Visualizations of God: Exploring the relationship between religious belief and mental representations of God
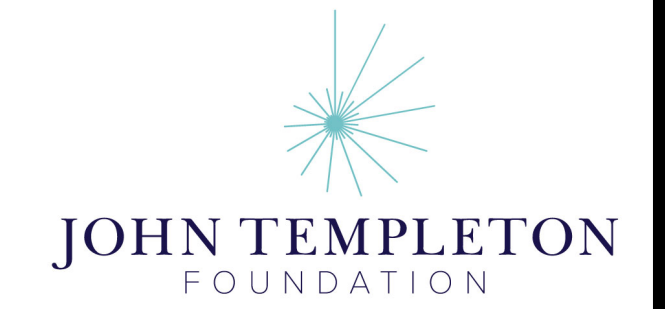
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Introduction

- Are differences in religious belief associated with fundamentally different God representations?
- No previous research had identified differences in deistic representation based on strength of religious belief.
- Do participants differ in mental representations of God (e.g., personified vs. abstract)?
- Do representation differ by strength of religious belief?

Methods and Participants

- 172 online subjects recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk.
- Completed battery of questionnaires to measure strength of religious belief
- Also completed a multi-dimensional scale to assess attributes of God (Johnson et al., 2018).
- Participants responded to open-ended visualization prompt:
  - "What sort of imagine comes to mind when you think of God? How do you visualize God in your mind's eye"
  - Responses were coded as belonging to one of 3 categories:
    - Personified descriptions
    - Abstract or Impersonal descriptions
    - Descriptions of a being or spirit

Fig. 1
Participants most frequently visualized God as a personified figure.

Fig. 2
Our sample was comprised of predominantly high believers, or those with strong religious beliefs.

"How do you visualize God?"

Descriptions of a personified image	Descriptions of a being or spirit	Descriptions of an abstract image
"As an old white guy with long gray beard and long gray hair"	"A spiritual being, not viewable"	"Good source of bright white energy"
"White robe sitting on his throne with his long brown hair"	"I visualize god as a spiritual being. taking what ever form he desires."	"A glowing aura of floating light. Or a golden orb."
"God in my mind has white hair and a white beard. He is light skin toned with brown eyes. He wears a white outfit with sandals."	"An all powerful entity that has no physical form"	"Bright multi-colored light" "I visualize a presence like a cloud in space. Glittering lights, beautiful, silent without personality."

Representations of God Within Belief Groups

Fig. 3
- God representations did not differ between belief groups.
- Strength of religious belief does not appear to influence the way in which people imagine God.

