Unbounded Affinity: Religiosity and the Paranormal in the UK

Introduction

Avebury is a picturesque village in Wiltshire, England. The farmhouses, church, and the local pub are built in and around its defining feature – the world's largest prehistoric megalithic henge. Notably, two shops in the otherwise small village center cater to New Age and paranormal topics and material culture. They each sell a variety of crystals, astrological talismans, and texts covering topics such as UFOs, sacred geometry, crop circles, spiritual healing, numerology, moon runes, and the Knights Templar, to name but a few. Local entrepreneurs and practitioners advertise their classes and services featuring "alternative" spiritual practices on the community boards in these shops. The henge site itself has become a tourist destination for a variety of spiritually-inclined pilgrims, from Pagans to pseudo-archaeological purveyors of "conspirituality" (Ward and Voas 2011).

At the edge of the stone circle and barrow, a walking path leads to two ancient-looking "wishing trees," rumored to have served as the inspiration for the Ents in J.R.R. Tolkein's mythic universe. Visitors bring tokens and offerings to leave at the tree, often tethered to the branches or roots. Examples include ribbons, messages, and faerie portals (see Image 1). The diffuse spirituality on display at Avebury serves as a microcosm of wider trends in the Western world generally, and in Britain especially. Increasing numbers of people are moving away from organized monotheisms (Field 2022), and toward individualized forms of spirituality that amalgamate beliefs and practices from magical, esoteric, and "New Age" streams of culture (Hanegraaff 1998, 2003, 2013). Indeed, there is evidence of growing interest in the paranormal in Britain, particularly in areas such as ghost belief and paranormal-themed tourism (Clark, Baker, and Bader 2026).

<Image 1 about here>

Sitting within a short walk of the standing stones at Avebury sits the Anglican Church of St. James, one of two active churches in the immediate area. A sign on the door of the historic chapel reads: "Welcome pilgrims of all faiths & none." It seems that conventional religions are having to adjust to a new reality in Britain. There has been a well-documented decline in affiliation with organized religions in the UK in the last several decades, particularly amongst Christian traditions (Bruce and Glendinning 2010; Crockett and Voas 2006; Field 2022). A nation that once had majority affiliation with the Church of England has experienced precipitous drops in both affiliation and attendance. Two-thirds (66%) of UK citizens reported a religious affiliation in 1984. By 2018, that number had dropped to less than half (47%) of the population (Voas and Bruce 2019). Accordingly, in accounts of secularization in the Western world, Britain often serves as a key example of declining levels of piety amongst the general population (e.g., Bruce 2001; Woodhead 2016). But at the same time as organized religion is declining in Britain, there appears to be increasing interest in paranormalism (Clark, Bader, and Baker 2026). This begs the question: How do religion and paranormalism intersect in more secularized contexts such as Britain? Does the relationship between conventional religion and paranormalism match the patterns identified using data from the US (Baker et al. 2016), or other countries such as Italy (Bader et al. 2012) and Canada (Silva and Huddart 2026)?

Perhaps in relatively secularized contexts, organized religion and the paranormal will adopt a more ecumenical, symbiotic approach to one another. The decline of organized religion's social significance and decreases in affiliation do not necessarily mean that individuals have ceased to believe in supernatural powers and agents (Davie 2015), and scholars have also noted a considerable amount of residual spirituality amongst the religiously disaffiliated (Beider 2023). For example, the percentage of the British population who believe in life after death has been

relatively stable since 1970, despite steep declines in affiliation and attendance during this same period.[1] While some percentage of those who disaffiliate will also reject belief in all supernatural agents and powers, secularization more likely is *transforming* supernatural beliefs, rather than eradicating them. Institutional religious secularization may well be opening up more cultural space for alternative forms of supernaturalism.[2] "Paranormal" subcultures offer a wellspring of such alternative forms of supernatural belief. Belief in ghosts, psychic powers, UFOs, the Loch Ness monster, faeries and other such phenomena may allow those disenchanted by conventional religion to restore enchantment to their worlds.

Here we examine the relationship between conventional religion and the paranormal by analyzing data from a 2021 national survey of UK citizens. This survey included an extensive battery of questions about conventional religiosity, as well as a wide range of questions about belief in and engagement with paranormal subjects. We begin by defining the paranormal and discussing how it occupies a unique cultural space in between conventional religion and institutional science. We then discuss existing research on the paranormal in the UK, before moving to a discussion of "bounded affinity" theory, which helps explain the connections between religion and the paranormal. Finally, we test hypotheses derived from bounded affinity theory using data from the UK, and discuss how these results support, but also amend and extend previous research about the intersection of religion and the paranormal.

Defining the Paranormal

[1] British Religion in Numbers: http://www.brin.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Belief-After-Life-1939-2008.png.

[2] Importantly, this could still be a transitionary phase into a more thorough form of secularization (see Stolz et al. 2025); however, the degree to which non-institutionalized supernatural beliefs are eroded in circumstances of extensive secularization awaits adequate data on paranormalism. The data that are currently available from relatively secular contexts such as Sweden (Tidelius 2024) and the UK (Clark et al. 2025) continue to show considerable levels of supernatural belief among the general public.

There are, intuitively and ontologically, many similarities between religious and paranormal beliefs. Both conventional religious beliefs and paranormal beliefs typically require the acceptance of supernatural agents and, therefore, necessarily lie outside the realm of institutional science. What distinguishes the paranormal from religion is not, therefore, supernatural orientation, but rather relative institutional position within a wider cultural marketplace of supernatural ideas (Bader et al. 2017). Certain supernatural beliefs are sanctioned by mainstream, conventional religions in the culture in which they operate and are, therefore, considered normative by a large segment of the population. The belief that Jesus was physically resurrected after his crucifixion would be viewed as a medical impossibility by institutional science; but it is a foundational belief of Christian religions. Indeed, such "wonderous events" are the basis for most forms of organized religion (see McClenon 1994), and effectively serve as a form of "costly signaling" to fellow members (see Potz 2023).

Likewise, the belief that the body contains seven chakras that can be influenced by the energies contained within different crystals also does not align with accepted scientific thinking; but belief in chakras also does not align with the beliefs of mainstream, Abrahamic religions in Western contexts. Notably, however, belief in chakras may be part of normative religious beliefs in other contexts, particularly where Hinduism is the dominant religion. Consequently, what is culturally classified as "paranormal" or "religious" varies by cultural context. By examining the negative cultural responses to a particular supernatural phenomenon by mainstream institutions representing religion and science in a given culture, we can determine what lies both outside science (the supernatural) and outside mainstream religion (the damned or heretical). Such

"doubly damned" phenomena become classified as “paranormal,” “occult,” “magical,” "new age," or by other analogous cultural and linguistic categories.[3]

As previous research has noted, mainstream religions may have a variety of reactions to supernatural beliefs that fall outside of their purview. More ecumenical religions will have little concern about their members dabbling in astrology, or drawing inspiration from different religious traditions (e.g., the Anglican church in Avebury). More exclusivist religious groups will actively discourage such experimentation and may, indeed, brand paranormal beliefs as heretical, or even Satanic (*cf*. Bader, Baker and Mencken 2017; Baker, Bader and Mencken 2016; Taves 1999, 2013). Ironically, this act of condemnation charges damned beliefs, objects, and rites with the cultural power of desecration (Taussig 1999). That is, supernatural beliefs and objects, as well as rites organized around them, can draw on the negative cultural energy seeded by desecration from conventional religions, channeling them into the magical and occult (Poole 2009).

