “God” and “Satan” narratives are as follows:

1. Did the participant provide a codable event? If the participant **did not** provide a codable event, why was it not codable?
2. What is the context in which God/Satan is seen as working? (e.g., death, relationship, etc.)
3. How old was the subject when the event happened? (childhood, adolescence, etc.)
4. Who was mentioned in this narrative as being affected by or directly involved in the event? (e.g., the individual, a parent, a friend, etc.)
5. Did the participant mention praying about the event?
6. How does the subject see God/Satan as working in the world/people’s lives? (e.g., causing a negative event, a positive event, etc.)

After questions were developed, categories of answers were specified for each question using both an inductive and deductive approach. To use question 6 as an example, we noted that God allowing or using negative events to bring about positive purpose was a common theme, as was God working through the actions of other people; therefore, these were provided to coders as potential categories in which to place narratives. We also added a few additional categories based on our expectation that they might appear (e.g., God causing a positive event) or based on our desire to know whether they would appear (e.g., God causing a negative event). An “other” category was also included to capture any items that we failed to note. After creating the coding guide and tool, two primary investigators independently coded 20 narratives from the real dataset. Answers were compared, any disagreement was settled by discussion, and the coding guide updated to reflect the results of this coding experience and conversation. Finally, coders were selected who were undergraduate psychology students from the same university as the research participants. They were part of the process of developing the coding guide and were chosen because they were coding reliably with each other and with the primary investigators. These two coders independently reviewed the 109 participants’ data and coded each narrative. Reliability varied by question, with Kappas ranging from .72 to .95. These are reported separately with the results for each question.

## Results

### Preliminary Belief Questions

Preliminary beliefs questions indicated that this sample was highly religiously involved and committed—77.1% reported attending religious services every week and 18.4% attended a few times per month; 92.7% agreed or strongly agreed that they considered themselves religious; 69.7% pray daily and 24.8% at least weekly; and 82.4% agree or strongly agree that they lived their life according to their religious beliefs.

Responses to questions about God's and Satan's involvement in life events are reported in Table 1. These results indicate that a large percent of our participants endorsed an "involved" view of God, with 92.6% agreeing or strongly agreeing that God causes positive events and 95.4% agreeing/strongly agreeing that God is active in individual lives. A significant portion was willing to attribute negative events to God (67.0% agreeing/strongly agreeing) and endorsed the idea that details of life are controlled by God (75.0% agreeing/strongly agreeing). Participants had an active view of Satan, with 82.7% strongly endorsing the idea that Satan has the power to cause negative events.

### Vignettes

For each vignette, subjects rated the extent to which God and Satan played a role in the event. Participants could select *I don't know* as an answer or respond on a 1 to 5 scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a lot*). Averaging across all conditions, participants selected *I don't know* for 17.6% of questions about God and 24.4% of questions about Satan. The tendency to answer *I don't know* was examined with a Chi Square Goodness of Fit test to determine whether this answer was more frequent in any of the 9 conditions. No difference was found,  $p < .01$ .

For items that participants chose to mark *I don't know* rather than estimate the extent to which God/Satan were involved, we calculated the mean using other vignettes that were rated from this condition. If other vignettes in this condition were also lacking data, then the participant would not have a score for this condition and would not be included in the means or significance tests reported (if data were available for other conditions, it was used).

Means and standard deviations for each condition are shown in Table 2. To examine the role of actions leading up to the core event, a one-way repeated measures MANOVA was done, with responses to the questions about Satan's and God's role as the dependent variables and the Prior Action factor (prayer, wishing, unspecified) as the independent variable. The God's role and Satan's role variables were significantly different from one another,  $F(1, 87) = 39.71, p < .0001$ , with participants more likely to make attributions to God ( $M = 3.47, SD = 1.06$ ) than to Satan ( $M = 2.64, SD = .99$ ),  $t(100) = 6.78, p < .0001$ . The main effect of PA was not significant,  $F(2, 174) = 1.83, p < .164$ , nor was the PA by God/Satan interaction,  $F(2, 174) = .36, p < .47$ . Therefore, Hypotheses 1 and 2—that participants would be more likely to attribute a negative event preceded by prayer to God (and less likely to attribute it to Satan)—were not supported.

