Perceptions of Divine Grace and Gratitude to God among Christian and Non-Christian Populations: CQR-M

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Abstract

Grace and gratitude to God have recently emerged as prevalent topics within positive psychology for their benefits such as mental, physical, and relational well-being. However, an in-depth understanding of how people understand these two concepts has been neglected in empirical research. The current study aims to address this gap in the literature and investigate how lay populations perceive divine grace and gratitude to God. This study attempts to address an additional gap in the literature by comparing Christian and non-Christian perceptions of grace and gratitude to God, since most current research is heavily limited to Christian populations. Modified consensual qualitative analysis (CQR-M) was used to analyze 100 random written narratives each from a Christian and non-Christian sample (N = 200). These written narratives were gathered through Qualtrics online surveys that asked six open-ended questions assessing participants' ideas, definitions, and personal experiences of divine grace and their potential method, purpose, and benefits of expressing gratitude to God. Using consensual qualitative research methods allowed the researchers to extract a holistic analysis of participants' perceptions and interpretations of the topics. Results indicated that the majority of non-Christian participants did believe in divine grace, most commonly defining divine grace as a virtue, not personally experienced. The majority of the Christian sample defined divine grace in relation to God's character, exemplifying his love or forgiveness, and most commonly experienced it in shortcomings or hardships. Participants from the non-Christian sample who did express gratitude to God commonly did so through praying and caring for others, similar to Christian participants who expressed gratitude to God through worship practices such as praying and serving others. When asked of their perceived benefit to expressing gratitude to God, both samples most commonly noted blessings and benefits.

Introduction and Research Questions

Most of the research on divine grace is based on a Christian perspective, pointing to the dearth of research on how other religious outlooks see grace (Hodge et al., 2023). The existing research also suggests that experiencing grace can deepen and enhance gratitude, a construct that has been demonstrated to have numerous positive effects (Watkins et al., 2009). In comparison to general gratitude, Gratitude to God (GTG) is a stronger predictor of forgiveness, patience, love to others, and relational humility (Zuniga et al., 2023).

This study aims to expand the current research by exploring common perceptions of divine grace and gratitude to God (GTG) as held by Christians and non-Christians, including people of other religious minorities and philosophical thoughts in the United States. We also intend to investigate the distinctions in how Christians and other religious and non-Christian populations in the United States understand grace and gratitude. To do that, this study will address the following research questions:

- **Q1: How do individuals perceive/understand God's grace?**
- **Q2: How do individuals express GTG?**
- **Q3: How do perceptions of grace and gratitude to God differ between Christians and non-Christians?**

Methods

Participant Sample
We chose to study two samples including students of a private Christian online university (LUO) (*n* = 100) and students from a public university with no stated religious affiliation (*n* = 100) to compare their perceptions of grace and gratitude to God. Survey respondents who did not identify as Christian were excluded from the Christian university sample to allow for a uniform sample that reflected the Christian majority. Likewise, survey respondents from the public university who identified with the Christian religion were excluded from the data sample to separate the variables into a dichotomy of Christian and non-Christian participants. Figure 1 shows the various religious affiliations which were present in the non-Christian sample.

Perceived Grace and Gratitude to God Survey
Participants completed an online survey where they provided informed consent and then proceeded to survey questions. After completing a demographic questionnaire, participants were given a series of open-ended questions as listed in Table 1.

CQR-M Methodology
We chose to utilize the Consensual Qualitative Research-Modified Approach (CQR-M) to analyze both samples (*N* = 200) (Spangler et al., 2012). This method allowed us to analyze a large number of short responses to create a comprehensive description of the results. First, two researchers read 30 participant responses from each of the two samples individually and identified possible domains and categories for each sample that reflected commonalities among the responses. The domains and categories were then given to a coding team of six judges to categorically sort the rest of the participant responses in each sample. The coding team met biweekly to sort the data and adjust domains and categories as needed to ensure that qualitative participant responses were thoroughly represented.