Following previous work, we define the paranormal as “[b]eliefs, practices, and experiences that are not recognized by science and *not* associated, with mainstream religion” (Bader et al. 2017: 32). Given this definition, the designation of a particular idea as “paranormal” is fluid; subject to change across time, place, and cultural context. Should science confirm the existence of Bigfoot, then the creature ceases to be paranormal and becomes an object of science. Should UFOs and extraterrestrials ever form the basis of a major, *mainstream* religion, then

[3] It is worth noting, however, that different kinds of paranormal topics may be more or less condemned by organized religious groups. Rejection from religion may range from passive indifference (e.g., Bigfoot) to explicit condemnation, (e.g., fortune telling). Examining whether and how different kinds of paranormal topics evoke varying levels of explicit or implicit rejection by religion, and how this differential rejection effects resulting patterns related to the religion-paranormal connection, offers an important avenue for future inquiry.

UFOs would also cease to be a paranormal matter, but instead become a religious one.[4] Likewise, if physical evidence for UFO visitation ever becomes accepted by mainstream science, then aliens will cease to classified as paranormal, and will instead come to be viewed through the lens of science, rationality, and empiricism.

Bounded Affinity Theory

Since there is considerable overlap between religious and paranormal beliefs, many scholars have speculated about the empirical relationship between the two (*cf*. Bader, Baker and Mencken 2017; Mencken, Bader and Kim 2009; Orenstein 2002; Rice 2003). Both paranormal and religious claims: 1) go beyond what is verifiable through scientific methods; 2) involve supernatural forces breaking into the material world; and 3) can produce intensive, other-worldly experiences that overtake people's senses to produce visions, voices, healing, and bodily possession (Baker et al. 2016). Based on all these affinities, many researchers reasonably hypothesized that it should only be a small step from believing in angels to believing in ghosts, and that believing in one should make interest and involvement in the other *more* likely (Bainbridge 2004; Goode 2000; Wuthnow 1978).

At the same time, organized religions have long placed limits on non-institutional forms of supernaturalism, such as consulting psychics, hunting ghosts, or believing in aliens. There is a basic, rational reason for this. People only have a limited amount of attention, time, and money. To the extent that people spend their finite resources on psychics, there is less to put into the proverbial offering plate. More formally, religious organizations that place restrictions on participants' levels of investment in other supernatural endeavors are able to screen out "free

[4] Of course, there are multiple new religious movements based upon contact with extraterrestrials, such as the Aetherius Society, Scientology, Unarius and Raëlianism; but none of these groups has ever developed substantial enough membership to be considered a conventional, culturally normative religion (see Partridge 2003, for a review).

riders" (weak members), and correspondingly increase the sense of investment and commitment from those who remain in the organizations (Iannaccone 1995). This exclusivism is a key feature of the relative value of group membership, and in turn helps inspire more efficacious collective rituals, social solidarity, and positive affect among group participants (Baker 2010; Stroope and Baker 2014). Consequently, based on the cultural boundaries enforced by organized religions, many researchers reasonably surmised that religion and the paranormal constituted separate cultural spheres. Therefore, believing in one should make interest and involvement in the other *less* likely (Emmons and Sobel 1981; Stark 2008).

For many years, empirical research was unable to provide strong confirmation for either the "small step" or "separate spheres" hypotheses, as analyses of whether religiosity was positively or negatively correlated with paranormalism were mixed, weak, and inconsistent (*cf*. Donahue 1993; Sparks 2001; Rice 2003). Baker and Draper (2010) demonstrated that this lack of consistent findings largely resulted from using linear statistical tests. In contrast to linear patterns, they found that the relationship between paranormalism and religiosity was curvilinear, with the highest levels of paranormal belief and practice occurring at moderate levels of religiosity.

Synthesizing the aspects of "small step" and "separate spheres" approaches that are useful, Baker et al. (2016) posited a "bounded affinity" between religion and the paranormal. Following the "small step" idea, there is an elective affinity between the supernaturalist orientation of religious and paranormal beliefs (see McClenon 2000), which leads to a general, positive relationship between the two. However, when people are actively participating in exclusivist religions, these connections will be restricted, and thus religious and paranormal ideas will remain in separate cultural spheres, with little overlap. Research in the United States and

Italy has confirmed the existence of a curvilinear relationship between the paranormal and religion (Baker and Draper 2010; Baker, Bader and Mencken 2016; Bader, Baker and Molle 2012), and analyses of data from Australia have also support bounded affinity theory (Possamai 2020 et al.). A recent national study of Canadian adults also documented a curvilinear relationship between subjective religious salience and paranormal beliefs, with the highest levels of belief in hauntings, mental and spiritual energy, and alien visitation occurring among those who reported being "somewhat" (rather than "very," "not at all," or "not too") religious (Silva and Huddart 2026. Notably, religious identity and religious salience were the strongest predictors of paranormal beliefs in that study.

Subdividing expressions of religiosity into different dimensions—particularly involving supernatural beliefs, intensive religious experiences, religious practices, and commitment to exclusivist religious rules (see Glock and Stark 1965)—reveals that different aspects of religiosity have varying connections to levels of paranormalism. Specifically, religious beliefs and experiences are positively correlated with paranormal beliefs and experiences (Draper and Baker 2011), while religious practice and commitment are negatively correlated with paranormalism (Orenstein 2002). Religious service attendance in particular has a negative influence on paranormal beliefs after controlling for other aspects of religiosity, especially for frequent attenders (Silva and Huddart 2026).

Further, there is a complex dynamic between these different aspects of religiosity, such that the positive effects of religious beliefs and experiences on paranormalism are amplified for people who are not strongly tethered to an exclusive, organized religious group through regular practices and expressions of commitment (Mencken et al. 2008, 2009; Baker et al. 2016). Notably, however, all previous studies that have identified this dynamic have relied on samples

from the United States. To test the limits to the external validity of bounded affinity theory, and more generally to expand the comparative and descriptive aspects of empirical studies of the paranormal, high-quality data on paranormal beliefs and experiences from comparable, but different, locations are needed.

The Paranormal in the UK

The nature of the relationship between the paranormal and religion in the UK remains an open question, as the majority of research on the paranormal involving representative samples has been conducted in the United States (Kim et al. 2015). When approaching this topic, the specific historical and cultural context of the UK is an important consideration for framing our study and interpreting any resulting patterns we find. In particular, it is important to note both the extent of institutional secularization that has occurred in the UK, as well as the (sometimes) symbiotic relationship between conventional religions and non-institutional forms of spirituality. More specifically, historical studies of "popular" religion—as contrasted with formal, institutional religion—have documented a long-running trend of freely combining "folk beliefs" and traditions, which include the paranormal, with beliefs and practices drawn from institutional religion (Williams 1999).

This porous relationship between religion and the paranormal also flows in multiple directions, influencing both mainstream and more marginalized religious traditions. For example, organized Wicca has drawn extensively from both paranormal traditions and (heterodox) Christian traditions, allowing for syncretic cross-pollination (Pearson 2007). A key consideration for whether the connections between conventional religious traditions and the paranormal are symbiotic or antagonistic is whether the religion tradition in question is exclusivist or adopts a pluralist orientation toward other traditions, echoing the premises of bounded affinity theory. Just

as “magical” religions such as Wicca have drawn on Christianity, so too individuals (with a pluralistic orientation) within the Church may also draw on paranormal traditions in an effort to revitalize mainstream religion by reconnecting it to spirituality and mysticism (Shaw 2017). These historical examples show that considerable cultural exchange may occur between organized religion and paranormal traditions, particularly where organized religious institutions or individuals adopt a pluralistic orientation toward different traditions.