To examine the role of the Long Term Outcome factor in participants' interpretations, another one-way repeated measures MANOVA was performed on the data, with responses to the

Table 2

Average Rating of God and Satan Involvement By Condition, Mean and Standard Deviations

Condition	God			Satan		
	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Prior action						
Prayer	101	3.60	1.13	97	2.64	1.15
Wish	103	3.47	1.23	95	2.70	1.15
Unspecified	103	3.44	1.14	98	2.64	1.09
Long-term outcome						
Positive	102	3.77	1.14	95	2.45	1.16
Negative	98	3.28	1.22	97	2.86	1.11
Unspecified	100	3.49	1.20	96	2.67	1.13

Note. Because of missing data from participants who selected *I don't know*, *n* varies by condition.

questions about Satan's and God's role as the dependent variables and Long Term Outcome (positive, negative, unspecified) as the independent variable. The God's Involvement and Satan's involvement variables were significantly different from one another,  $F(1, 86) = 35.54, p < .0001$  and the main effect of LTO was not significant,  $F(2, 172) = 0.65, p < .521$ , but consistent with our hypotheses the God/Satan by LTO interaction was significant,  $F(2, 174) = 18.27, p < .0001$ . This indicated that participants responded to the conditions differently depending on whether they were asked about God or Satan.

Follow-up paired-sample *t* tests were done to explore the interaction effect. To examine Hypothesis 3, that participants may allow a role for God in a negative event if the event had a long-term positive outcome, we examined differences between God's perceived involvement in each of the LTO factors. There was a significant difference between all of the LTO factors, with people attributing a greater role to God in the Positive than in the Negative,  $t(95) = 5.46, p < .0001$ , and Unspecified,  $t(96) = 3.49, p = .001$ , conditions. The Negative and Unspecified conditions also differed from each other,  $t(95) = 2.06, p = .043$ .

Hypothesis 4 predicted that Satan would play a greater role in events with a long term negative outcome. Results of follow-up *t* tests supported this hypothesis, indicating a significant difference between all of the LTO conditions, with people attributing a greater role to Satan in the Negative than in the Positive,  $t(91) = 4.32, p < .0001$ , and Unspecified,  $t(91) = 2.66, p = .009$ , conditions. Positive and Unspecified conditions also differed,  $t(93) = 2.30, p = .024$ , with people attributing more involvement to Satan in unspecified than positive conditions.

### Participant Narratives

**Narratives about God.** The two coders independently reviewed the 109 participants' data and found that 80 of 109 participants provided codable narratives about God. Eighteen of the 109 (16.5%) were classified as uncodable because the answer was left blank. Another 11 (10.1%) were deemed uncodable because they described generalized statements rather than a specific event. For example, "every Time I have ever prayed to God I have been able to see his hand in the situation somehow" is a general statement about prayer, not a story about a specific situation that involved an answered prayer.

The second question concerned the kinds of situations in which God was involved. To reduce small or redundant categories, some categories created in advance were either moved to “other” category or combined into new ones (e.g., “illness” and “death” were combined into a “medical” category). Categories used by coders were not mutually exclusive and some narratives were classified into multiple categories. For example, a spiritual crisis prompted by the death of a parent could be categorized as both “medical” and “spiritual.” Because of the presence of non-mutually exclusive categories, a standard Kappa procedure for checking interrater reliability would be inappropriate. Instead, we used a Mezzich’s Kappa procedure which measures reliability in terms of the proportion of theme classifications that overlap between raters (Eccleston, Werneke, Armon, Stephenson, & MacFaul, 2001; Mezzich, Kraemer, Worthington, & Coffman, 1981). Reliability was excellent for this question,  $\kappa = .96$ . Rather than resolve disagreements on each coding classification, the percentage of vignettes that fell into each category was obtained for each coder and then the two percentages averaged. This method was used in all subsequent analyses. The most common context was school (28.9%); this category included stories about what major to choose, what school to attend, and problems relating to teachers and grades. Medical problems (27.7%) was the next most frequent category and included illnesses, accidents, and deaths involving the participant or a family member. The third most common was relationships (27.5%), including conflicts or break-ups with dating partners, arguments with friends, and disagreements with parents. The remaining categories included important decisions (9.4%); behaviors such as substance use, sexual indiscretions, and violating parental rules (6.9%); workplace problems (4.4%); and spiritual struggles (1.9%).