Figure 1
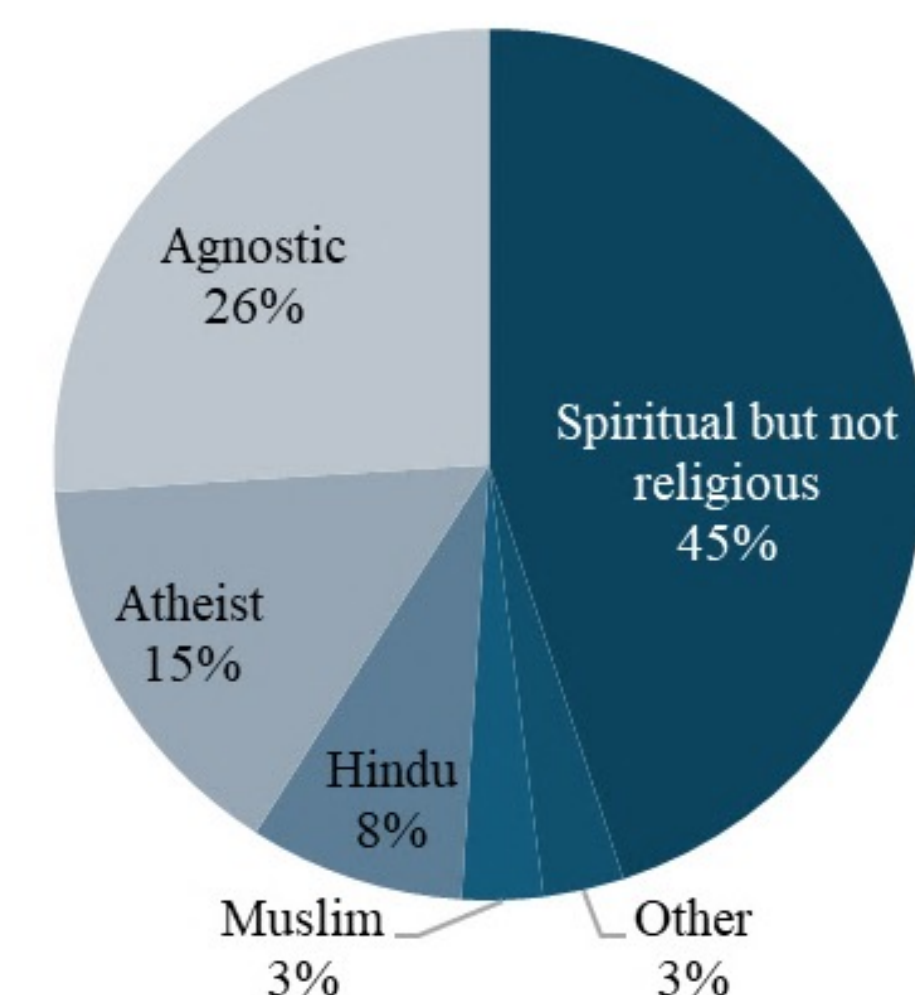*Pie Graph Showing the Religious Affiliations Present in the Non-Christian Sample*