Regarding more contemporary research on the paranormal in the UK, most has been confined to psychology and focused upon the measurement and prevalence of paranormal beliefs, not upon their relationship to religion (*cf*. Dagnall, Parker and Clough 2016; Schofield et al. 2016; Dean et al. 2021; Drinkwater et al. 2017, 2018; or French and Stone 2017, for a recent overview). Castro et al. (2014) is the most notable contemporary exception to the dominance of psychological research on the paranormal in the UK. Using a nationally representative sample of 4069 adults in Great Britain, they report that 37% of adults claim to have had at least one paranormal experience. This research suggests that the paranormal does indeed have a considerable foothold among the public in the UK.

As noted above, there has been a well-documented decline in affiliation with organized religions in the UK, particularly within Christianity. With less than half of the population reporting a religious affiliation, the UK provides a cultural context of advanced secularization (Voas and Bruce 2019; Bruce 2001; Woodhead 2016). Assessing the complex relationship between religion and the paranormal in a more secular context provides an important comparison point to analyses from locations such as the US and Italy, which are outliers in terms of higher religiosity among Western countries (Norris and Inglehart 2011).[5]

[5] Importantly, however, both the US (Cragun and Smith 2024; Voas and Chaves 2016) and Italy (Scappini 2022) have also recently seen secularization and disaffiliation among younger generations.

Consequently, patterns between religion and the paranormal in the UK provide a window into how these relationships may stay the same or change if secularization continues to advance. Does extensive religious decline provide an opening for alternative spiritual beliefs, including the paranormal? Or will all supernatural beliefs and experiences decline in contexts of secularization? This further raises the question of whether, among more secular populations, the relationship between the paranormal and religion will be curvilinear, as found in the US and Italy. Likewise, it is an open question whether the differences found across varying types of religiosity (e.g., beliefs, experiences, practices, and commitment) will also relate to paranormalism in the UK, or whether the moderating relationships identified between religious beliefs and experiences in conjunction with religious practices will hold using new data.

A recent empirical study provides some initial information towards addressing some of these questions, but also lacks the specificity needed to properly address other relevant questions about bounded affinity theory. Using a recent national survey of the UK, Clark et al. (2025) found that paranormal beliefs were relatively common, with over 70% of the population holding at least one paranormal belief. Further, they tested for and identified a curvilinear relationship between a measure of conventional religious commitment (service attendance, private prayer, and religious identity salience) and paranormal beliefs; however, rather than the n-shaped pattern found in US samples, they identified a more general positive correlation between religiosity and paranormal beliefs, with a ceiling effect at the high end of religiosity. This extended and amended bounded affinity theory by showing that, in more secular cultural contexts, there may be a more general positive relationship between conventional religiosity and paranormal beliefs. This demonstrates an “unbounded” affinity that can occur between religion and the paranormal in more secular contexts.

Although they helped advance the empirical study of paranormal beliefs in the UK, the analyses in Clark et al. (2025) relied on composite measure of overall religiosity, rather than distinguishing between different types of religiosity, and also did not assess patterns related to paranormal experiences. Both of these aspects, the differential and interactive effects of different types of religiosity and the connections between different types of intensive supernatural experiences, are key features of bounded affinity theory. Consequently, in this study we assess the more granular predictions of bounded affinity theory relating to the effects of religious beliefs, experiences, and practices on paranormal beliefs and experiences.

Methods

Data

The data used in this study are from the Chapman and Sheffield Paranormal and Religion Survey (CASPAR), 2021 (see Clark et al. 2025). The data were collected by the marketing and polling firm IPSOS MORI UK (IPSOS). IPSOS's UK KnowledgePanel consists of over 20,000 adults, aged 16-75, from across the United Kingdom (Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and England). Modeled on the IPSOS US KnowledgePanel, UK panelists are recruited using unclustered, address-based sampling, with quotas for age, gender, region and working status. Every household in the UK has a chance to be recruited to join the panel. Surveys are completed online. If a recruited household does not have internet access, IPSOS UK provides access to both equipment and the internet.

The survey consisted of items related to conventional religious behaviors, beliefs, and affiliation, as well as paranormal beliefs and experiences. Respondents completed the survey between August 31 and September 1, 2021. Of the 26,249 invitations sent to respondents in the panel, a total of 2,866 agreed to take the survey. Approximately 73% of these potential

respondents ultimately completed the survey, for a final sample of 2,100 adults. All analyses are weighted by region, working status, age, gender and social grade to be nationally representative. The project gained ethical approval from the Chapman University Institutional Review Board and written informed consent was given to the provider in all cases.

Measures

Dependent Variables

We use two dependent variables, an index of paranormal beliefs and an index of paranormal experiences. Our paranormal belief index is comprised of eighteen items, which were included in two different question batteries. The first battery asks respondents their levels of agreement with statements about paranormal subjects using the possible responses: "strongly agree," "tend to agree," "neither agree nor disagree," "tend to disagree," "strongly disagree," and "prefer not to say."[6] All items were coded such that higher values equate to greater agreement, with "prefer not to say" coded as missing. The statements related to belief in alien visitation in Earth's past, alien visitation in modern times, fortune tellers, hauntings, Bigfoot, Atlantis and telekinesis. A second battery asked respondents to gauge the truth of several statements using the possible responses: "definitely true," "probably true," "probably not true," "definitely not true" and "prefer not to say." All items were coded such that higher values equate to greater belief that the statement is true, with "prefer not to say" coded as missing. These items related to dowsing, ley lines, black magic, mysterious creatures, curses, crop circles, "alien big cats," psychics, the

[6] The inclusion of a "prefer not to say" option helps ease concerns about desirability bias, such that highly religious people will be more susceptible to downplay their paranormal beliefs and experiences, even in an anonymous survey. This response option also provides a way to empirically assess the possibility that religious people were more likely to opt out of responding to questions about the paranormal. To assess this possibility, we used the "prefer not to say" responses to the paranormal experience questions to create an index of opting out. The strongest predictor of opting out of questions was indeed levels of supernatural religious beliefs. Although beyond the scope of the current study, empirically assessing potential survey effects is an important avenue for future quantitative research on the paranormal, and religious characteristics should be a key consideration in such work.

abominable snowman, and faeries. Because the items from the two different batteries were measured with different response ranges (five-category and four-category), we standardized these measures before summing the responses to these eighteen items to create an index, coded such that higher values equate to higher levels of paranormal belief. The final measure had high internal reliability, with a Cronbach's $\propto$ = .94.

Our index of paranormal experiences combines responses to eleven questions. The CASPAR 2021 survey asks respondents if they have ever consulted a horoscope, consulted a psychic, experienced a ghost, lived in a haunted house, used a Ouija board, had a prophetic dream, seen a UFO, been in close contact with an alien, used crystals for healing purposes, had a tarot reading, and/or used hypnosis for past-life regression. Possible responses included "yes," "no" and "prefer not to say." We coded "prefer not to say" responses as missing and combined responses such that higher values on the index equate to a greater number of claimed experiences. The final measure had acceptable internal reliability, with a Cronbach's $\propto$ = .79.[7]

Religion Measures

We used stated religious affiliation as a control variable in our models. Religious affiliation was assessed using the provider's standard seventeen-fold item – "What is your religion, if any?" We recoded respondents into a smaller set of categories, ensuring that each category had at least 30 cases: Catholic, Church of England, other Protestants, Muslim, Agnostic, Atheist, and all other religions. Church of England is used as the reference category for multivariable modeling, because it is the largest category (n = 527), and is the most mainstream religion in the UK. The "other religions" catchall category deserves further detail, as it includes Jews (n = 8), Eastern religious traditions such as Hindus (n = 18), Buddhists (n = 13), and Sikhs

[7] Because these items were all binary, a Kuder-Richardson 20 formula (KR-20) was used to assess internal reliability.

(n = 8), but also traditions that directly incorporate culturally paranormal beliefs, such as Spiritualists (n = 8), Wiccans (n = 6), and Pagans (n = 4).