Our next question concerned the age of the participant when the event occurred. This question had excellent levels of agreement,  $\kappa = .93$  (calculated assuming mutually exclusive categories). In 12.5% of cases, it was not clear from the narrative when the event happened. However, most of the time the participant explicitly stated clues to their age (*When I was a child . . . , Back in high school . . .*) or discussed issues that allowed us to infer a developmental period (e.g., making decisions about college). Most of the events (75.5%) took place during adolescence/emerging adulthood, whereas a smaller percentage (5%) occurred in childhood. Although adolescence and emerging adulthood are developmentally distinct periods (Arnett, 2000), it was difficult to reliably distinguish between them in our sample of mostly 18-year-olds who are in transition between the stages; therefore we coded the two stages together. A remaining 7.5% of events were classified as lifelong/ongoing. This category included lifelong situations (e.g., being the only girl out of 5 children) or situations that continued over many years (e.g., a father diagnosed with cancer in a participant’s childhood who had not yet been cured).

Narratives were examined to determine the people involved. Reliability was good, Mezzich’s  $\kappa = .85$ . For the vast majority (95.6%), the participant was directly involved in the event rather than a reporter of a witnessed event. Others who were also involved are reported below, with examples of the types of situations mentioned.

- Parents (26.9%): Narratives about parental conflict/divorce; accident/illness; job loss; moving the family to a new city/home; fertility issues; grief; and involvement in participant’s event.

- Romantic partners (22.5%): Breakups with romantic partners; meeting new romantic partners; crisis or illness in a boyfriend/girlfriend’s life.

- Friend (19.4%): Illness/crisis in a friend’s life; meeting a new friend who is good influence; ending relationship with a bad friend; and involvement in participant’s event.

- Sibling (13.1%): Birth/adoption of siblings; sibling accident/illness/suicide; drug/alcohol problems; and involvement in participant’s event.

- Extended family (5.6%): Events involving cousins, aunts/uncles, and grandparents.

- Other (8.1%): An assortment of other acquaintances forming no clear category.

Coders classified narratives according to whether or not they referenced praying about the event (a mutually exclusive categorization); there was an acceptable degree of agreement between coders,  $\kappa = .85$ . In 27.5% of narratives, participants reported prayer related the event. These events often fit a “participant prays, God responds” storyline. For example, *Last year I had to make an important decision on where to go to school. . . . I prayed about the decision and I let God decide what was best for me.* The participant then described unexpected scholarship money becoming available that made a previously unaffordable school possible, an event they interpreted as an answer to prayer. The 72.5% of events where participants did not report prayer often followed a “God acts, then participant interprets” model. An example of this is seen in this narrative: *I was involved in a car accident recently. I was driving on the interstate while it was raining very hard. I hydroplaned and loss (sic) control of my car. . . . It was a scary experience but I know God was with me the whole time. I escaped with only a few bruises.* The participant never mentions asking God to intervene, nor does he necessarily see God as the cause of the accident itself. However, God plays a protective role and becomes the participant’s explanation for the way the situation unfolded.