Table 1
Survey Questions with Related Research Questions

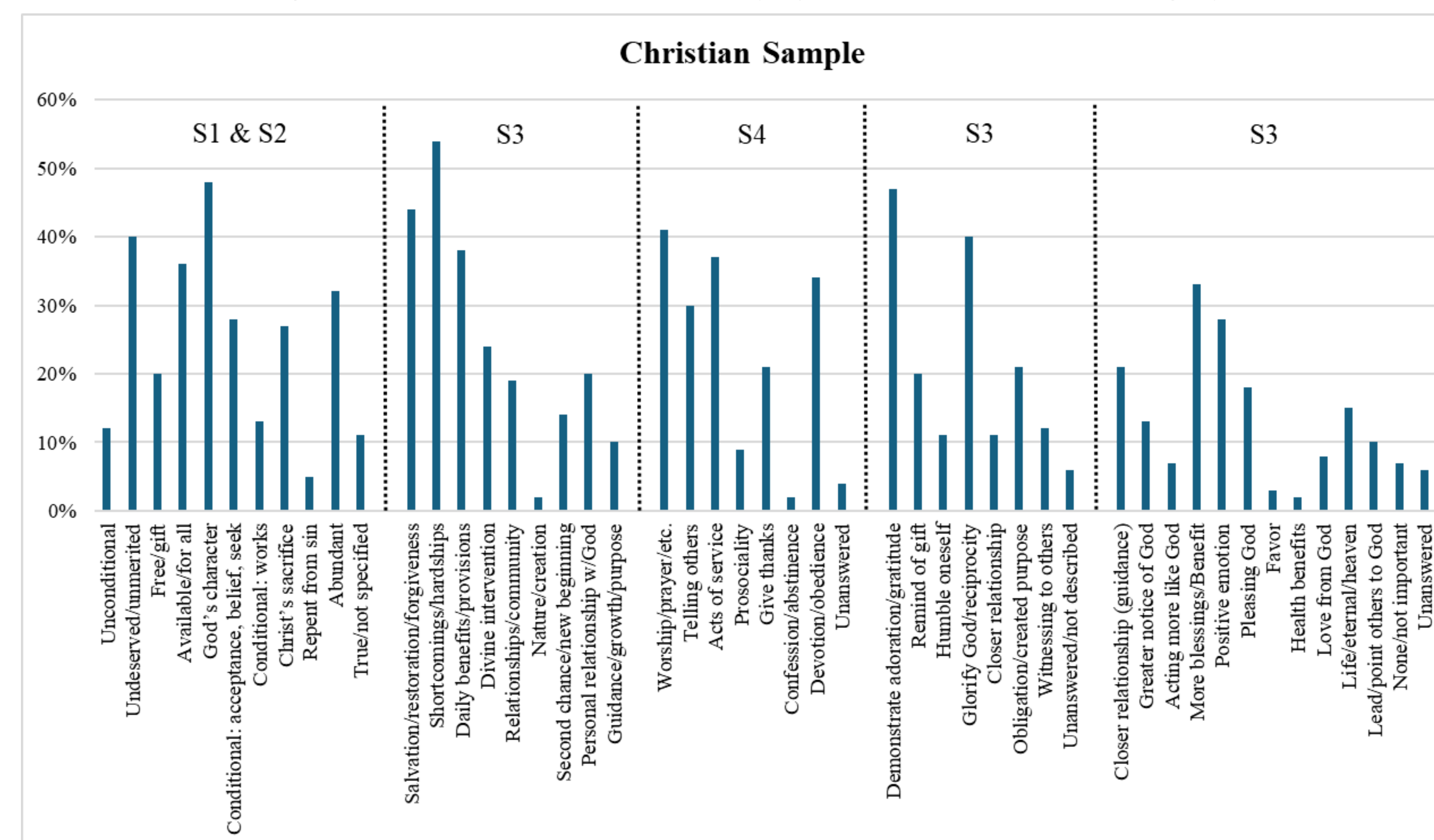| Research Questions	Survey Questions
Q1 How do individuals perceive/understand God's grace?	S1: What do you believe regarding the idea that God offers grace to people?
	S2: How would you define grace that is offered by God?
	S3: How have you personally experienced grace from God over the course of your life?
Q2 How do individuals express GTG?	S4: How might you show appreciation or gratitude to God for the benefits/blessings God offers you?
	S5: What do you believe is the purpose of responding in appreciation or gratitude to God?
	S6: What benefits might you receive from showing appreciation or gratitude to God for the benefits/blessings God has given you?