Beyond religious affiliation, our models include three additional measures of religiosity, with separate indices for religious beliefs, religious experiences, and religious practices/commitment. The religious beliefs index combined eight questions that asked respondents about the existence of different supernatural religious phenomena. Respondents were asked if they believed in the existence of the Devil, Heaven, Hell, purgatory, Armageddon, angels, demons, and the rapture, using the possible responses of "definitely," "probably," "probably not," "definitely not," and "prefer not to say." As with other questions, the "prefer not to say" respondents were dropped from analyses. Responses were coded such that higher values equated to greater certainty of supernatural religious belief. These items were combined into an index that high internal reliability, with a Cronbach's $\propto = .95$.

The religious experiences index combines seven items that asked respondents if they had ever experienced a miraculous healing, spoken in tongues, had a vision of a religious figure, felt "called" by God to do something, heard the voice of God, felt in a state of religious ecstasy, and/or felt filled with the Holy Spirit. Possible responses included "yes," "no" and "prefer not to say." We dropped the "prefer not to say" option and combined these items such that higher values equate to a greater number of claimed religious experiences. This final index has a Cronbach's $\propto = .86$.

Our final index of religious practice and commitment combines responses to questions about religious service attendance, frequency of private prayer, and religious identity salience. We measure religious service attendance using the question: "How often do you attend religious services at a church, mosque, synagogue or other place of worship?" Response options were:

never; less than once a year; once or twice a year; several times a year; once a month; two to three times a month; weekly; several times a week. Frequency of private prayer is measured with a question that asked: "About how often do you pray, if at all, outside of religious services?" Response options ranged on a six-point scale from "never" to "several times a day." Religious salience was measured by asking: "To what extent do you consider yourself a religious person?" Answer choices were on a four-point scale, from "not religious at all" to "very religious." These measures were mean standardized to account for their different measurement ranges, then combined into an additive index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$).

<Figure 1 about here>

Control Variables

Demographic variables in CASPAR (2021) include gender (men = 1), age (categories for 16-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65-75), and ethnicity (white = 1). Socioeconomic status variables used include income, which is on a ten-point scale (under £5,000, £5,000-£9,999, £10,000-£14,999, £15,000-£19,999, £20,000-£24,999, £25,000-£34,999, £35,000-£44,999, £45,000-£54,999, £55,000-£99,999, £100,000 or more). Social grade has six ranks: "lower level of subsistence" (1); "working class" (2); "skilled working class" (3); "lower middle class" (4); "middle class" (5); and "upper middle class" or higher (6). Education is measured using seven ordinal categories (primary school, secondary school, GNVQ/GSVQ/GCSE/SCE, NVQ1/NVQ2, NVQ3/SCE Higher Grade/Advanced GNVQ/GCE A/AS or similar, NVQ4/HNC/HND/Bachelor's degree or similar, NVQ5 or post-graduate diploma). For work status, we use dummy variables for full-time employment (reference category); part-time employment; unemployed and looking for work; unemployed and not looking for work; homemaker; student; and retiree.

We control for region of the country with twelve dummy variables for: Northeast, Northwest, Yorkshire, East Midlands, West Midlands, East, Southwest, Southeast, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, with London used as the reference category. Region of the country is used as a control in all multivariable models, but not shown on the tables, for the sake of parsimony. We also include controls for marital status (dummy variables for single, cohabiting, separated, divorced, and widowed, with currently married as the reference category), and whether or not the respondent has children under 18 living at home (yes = 1).

At the insistence of the survey provider, "due to the personal nature of the questions," all items included the "prefer not to say" response option discussed above. All such returns were coded as missing. Missing cases for variables included in multivariable models were handled with list-wise deletion.

Analysis

Our analyses consist of a series of ordinary least squares regression models for our two outcomes, paranormal beliefs and experiences. For each dependent variable, the first model consists of the demographic predictors, religious affiliation and the three indices of different types of religiosity (religious beliefs, religious experiences, and religious practices and commitment). We report standardized coefficients for these models (β), so that we can compare the relative magnitude of the predictors for the outcomes of interest.

The second model for each dependent variables adds a multiplicative interaction term (religious beliefs * religious practices) to test for a moderating effect between these two dimensions of religiosity for predicting paranormalism. The third model includes a multiplicative interaction term to test for a moderating effect between religious experiences and religious practices for predicting paranormalism. For the second and third models, we report

unstandardized coefficients, which are then used to graphically display the moderation effects (Mize 2019). In models 2 and 3, all variables other than the lower-order measures of religiosity and the interaction terms were standardized and mean-centered before entry into the models.[8] Consequently, these models are used for creating figures (2-4) from the resulting moderation effects, and the coefficients from these models should not be compared for effect size. Instead, Model 1 offers the best assessment of magnitude of specific predictors for the outcomes of interest.

Results

Paranormal Beliefs

Table 1 provides the results of the OLS regression models predicting levels of paranormal belief and experiences. In Model 1a predicting paranormal beliefs, which shows standardized coefficients, the strongest predictor, by far, was religious beliefs ($\beta = .615$; $p < .001$). Notably, the next strongest predictor was religious practice and commitment, which had a negative effect on overall paranormal belief ($\beta = -.153$; $p < .001$). The fourth strongest predictor was the number of claimed religious experiences ($\beta = .086$; $p < .001$), which had a positive effect on paranormal beliefs. This supports the basic features of bounded affinity theory, such that, when accounted for separately and simultaneously, religious beliefs and experiences have positive impacts on paranormal beliefs, while religious practice and commitment have a significant negative relationship to paranormalism.

Other notable aspects of Model 1a predicting paranormal beliefs are that other Protestants ($\beta = -.071$; $p < .01$), Muslims ($\beta = -.079$; $p < .01$), and atheists ($\beta = -.079$; $p < .05$) all had

[8] Specifically, all control variables were mean-centered, while the measures for religious beliefs, practices, and experiences, as well as the multiplicative interaction terms based on those measures, were entered as unstandardized variables.

significantly lower levels of paranormal beliefs compared to members of the Church of England. Members of non-mainstream religions had significantly higher levels of paranormal belief (β = .130; $p < .001$). In terms of demographics, men (β = -.064; $p < .01$), people with higher levels of education (β = -.080; $p < .01$), and white respondents (β = -.074; $p < .05$) all reported significantly lower levels of paranormal beliefs, while people who were maritally separated (β = .064; $p > .01$) reported significantly higher levels of belief. This pattern matches recent research, which has documented a consistent relationship between occupying more marginalized social statuses and higher belief in the paranormal (Clark et al. 2025, 2026; Corcoran, Scheitle, and DiGregorio 2025; Remsburg, Scheitle, and Corcoran 2024; Silva and Woody 2022).

<Insert Table 1 about here>

Model 2a add the interaction terms testing for moderation effects between supernatural religious beliefs and religious practices, which was significant and negative (b = -.008; $p > .001$). The interaction effect between religious beliefs and levels of religious practice and commitment for predicting paranormal beliefs is shown in Figure 2. Here we can see that at the highest levels of religious practice, the positive effects of religious belief on paranormalism are attenuated to the point of being essentially static. At lower levels of religious practice and identity salience, however, religious beliefs have a very strong positive relationship to levels of paranormal belief. This supports the moderating hypothesis of bounded affinity theory with regard to religious beliefs, and is similar to the relationship identified in data from the United States.

<Insert Figure 2 about here>

Model 3a adds the interaction term for religious experiences and religious commitment for predicting paranormal beliefs. The coefficient is non-significant (b = -.001; $p = .86$) and close

to zero, failing to lend support to the interactive hypothesis with regard to religious experiences and practices for predicting paranormal beliefs.