Finally, coders classified narratives into categories based on the participant’s theory about how God acted. Categories were not mutually exclusive so Mezzich’s Kappa procedure was used. Reliability was acceptable but still lower than other questions,  $\kappa = .80$ . In 6.9% of cases, there was a lack of information from which to form a judgment about how God was involved, such as *I talked to an atheist about Christ.* The other major categories are below:

- God saved/rescued someone from a negative event (30.6%): This involves negative events where God acted as a protector or rescuer. For example, *In my country there was a bad war and God gave me a chance to move to the U.S.A. and I did with my family. Ever since then I have been succeeding greatly in my life.*

- God influenced the protagonist’s thoughts in a positive way (15.6%): This category involved situations where God influences the thoughts and decisions of the protagonist. For example, *God was involved in my breakup with my last boyfriend who was mentally abusive. I honestly feel as if God told me it was the best thing for me even though I didn’t want it.*

- God influenced the protagonist positively through another person (15.6%): This involves other people being acting as an agent of God. For example, *The first day of [freshman] orientation I met a great, strong, Christian guy who made me want to love God . . .*

- God allowed or used a negative event (14.4%): This category was used when there is no indication that the event was caused by

God, but the event was used to bring out some positive purpose. For example, *My sister was with her abusive boyfriend for 5 years and it seemed like she would never leave him. But one day he finally beat her SO severely we had to take her to the doctor and it was like a wake-up call for her. She left him and got a good job and went back to school. I feel God used that horrible situation to show her where she would end up if she did not leave him.*

- God caused a positive event (13.8%): This category was used when God caused something positive to happen to the participant. For example, *I have a friend named Caleb whom I have always wanted to date. . . . When I was 16 years old I prayed for a long time for God to let me have a chance with him because I truly loved him. When I was 16 me and him (sic) started to date. It was the best experience that I have been through in my life.*

- God helped the person cope with a difficult situation (10.0%): God's role was to help the person cope with a bad situation. For example, *When I was a senior in high school my mom was diagnosed with cancer. She passed away 5 months later. At first I was so angry with God. I didn't understand why my mom [died]. It was so hard but God strengthened me throughout this and he sent different people in my life to fill those holes my mom couldn't. He brought me and my dad closer than we'll proly (sic) ever be.* (This was also categorized as "influence through another person.")

**Narratives about Satan.** Of the 109 participants, 59 (54.1%) provided narratives about Satan that could be coded; 27 (24.8%) were eliminated because they left the question blank; 9 (8.3%) wrote that they did not believe in Satan and/or did not believe Satan was involved in our everyday lives; and 14 (12.8%) only provided general or hypothetical situations.

We examined narratives for information about the types of situations in which Satan was involved. Categories were not mutually exclusive, so Mezzich's Kappa was calculated,  $\kappa = .86$ . Some of the same topics reported in God narratives were also present in Satan narratives; for example, medical issues (29.8%) and relationships (40.4%). Other prominent issues in the God narratives were less present in Satan narratives; for example school and work combined together only composed 1.8% of Satan narratives while school was the most common category for God stories. Finally, there were categories that were very minor or nonexistent in the God narratives that appear frequently in Satan narratives: negative behavior (43.0%), which included defying authority figures, drinking alcohol, drug use, and sexual behavior (we only classified these behaviors as negative when the participant perceived it as sinful or unwise); negative thoughts or feelings (7.9%), which included feelings of sadness, depression, anxiety or hopelessness; victimization experiences (2.6%); spiritual crises (1.9%); and other (7.9%). The "other" category was examined by the primary author and no new theme emerged.

Concerning the age when events in Satan narratives happened, coders had good agreement,  $\kappa = .86$ . The participant's age was not clear in 23.7% of narratives. As with God narratives, the majority (56.1%) of events took place during adolescence/emerging adulthood and few (4.4%) occurred in childhood. Another 15.8% of events were lifelong/ongoing.

Satan narratives were classified according to who was involved in or affected by the event. Percentage of agreement was good, Meschler's  $\kappa = .91$ . For the majority (85.1%), the participant was mentioned as involved rather than merely a reporter of the event. The breakdown was largely similar to that of God narratives, with

other individuals involved (from most common to least) being friends (34.2%), extended family (15.8%), parents (14.0%), romantic partners (11.4%), other acquaintances (10.5%), and siblings (5.3%).

Regarding prayer, percentage of agreement was 100%,  $\kappa = 1.00$ . Mentions to prayer were rare—96.5% did not mention it and 3.51% did.