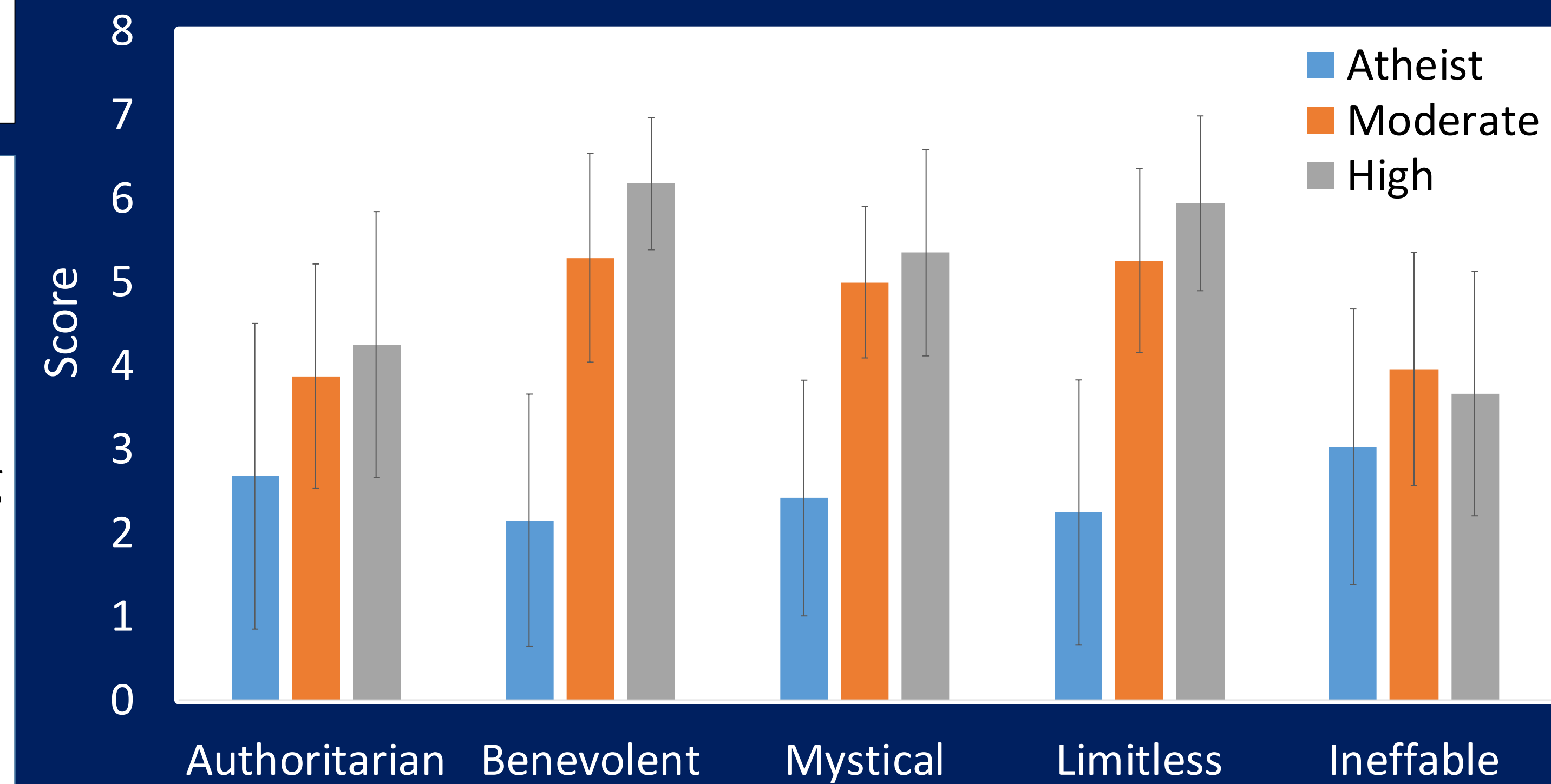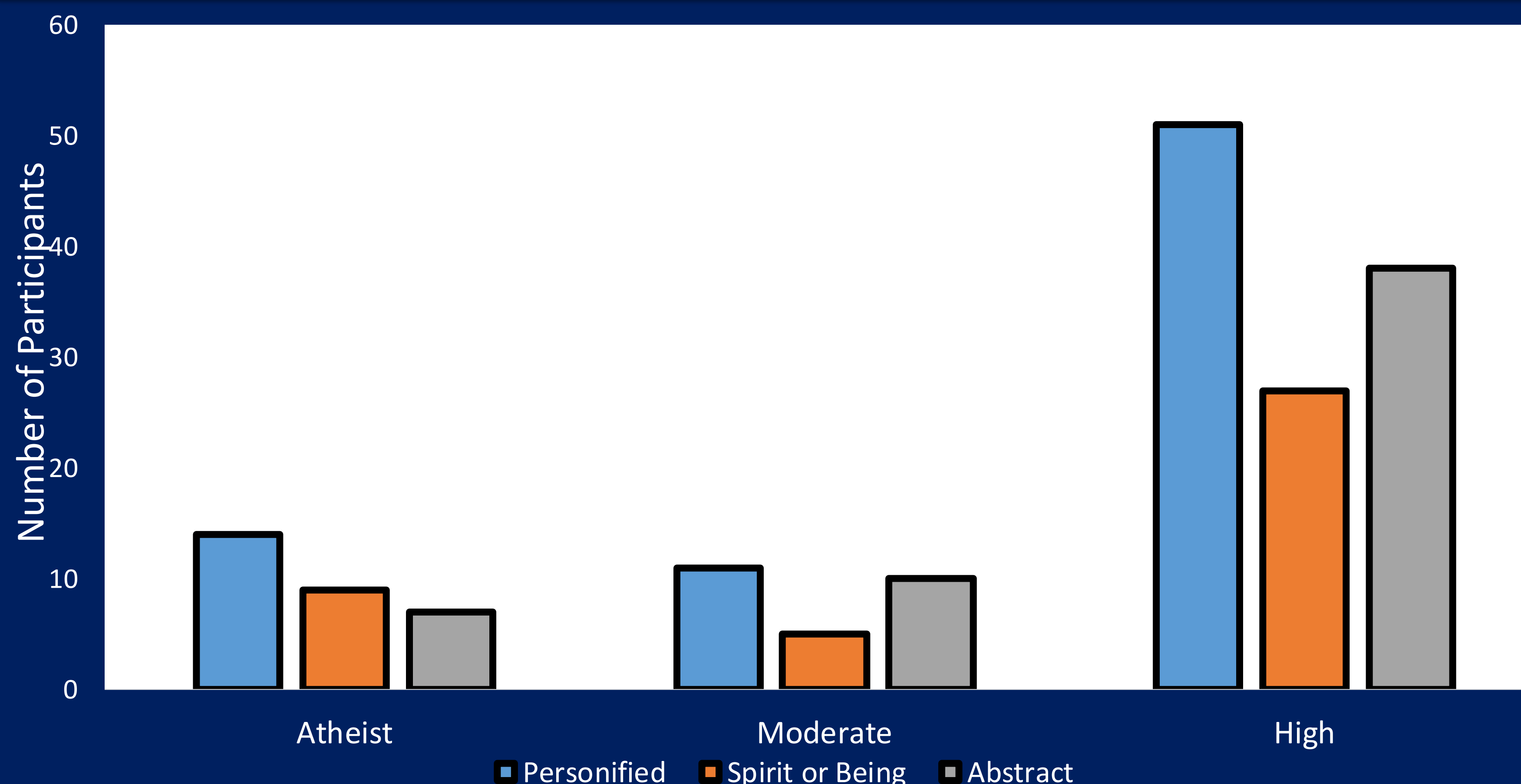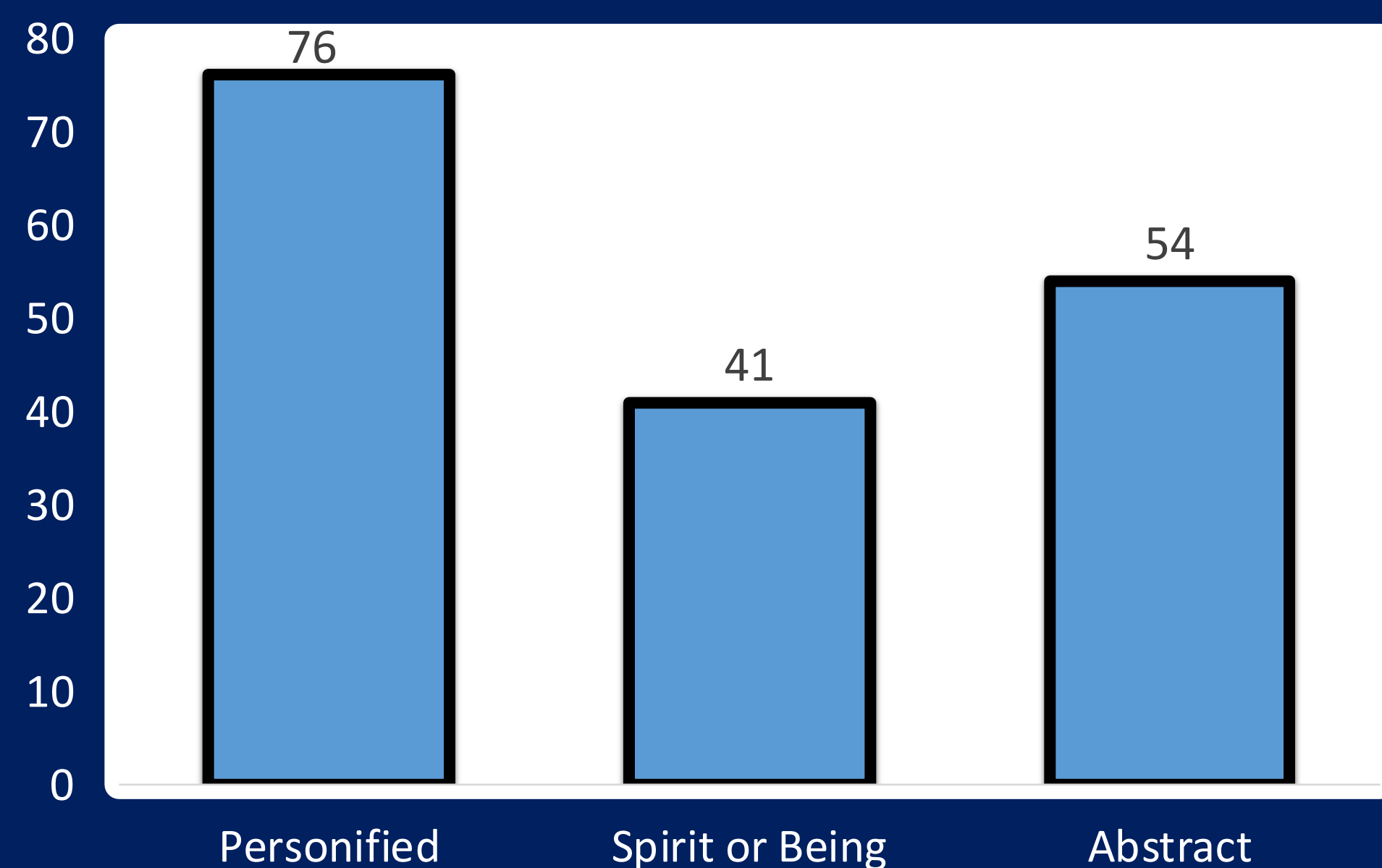## Attributes of God Between Belief Groups

Fig. 4
- In addition to analyzing the self-reported visualizations of God (see fig. 3), we examined the relationship between people's responses on the multi-dimensional scale used to assess attributes of God and their level of religious belief.
- In contrast to what we saw with their self-reported visualizations, strength of religious belief does seem to influence the ways in which people attribute different characteristics to God.
- Those who have stronger religious beliefs attribute almost all attributes to God more strongly than their moderate and low believer counterparts.

Conclusions

- Participants do not show differences in how they describe their mental representations of God (personification vs. being or spirit vs. abstract) based on strength of religious belief.
- However, participants do show differences in the way that they attribute characteristics to God based on their strength of religious belief.
  - If you do believe something is real, you may be more likely to attribute any characteristic to that entity; versus if you do not believe something real you may not attribute any characteristic to that entity.
- Future work in our laboratory will explore whether neural representations are consistent with these self reported representations.