In Model 1b predicting paranormal experiences, the strongest predictors were supernatural religious beliefs ($\beta = .339$; $p < .001$) and claimed religious experiences ($\beta = .251$; $p < .001$), both of which had positive relationships to the number of claimed paranormal experiences. The third strongest variable in the model was religious practice and commitment ($\beta = -.212$; $p < .001$), which again notably had a strong negative effect of the number of claimed paranormal experiences. Here we find support for the foundational hypotheses of bounded affinity theory related to the countervailing effects of different dimensions of religiosity for predicting paranormalism.

In Model 1b, other notable predictors include significantly lower levels of claimed paranormal experiences among other Protestants ($\beta = -.066$; $p < .05$) and Muslims ($\beta = -.099$; $p < .01$) compared to members of the Church of England. Similar to results for paranormal beliefs, members of non-mainstream religions ($\beta = .156$; $p < .001$) also claimed significantly more paranormal experiences than members of mainstream religious groups. In terms of demographics, men reported significantly fewer paranormal experiences than women ($\beta = -.176$; $p < .001$). Respondents who were divorced ($\beta = .077$; $p < .01$) and had children ($\beta = .074$; $p < .05$) reported significantly higher levels of paranormal experiences.

Model 2b adds the interaction term testing for moderating effects between supernatural religious beliefs and levels of religious practice and commitment for predicting paranormal experiences. The multiplicative term is significant and negative ($b = -.020$; $p < .001$), and the corresponding moderation effect is displayed graphically in Figure 3. Here we can see that at the highest levels of religious practice and commitment, supernatural religious beliefs actually have

a slight negative effect on the number of paranormal experiences people claim. In effect, people are putting all of their spiritual interests into intensive religious beliefs such as Satan, angels, and demons, and in doing so shunning paranormal experiences such as UFO contact or psychic readings.[9] In contrast, at lower levels of religious practice and commitment, supernatural religious beliefs have a very strong positive correlation with paranormal experiences. Again, we find support for the moderating hypothesis of bounded affinity theory with regard to religious beliefs and practice for predicting levels of paranormal experiences.

<Insert Figure 3 about here>

Model 3b adds the interaction term testing for moderating effects between religious experiences and levels of religious practice and commitment for predicting paranormal experiences. The multiplicative coefficient is negative and significant ($b = -.052$; $p < .01$), and the corresponding interaction effect is graphically displayed in Figure 4. Here we can see that at high levels of religious practice, the positive correlation for intensive religious and paranormal experiences is attenuated, while at lower levels of religious commitment, the positive effect between intensive religious and paranormal experiences is quite strong. This provides support for the moderating hypothesis of bounded affinity with regard to religious experiences and conventional religious practice, at least with regard to predicting paranormal experiences.

<Insert Figure 4 about here>

Discussion

[9] Notably, it may also be the case the same kinds of intensive, anomalous physiological experiences are simply interpreted through different cultural frameworks, depending on the belief system of the experiences. Hence, a conventionally religious person may experience demonic, rather than alien visitation. Hufford (1982) provides an insightful analysis of how cultural frames overlay the same underlying physiological experience of sleep paralysis. Importantly, this insight forms part of the foundational premises of bounded affinity theory about the inherent similarities between religion and the paranormal, as the differences between the two domains are cultural, rather than physical, psychological, or ontological (Baker et al. 2016).

These results help explain some of the inconsistent findings produced by previous research on the relationship between conventional religion and the paranormal, and extend the empirical support for bounded affinity theory as a useful conceptual framework for analyzing patterns of supernaturalism in late modernity. Our results clearly demonstrate that the bivariate relationship one finds between measures of religiosity and measures of paranormalism will depend upon the *types* of religion measures used. Across the analyses we consistently find that belief in the devil, angels and other religious phenomena are *positively* associated with beliefs about UFOs, ghosts, psychic phenomena and the like. Conventional religious beliefs also appear to open one up to both paranormal experiences (such as seeing a ghost or witnessing a UFO). Likewise, religious experiences, such as witnessing a vision of a religious figure or experiencing a miraculous healing, are also but a "small step" from paranormal beliefs and experiences.

However, once we take measures of conventional religious practice such as service attendance and private prayer into consideration, the patterns are more complex. Religious practice and identity salience were consistently negatively associated with paranormal beliefs and experiences. Conventional religious practice and commitment does, indeed, seem to occupy a separate sphere from the paranormal. When someone is highly engaged in religious practice and highly committed to a conventional religious identity, they hold fewer paranormal beliefs and report fewer paranormal experiences, on average.

These findings suggest that any assessments of the relationship between religion and the paranormal that do not take a multi-faceted and complex view of religiosity into account will continue to produce inconsistent results. At the very least, researchers who are unable to account for multiple dimensions of religiosity simultaneously will need to account for the curvilinear relationship between (one-dimensional) religiosity and paranormalism.

These findings underscore a critical, regulatory function of religious institutions. While religious beliefs and experiences provide the cognitive openness necessary for interest in diffuse supernaturalism, conventional practice imposes structural constraints on how that openness is directed. In this sense, the sociological role of organized religion is not merely to generate supernatural belief, but to *curate* it—distinguishing between distinctively "religious" miracles and unsanctioned "paranormal" phenomena. Consequently, the interaction effects observed here suggest that high levels of institutional commitment act as an exclusivist plausibility structure that dampens, rather than encourages, paranormal beliefs. In a highly secularized context like the UK, where conventional practice has largely receded, this regulatory mechanism is increasingly absent. The result is not necessarily a loss of supernatural affinity, but rather its deregulation and dispersion. Without the bounding influence of the church to organize and manage supernatural claims, supernatural affinity becomes unbounded, allowing paranormal beliefs and experiences to persist and thrive, independent of traditional doctrinal limits.

At the same time, considering the historical and cultural context of the UK alerts us to the long-standing symbiotic relationship between conventional religious beliefs and de-institutionalized supernatural beliefs among certain segments of the populace, especially those with a pluralistic orientation toward the supernatural. Indeed, there is clear historical precedent for this kind of syncretism, and a tendency for many among the general public to combine beliefs and practices for Christianity with those available from “folk beliefs,” “popular religion,” the “New Age,” and other streams of culture that incorporate the supernatural. This greater permeability between religion and the paranormal in the context of the UK is evident in the overall “shape” of relationship, which is more positive when contrasted with the sharply n-shaped curvilinear dynamics identified in other locations such as the US and Italy (*cf*. Bader et

al. 2012; Baker and Draper 2010; Clark et al. 2025). Thus, while bounded affinity theory provides the basic framework for mapping the dynamics between religion and the paranormal across cultural contexts, the specifics of these dynamics can and do vary by cultural context. Consequently, historical analysis necessarily helps provide a richer understanding of the degree to which organized religion has bounded, or in this case, unbounded, the relationship between different traditions of supernaturalism in a particular location.

The moderating effects of religious practice and commitment on other dimensions of religiosity also show how the bounded affinity between religion and the paranormal operates. Specifically, when people are tethered to conventional religious identity through practices such as service attendance and prayer, the positive effects of religious supernatural beliefs on paranormalism are neutralized. When people are not tied to conventional religious identity through practices, the affinity between religion and the paranormal is unbounded and amplified. A similar dynamic is present for the affinity between intensive religious and paranormal experiences. Hence, because anomalous experiences share much in common across religious and paranormal boundaries (McClenon 2000), they will have a strong positive co-occurrence, at least when they are unbounded from exclusivist religious communities.