Regarding the "theory" about which Satan worked, we had lower than desirable interrater agreement than on other items, Meschler's  $\kappa = .72$ . Because of the lower reliability, we are not reporting percentages for each theme, but instead merely reporting the major themes that both coders agreed were present in a substantial number of narratives.

- No theory present: These involved situations where an event was merely described with no explanation about how Satan was involved: *I lied to my parents about school.* Although there were narratives where coders disagreed about whether a theory was present (a contributor to the low Kappa), it is noteworthy that for 26 narratives (44% of the codable narratives), coders were both in agreement that there was no theory present. "No theory present" was therefore a very common theme.

- Temptation due to others' influence: This theme mirrors a similar one in the God narratives; however, here the influential person is an agent of Satan and a negative influence rather than an agent of God, a positive influence. For example, *In high school I spent a lot of time with people that like to drink alcohol on occasion. I was always strongly against drinking for myself, but I never held this opinion against my friends. Over time, however, I wore down and actually began to get drunk on occasion. I believe that Satan was able to break me down and put me into situations that I did not belong in.*

- Satan influenced thoughts/actions in a negative way: This category is analogous to the one where God influences the protagonist's decisions or thoughts in a positive direction. Satan proves to be a more nefarious influence: *I was 15 and I was at my aunt's house. I stole one of her Kool cigarettes, took the four-wheeler into the woods, and attempted to smoke it. No one told me to try it, but Satan did . . .*

- Satan caused/planned a negative event: Satan directly causing an event such as an illness.

## Discussion

One important issue addressed by this study is the contextualized nature of God and Satan attributions. Based on the data presented, a few general conclusions can be drawn. First, results from our preliminary belief questions indicated that our participants see God as heavily involved in the details of life. God is not just a being who occasionally causes an isolated event, but an active presence. In the vignettes, participants were attentive to the long-term progression of the event as they evaluated what occurred. In participant's narratives, they interpreted the meaning of the event based on their ideas about God's purpose for getting involved.

Another interesting issue concerned the role of prayer in people's attributions to God and Satan. This pool of participants indicated that prayer was an important part of their life. However in the vignettes, prayer was not a predictor of whether they saw God as being involved in a situation. In participant narratives,

prayer was occasionally mentioned as part of an event attributed to God, but the majority of both God and Satan narratives did not mention prayer. We would argue that many of the events follow less of a “person prays → God acts” sequence but instead that a “God acts → person interprets” narrative. Prayer is important to participants, but it might be more essential in the interpretation process, as a way to communicate with God about the events in their lives and gain insight about their meaning and purpose.

In previous research, people were found to rarely attribute negative events to God (Lupfer & Layman, 1996; Ritzema, 1979). Our research is consistent with this, but with some qualification. First, in direct questioning, the majority of our participants endorsed the statement that God causes negative events to bring about a purpose. Although it is accurate to say that Christians believe God is a causal agent in negative events, the wording of the question allowed for positive or benevolent purpose for the negative event. So, God is not seen as randomly or purposelessly causing bad events, but might play a role if a long-term positive purpose could be accomplished. This was confirmed in the vignettes, as people were willing to attribute a role for God in negative events, especially when a long-term positive outcome was the result. Participant-produced narratives extend this theme somewhat. Participants were not reluctant to assign a role for God in negative events, but it was generally not a causal role. Instead, God got involved as a rescuer, comforter, or one who uses the negative to bring about positive. In future research, it would be fruitful to clarify the difference between God playing a role in a negative event (the wording in our vignettes) and *causing* a negative event (the category we used in our coding) because our participants seem to make a distinction.

One finding that we did not anticipate was the number of stories that did not involve external events. It was quite common for our participants to attribute internal, psychological events to both God and Satan. With God, this involved shaping a person’s good decisions or helping their emotional state. With Satan, this was more likely to involve the induction of bad decisions or the temptation to think or act in unhealthy ways. In any event, these are not “events” in the usual sense of causing something in the person’s external environment, but are very important to the participants nevertheless. The issue of psychological and emotional influence by God and Satan may be an interesting subject for future research, especially research relating to religious coping behavior. If the subject believes emotional difficulties they are having can be exacerbated by Satan—or healed by God—then this may affect their responses to the situation and the way they use prayer.