Figure 2
Bar Chart Showing the Non-Christian Sample Frequency of Responses in Each Category
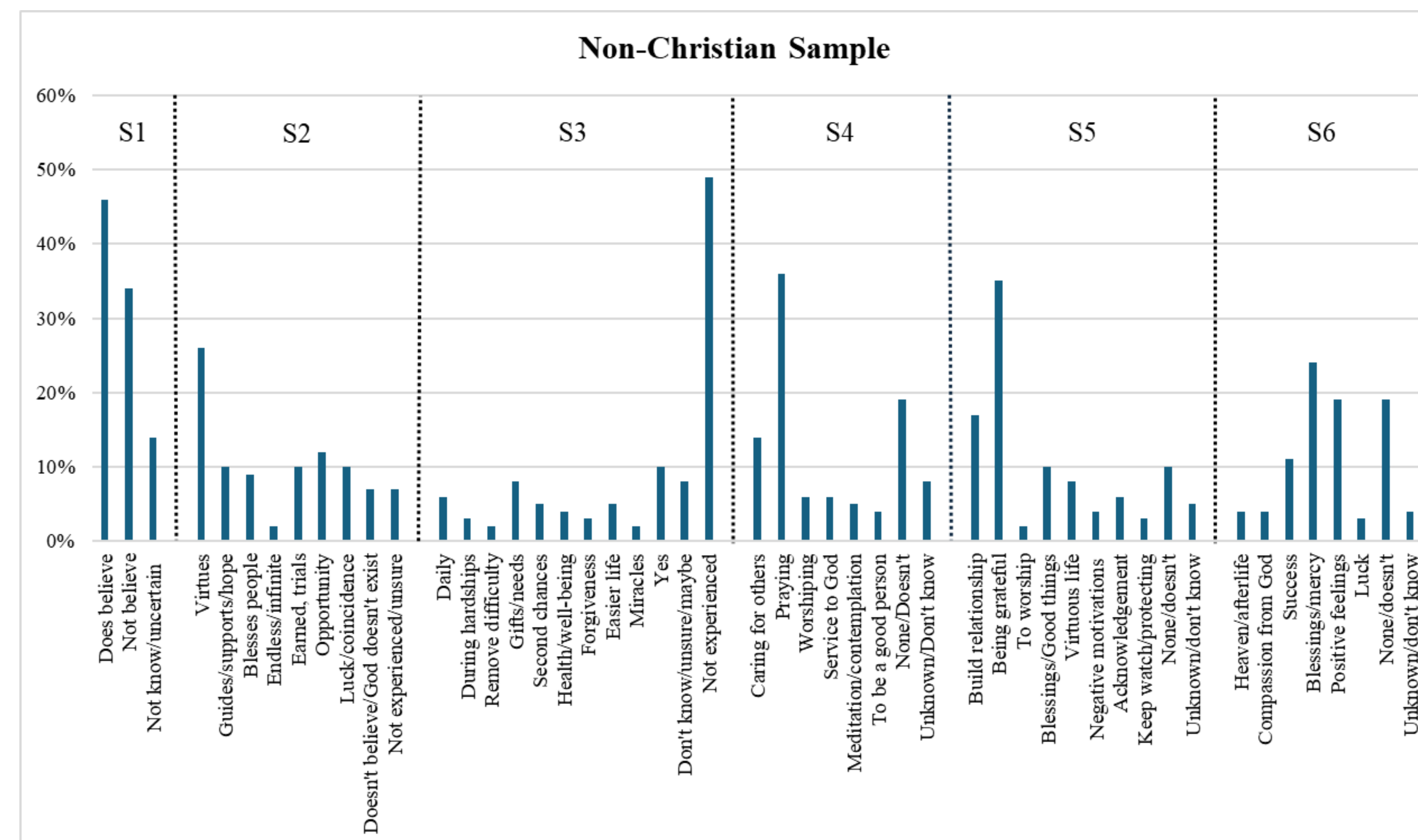
Note. S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, and S6 correspond to the survey questions listed in Table 1.