Similar patterns are evident by examining whether people consider themselves "spiritual" and/or "religious." Among the possible combination of these self-described identifications, paranormal beliefs and experiences, as well as the consumption of paranormal-themed media, are most common among people in the UK who identify as "spiritual" but not "religious" (Clark, Bader, and Baker 2026). Given the ever-expanding "spiritual turn" of late modernity in Western Europe (Heelas 2006, 2008; Heelas and Woodhead; Houtman and Aupers 2007; Houtman and Mascini 2002; Tromp et al. 2020; Watts 2022; Watts and Houtman 2022), paranormalism is

poised to thrive in social and technological environments where individualism is prized and truth is subjective.

Conclusion

Like its more famous counterpart, Stonehenge, Avebury remains a considerable draw for tourism of all kinds, bringing in an estimated 350,000 visitors each year, with peak season around the solstices.[10] The continued popularity of these sacralized landscape sites, and their integration into a wider world of paranormal spirituality attest to the durability of diffuse supernaturalism even in contexts of extensive religious secularization. As organized, exclusivist religions wane, the formerly definitive bounds between religion and the paranormal become more porous, and amalgamated combinations of syncretic supernatural beliefs and experiences become more viable and likely options for spiritual seekers.

This study illustrates that the relational dynamics between religion and the paranormal are multidimensional, and can be explained by bounded affinity theory. Supernatural religious beliefs and experiences are positively related to paranormalism. This confirms the core logic of the "small step" hypothesis: believing in one form of supernaturalism makes someone more likely to believe in other forms. However, this elective affinity is neutralized among individuals who are strongly committed to conventional forms of religious practice. Indeed, religious engagement is negatively correlated with paranormalism after controlling for religious beliefs and experiences. Further, conventional religious practice and salience actively neutralize or "bind" the positive influence of religious supernatural beliefs and experiences on paranormalism. This supports the logic of the "separate spheres" hypothesis, wherein deep engagement with an exclusive religious community—expressed by attending communal services, praying privately,

[10] "The Management Plan and the Significance of the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site."

and embracing a shared identity—neutralizes the appeal of paranormal alternatives by building strong cultural and cognitive boundaries between religion-approved supernaturalism and other forms.

For many decades, research on religion and the paranormal remain muddled, with some findings supporting a "small step" hypothesis of positive correlation and others a "separate spheres" hypothesis of negative correlation. By disaggregating religiosity into its distinct dimensions, we find that these competing hypotheses are not mutually exclusive. Synthesizing their complementary components into bounded affinity theory accounts for the complex, but also understandable patterns we find between conventional religiosity and paranormalism among general population samples.

In addition to this theoretical integration and empirical support, our results extend bounded affinity theory to the highly secularized context of the United Kingdom, confirming its explanatory ability beyond more religious nations in where it has been previously tested. As organized religions continue to decline in places like the UK, the cultural boundaries that separate conventional faith from other supernatural beliefs become “unbounded” for larger segments of the population. Here it seems that the key dynamics of bounded affinity theory hold; but also that the overall relationship between religion and paranormalism can become more positive than in contexts with more religious populations. Consequently, secularization does not eliminate supernatural beliefs, but instead allows individuals to develop personalized belief systems amalgamated from both organized religious and paranormal sources. This shift from institutionally bounded faith communities to an unbounded supernatural landscape represents a profound change in the social organization of spirituality, where old affinities find new forms of expression. It also allows more room for long-standing forms of religious syncretism to flourish,

as certain segments of Christianity within Britain have historically operated with a pluralistic orientation that allowed for the incorporation of multiple religious traditions (Pearson 2007), as well as the integration of "folk" and "popular" supernatural beliefs and practices (Williams 1999).

This study is certainly not without limitations. While our collection and analyses of data from the UK successfully extends bounded affinity theory in some ways, we still do now know the extent to which it is applicable in other cultural contexts, particularly among non-Western populations. To test the limits of this theory, future research should be conducted among new populations, particularly among samples drawn from Asian, Middle Eastern, and African populations. The connections between organized religion, folk traditions, and diffuse supernatural (paranormal) beliefs will undoubtedly vary across cultural contexts. Testing these dynamics among more diverse samples will help in outlining the limits and relative breadth of bounded affinity theory.

Longitudinal studies can also be done to advance beyond our cross-sectional analyses, which provides only static snapshots. Such research could track the evolution of spiritual belief in individuals over time, particularly among those who are moving away from organized religion. Future studies should also deconstruct the heterogeneous "other religion" category by oversampling religious minority groups to see whether and how the patterns we have identified may differ among specific traditions, particularly among groups that explicitly embrace the magical, such as Wicca and Paganism.

As societies secularize through the continued decline of traditional, organized religions in many places around the world, the question of what comes next remains open. One distinct possibility is an increased interest in diffuse forms of supernatural beliefs, and their related

practices. Consequently, understanding the dynamics between conventional religion and paranormalism stands as an important line of inquiry for the social scientific study of religion going forward.

Image 1: Faerie Portal Offering on a “Wishing Tree” at Avebury, England (author’s photo)



Table 1: OLS Regression Models Predicting Paranormal Beliefs and Experiences

	Paranormal Beliefs			Paranormal Experiences		
	Model 1a (β)	Model 2a (b)	Model 3a (b)	Model 1b (β)	Model 2b (b)	Model 3b (b)
Religion						
Religious Practice	-.153***	.117***	-.041***	-.212***	.243*	-.124**
Religious Beliefs	.615***	.059***	.062***	.339***	.099***	.104***
Religious Experiences	.086**	.077***	.045	.251***	.498***	.572***
Practice*Beliefs	---	-.008***	---	---	-.020***	---
Practice*Experiences	---	---	-.001	---	---	-.052**
Catholic[a]	-.005	.002	-.004	-.030	-.064	-.087
Other Protestant[a]	-.071**	-.046*	-.053**	-.066*	-.141	-.166*
Muslim[a]	-.079**	-.060*	-.077**	-.099**	-.258**	-.319***
Other religions[a]	.130***	.099***	.096***	.156***	.379***	.379***
Atheist	-.079*	.000	-.053*	-.052	.027	-.066
Agnostic	-.026	.015	-.017	-.007	.072	.017
Demographics						
Men	-.064**	-.037*	-.045**	-.176***	-.367***	-.384***
Employed	.026	.018	.019	.004	.001	.003
Income	-.056	-.033	-.042	.000	.014	.004
Social grade	-.019	-.023	-.015	-.054	-.143*	-.140
Education	-.080**	-.057**	-.059**	-.050	-.118	-.124*
White	-.074*	-.053*	-.062*	-.021	-.055	-.050
Age	.065	.056*	.049*	-.002	.015	.001
Single[b]	.010	.011	.008	.053	.136	.133
Cohabitating[b]	.012	.007	.008	.033	.072	.063
Separated[b]	.064**	.045**	.043**	-.001	.008	.001
Divorced[b]	.019	.010	.013	.077**	.157*	.164**
Widowed[b]	-.005	-.011	-.004	-.002	-.026	-.011
Children	.039	.026	.028	.074*	.166*	.183**
Model Stats						
Constant	-.667	-.984	-1.109	1.379	.290	1.010
Adjusted R^2	.429	.450	.428	.249	.264	.254
N	1088			1111		

Source: 2021 Chapman and Sheffield Paranormal and Religion Survey
* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; $p \leq .001$
a: contrast category = Church of England
b: contrast category = Married

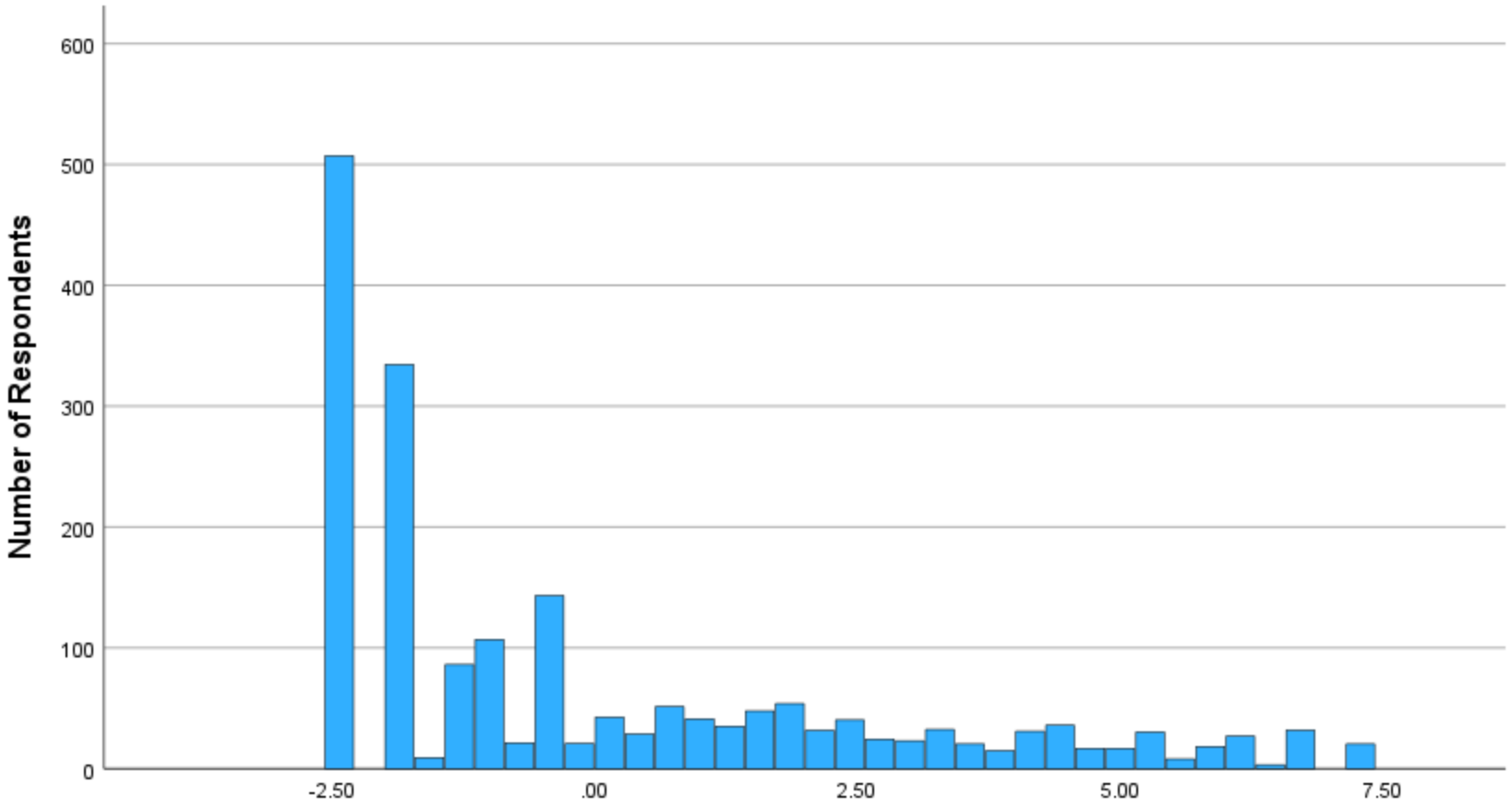


Figure 1: U.K. Population Distribution of Religious Commitment: Score on Index of Religious Identity Salience, Service Attendance, and Private Prayer

Figure 2: Predicted Score on Paranormal Belief Scale
by Religious Beliefs and Religious Commitment

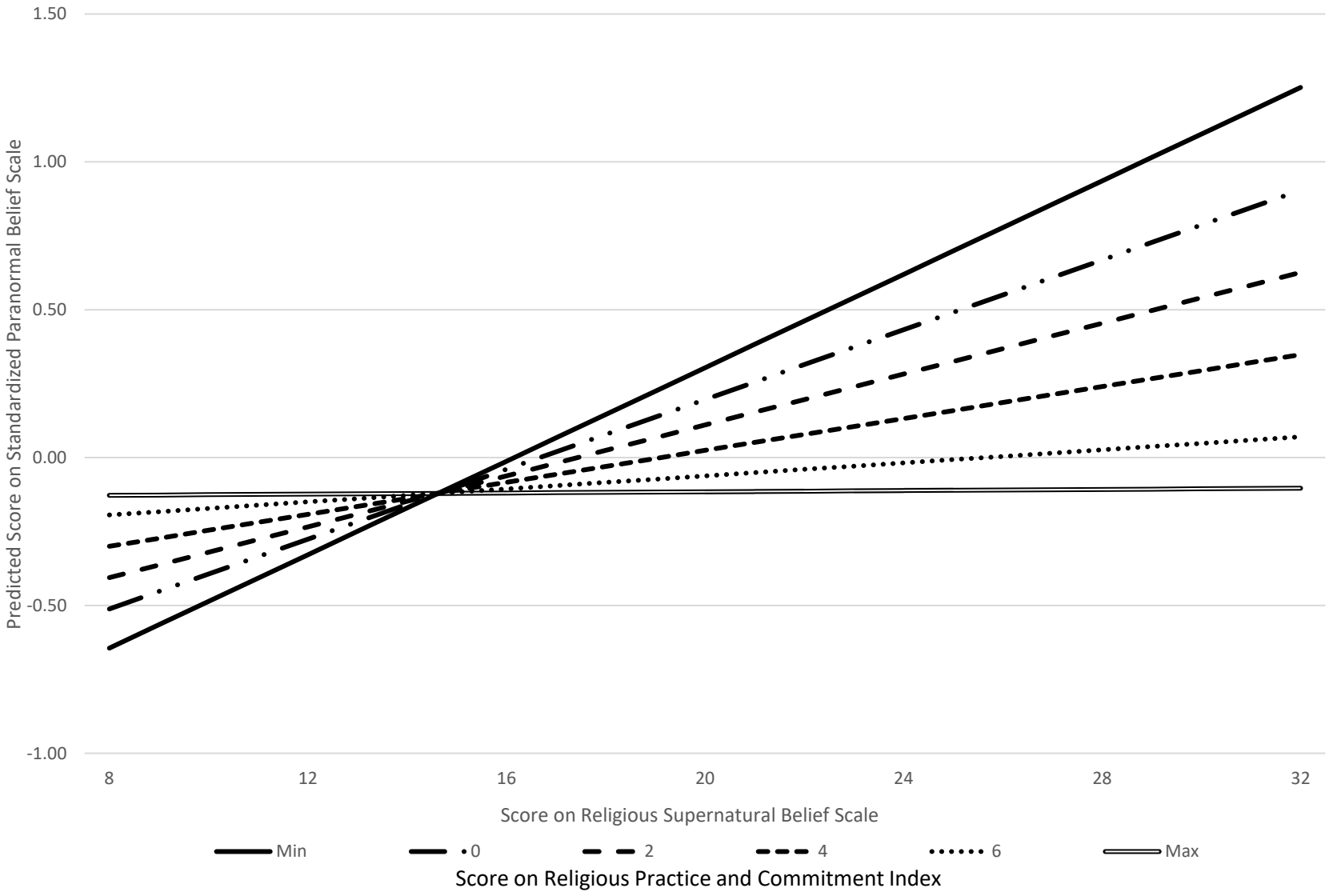


Figure 3: Predicted Number of Paranormal Experiences Claimed by Religious Beliefs and Religious Commitment

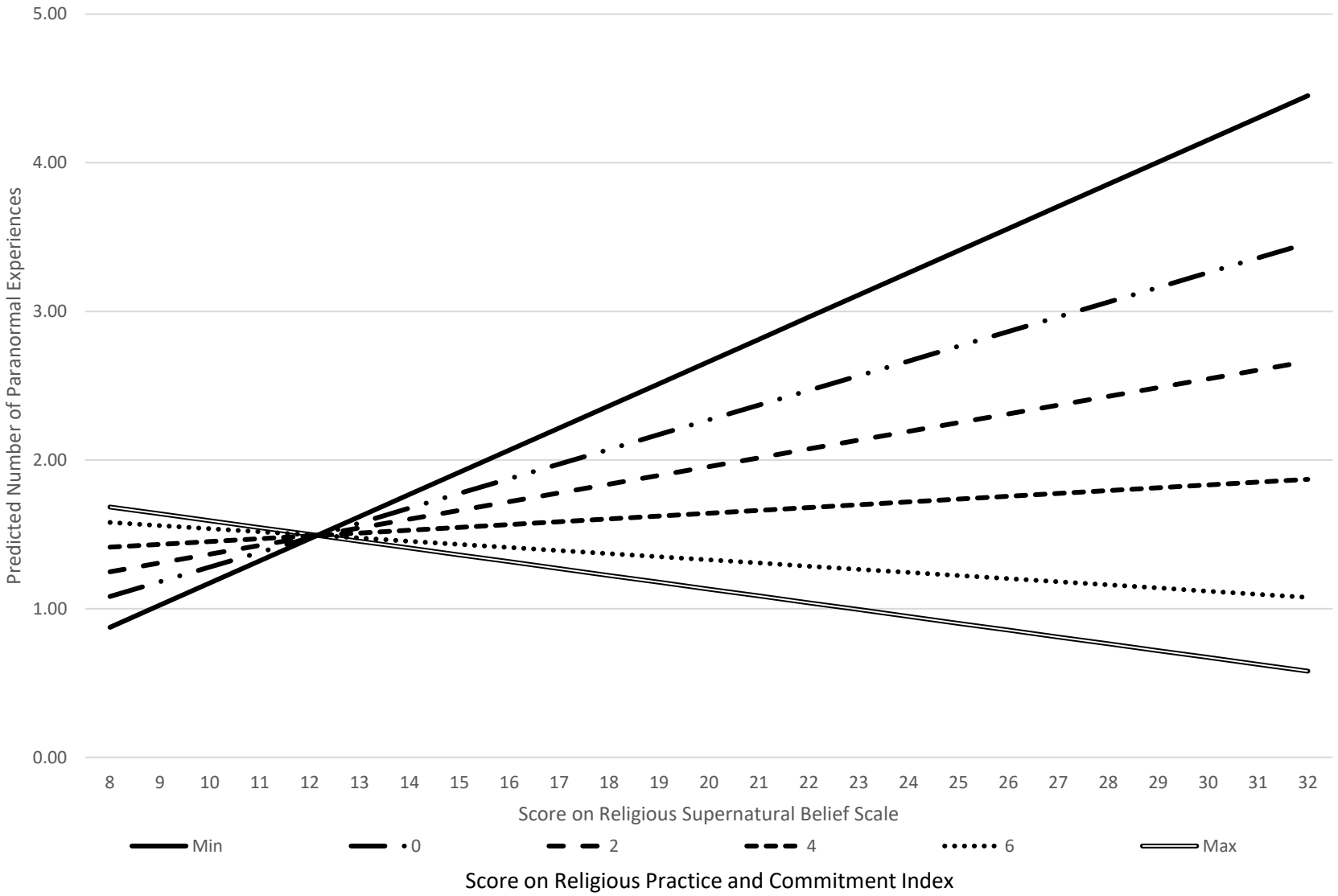
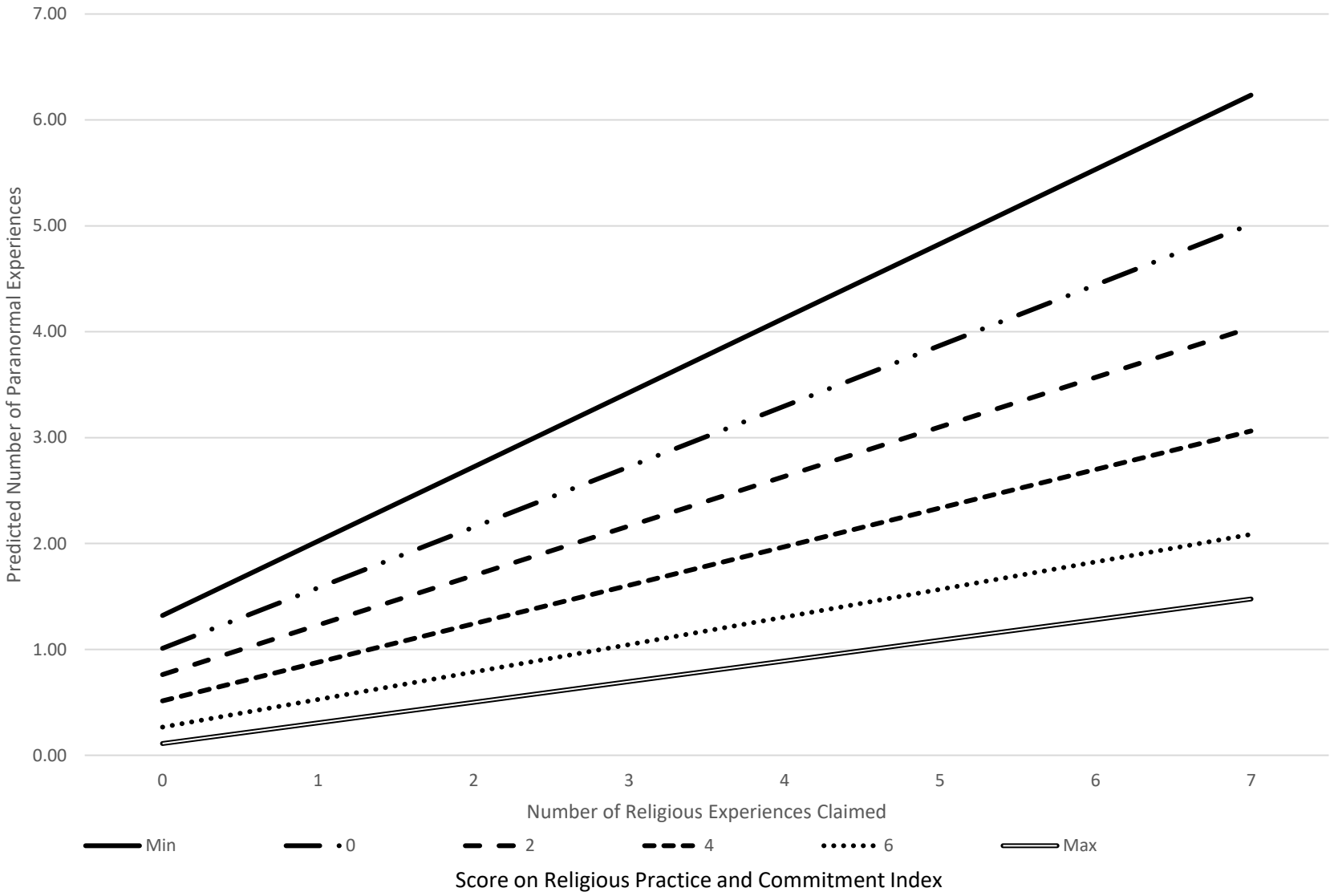


Figure 4: Predicted Number of Paranormal Experiences Claimed by Religious Experiences and Religious Commitment



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