The role of social influence is also interesting, because many of our participants not only attributed external and internal events to God, but also saw other people as agents of God or Satan. Both God and Satan are depicted as affecting the individual through other people’s influence, for good or ill. The common thread here is that often people did not see God or Satan as causing a particular chain of physical events, but instead affecting them psychologically, emotionally, and socially.

Regarding Satan, 93.6% of our sample believed in Satan and 82.7% strongly endorsed the view that Satan can cause negative events in life. In the vignettes, however, they were less likely to attribute events to Satan even in those situations where a bad long-term outcome resulted. When asked to produce narratives

relating to Satan, 27 (24.8%) participants left the item blank as compared with 18 (16.5%) for the God question. Of the 59 participants (54.1%) who provided a codable narrative, a very common theme was to simply provide an event without explaining how Satan was involved or why they believe this. Although there were reliability issues with our Satan narratives that prevent our making strong claims about the exact percentage of narratives lacking a theory, in 44% of the codable narratives, coders were both in agreement that there was no theme present, as compared to the theory being lacking in only 6.9% of God narratives. One possibility, based on the theological background of the participants, is that these conservative Christians endorse the doctrine of Satan being real, but do not have a well-developed theology of how Satan works. A similar result was found by Jensen (2009) in her study of concepts of God and the Devil among conservative/liberal Presbyterians; their subjects generated more descriptions of God than Satan.

The present study is limited because of the homogenous religious background and age of our sample. Specifically, we propose that Christians from different backgrounds may have different views about the action of God and Satan. In ongoing research, we are exploring the perceptions of Satan among Pentecostal Christians, who might have a more well-developed theology of Satan.

Regarding the types of events that participants cited and the people involved in them, this seems highly reflective of the developmental stage of the participants. As college freshmen entering emerging adulthood, issues related to school problems and decisions, romantic relationships, and “risky behavior” would be expected to be on their minds. The most central relationships in the lives of people these age—friends, dating partners, parents, and siblings (Arnett, 2000)—are also present to a large degree. Research on autobiographical memory is also consistent with our findings, in that recent events (and events of emergent adulthood) seem to be central to adult’s memories (Jansari & Parkin, 1996). We believe the age of our research participants poses a limitation of this study (and of many other similar studies). In ongoing research, we are exploring some of these developmental issues by surveying people from a broader age range. We anticipate that as people enter early, middle, and late adulthood, the types of events they perceive God and Satan as influencing, and the people who play a central role in these events, may change. We also expect to find maturing of spiritual beliefs that comes with time and life experience. How this maturation process is reflected in the ways they report actions of God and Satan remains to be seen.

In summary, our study suggests that people’s reasoning about the role of God and Satan in their lives is complex and highly contextual. People did not just see one way or one type of event as being caused by God/Satan, but a variety of events. They made meaning out of those events because of the way they unfolded over time, not just by considering events in isolation. Understanding the richness and complexity of people’s reasoning about the events encountered in life has a great deal of practical utility for helping people use their spirituality as a healthy coping mechanism.

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## Appendix

### Sample Vignette

PA (Prayer): Jim knew his son needed help and was praying for God to intervene and help Trevor overcome his alcoholism.

PA (Wish): Jim knew his son needed help and wished he could help Trevor overcome his alcoholism.

Jim's 23-year-old son, Trevor, had been abusing alcohol for many years. Because of his alcohol consumption, he had dropped out of school and lived in his parents' basement. One night, Trevor was very drunk while driving home from a party and he crashed into a tree. He couldn't move his body from the waist down and was rushed to the ER. When the surgeon operated, he found that Trevor's spinal cord was completely severed from the crash, and there was nothing he could do to repair it. He told Trevor that he would be permanently paralyzed from the waist down.

LTO (positive): Trevor saw this as a wake-up call and decided to change his ways. He entered a treatment program and eventually went back to school to become a substance abuse counselor.

LTO (negative): Trevor became very depressed and his alcoholism worsened. He continued to live in his parents' basement and never went back to school.

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