Figure 3
Bar Chart Showing the Christian Sample Frequency of Responses in Each Category

Note. S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, and S6 correspond to the research questions listed in Table 1.

Results and Discussion

Results
The complete list of categories and frequencies is provided in Figure 2 and Figure 3. We discuss only the most common categories from each domain in both samples.

How Do Individuals Perceive/Understand God's Grace?
Christian Sample. Participants defined divine grace in relation to God's Character (48%), including characteristics of love, mercy, and forgiveness. Additionally, participants experienced grace in Shortcomings/Hardship (53%), such as forgiveness following failure or sustenance through illness.
Non-Christian Sample. Participants defined grace in terms of virtues such as forgiveness, mercy, kindness, and love (26%). The Not Experienced category was the largest for experiences of God's grace (49%). Most participants in this category simply responded "no".

How Do Individuals Express GTG?
Christian Sample. GTG was expressed through Personal Experiences of Worship (54%) such as prayer or tithing. Participants believed the purpose of GTG was to demonstrate Adoration/Gratitude (47%). Benefits of expressing GTG was believed to be Blessings/Benefits (32%), including positive life events such as a job raise, healing from illness, or peace.
Non-Christian Sample. Participants expressed GTG through prayer in diverse religious practices (36%). The main explanation for the purpose of GTG was an affective experience of gratitude (35%). Blessings/mercy (24%) such as a positive impact on the course of life were considered the main benefit of GTG.

How do perceptions of grace and gratitude to God differ between Christians and non-Christians?
The greatest divergence between the two populations regarded whether they had experienced God's grace in their lifetime, with 100% of the Christian sample responding yes and only 51% of the non-Christian sample responding yes. Another stark difference was the quality of removing hardship, with 53% of the Christian sample citing this as a major attribute of grace and only 3% of the non-Christian sample answering such.

Discussion
Grace
Participants described positive feelings as a benefit of receiving grace. While these results are consistent with Bronte and Wade (2012) and Snow et al. (2023), the present research adds to these findings by revealing a more comprehensive description of these benefits extracted from the qualitative responses. For instance, non-Christians described a sense of contentment, fulfillment, and wholeness and Christians described joy, peace, happiness, contentment, and fulfillment. Consistent with similar findings (Emmons et al., 2017), receiving forgiveness from God was one of the major facets of divine grace defined by the Christian sample. However, Emmons et al (2017) defined forgiveness in terms of acceptance and unconditional, while our research found forgiveness to be closely related to love, restoration and salvation. Similar to findings from Hall and McMinn (2023), many Christian participants described grace as a concept encompassing both salvific and common grace themes, while not using these specific terms. Distinct from previous research, Christian participants described God's grace as abundant.

Gratitude to God
The perception of God has been seen in the expression and experience of God as loving and near rather than focusing on their knowledge of His character (Watkins et al., 2023). Reciprocal gratitude is seen as experiencing more blessings and benefits from God in the Christian sample (40%). Reciprocal gratitude in Muslim belief show a high desire for more blessings from God when in challenging times (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). Forgiveness, closeness to God and humility were all noted as benefits of gratitude to God in the research (Watkins et al., 2023). We found consistent results, additionally finding the promise of an afterlife, and positive feelings.

Suggestions and Implications
The findings of this study have many implications for academical and clinical applications. Further research and application could:
- Be beneficial to clinical treatments of trauma.
- Provide framework for evidence based GTG exercises.
- Explore expressions GTG as forms of coping strategies.
- Change the approaches to divine grace in multicultural and multi-religious therapeutic relationships.

Limitations and Future Work

Limitations
Despite efforts to minimize bias, this method relied on the worldviews and interpretations of the coding team that in turn influenced how participant responses were coded. Some answers were vague or difficult to follow, thus limiting the accurateness of complete representation. Additionally, the lack of religious diversity in the non-Christian sample also contributed to some of the limitations in this study.

Future Work
- In-person interviews
- Further clarifying questions
- More focus on religious minorities

References: