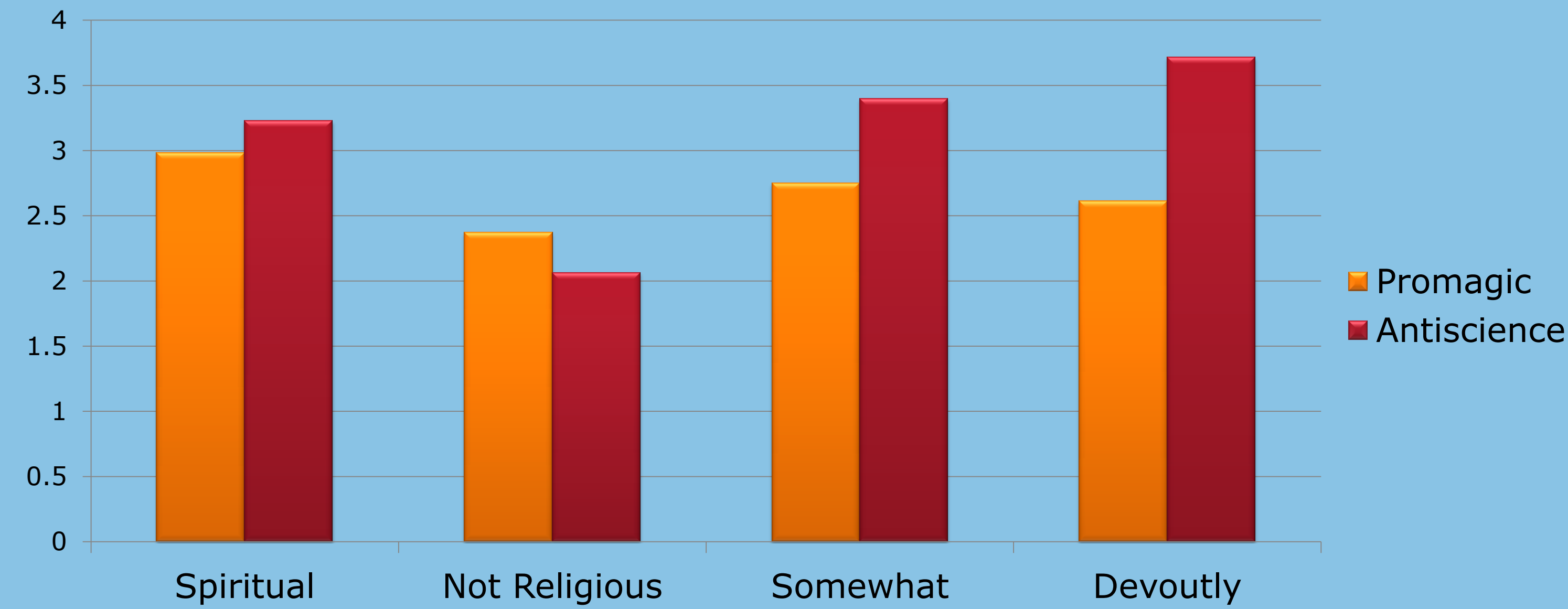




# Need for Mystery and Religious Belief

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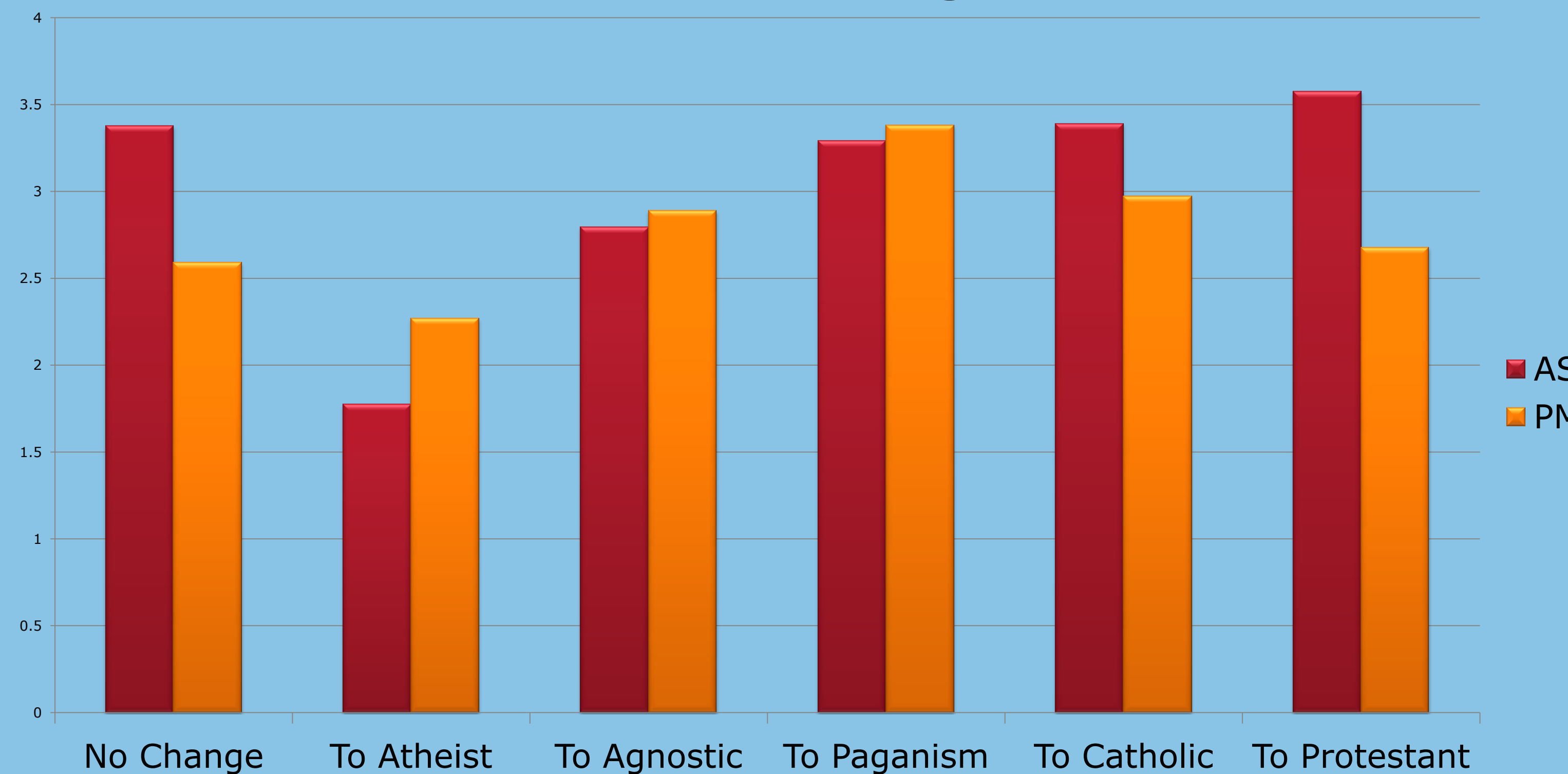
Average Pro-Magic and Anti-Science Scores for Levels of Religiosity



Average Pro-Magic and Anti-Science Scores for Different Religious Affiliations



Conversion to Different Religious Affiliations



## Abstract

Need for Mystery (nMyst) is a personality construct relating to the need to have beliefs about the universe that are not susceptible to rigorous proof. As measured by a new self-report instrument, the nMyst scale, the construct comprises two factors, Anti-Science (AS) and Pro-magic (PM). Anti-science individuals maintain mystery by rejecting concrete explanations for vital worldviews whereas Pro-Magic individuals take pleasure in mystical attributions for new phenomena. In data from an online community sample (N = 500), the two subscales were moderately correlated ( $r = .37$ ). The data revealed a number of links with religious beliefs. Religious individuals tended to be higher on AS, but not on PM. The two factors were also tied to religious affiliation. Catholics scored higher than Protestants on PM whereas Buddhists and Jews scored lowest on AS. Those who had converted to a different religion were significantly lower on AS than those who had not changed religions. Those who became Atheists were significantly lower on both than those who became Agnostics. We conjecture that nMyst operates as a means of threat reduction regarding fundamental worldview beliefs.

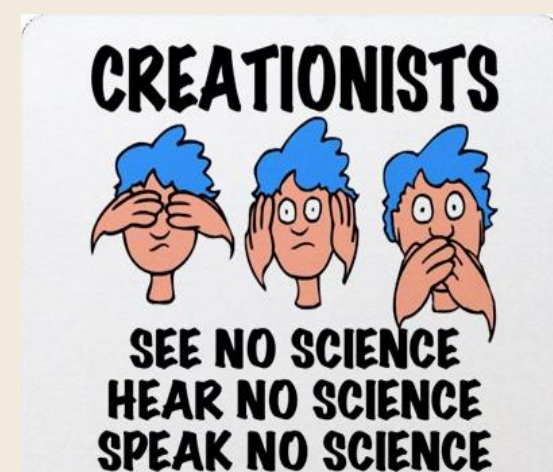
## What is Need for Mystery?

Need for Mystery describes a need to maintain some beliefs about the universe not susceptible to proof or explanation. Maintaining unfalsifiable beliefs protects a person's worldview from certain threats. Mysteries that are maintained are ones that have explanatory power, like belief in God or even ghosts or astrology.

## Two Strategies

Previous analyses have found that nMyst has two distinct factors, which correspond to different strategies of maintaining mystery.

Anti-Science: Rejecting proof or concrete explanations.



Non-mysterious explanations devalue the existing beliefs (Preston & Epley, 2005)  
Intuitive explanations are more trustworthy than scientific ones

Pro-Magic: Seeking out new mysterious explanations



Supernatural phenomena or conspiracy theories  
Seeing everyday experiences as spiritual and mysterious

The two strategies are correlated,  $r = .37$ , but they are independently related to other variables. In previous samples we have found that AS is correlated with religious belief, while PM is not. PM is also correlated with greater belief in ghosts, ESP, Astrology, and conspiracies such as Area 51 (Carey & Paulhus, 2009).

## Research Questions

1. How do individual differences in Anti-Science and Pro-Magic relate to religiosity?
2. Are different religious denominations higher in nMyst than others?
3. How does nMyst relate to religious conversion?

## Method

Participants completed the questionnaire as part of a Facebook application called MyType. MyType allows users to take validated personality measures and gives them feedback on their scores. Over 15,000 people participated. Results here are shown using only the first 500.

## Results

1. Participants who identify as not religious are significantly lower on both AS and PM than all other groups. Those identify as devoutly religious are higher in AS, but lower in PM than those who are "Spiritual, but not religious"
2. People of different religious affiliations varied greatly on both AS and PM, with Atheists being lowest on both.
3. Those who convert to a different religion in general are lower in AS,  $t = -6.82$ , and slightly higher on PM,  $t = 2.61$ , than those who do not.
4. Those who choose to convert to different religions are also different in their levels of AS and PM. Those who converted to Atheism or Agnosticism were lower in AS than those who converted to a different organized religion.

## Conclusions

Need for Mystery is related to religious belief including conversion and choice of religion after conversion. Conversion is an important part of studying religious belief because it is based on personal choice rather than family teachings or tradition. Those who convert to a particular religion show the patterns of AS and PM found in their religion of choice. This suggests that nMyst is not caused by religious upbringing. The pattern of results also suggests that being higher in nMyst distinguishes between those who choose Agnosticism or general Spirituality rather than Atheism when converting from an organized religion.

## References

- Carey, J. M., & Paulhus, D. L. (2009, February) *Need for Mystery: Development and Measurement of a New Construct*. Poster presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Tampa, FL.  
Preston, J. & Epley, N (2005) Explanation vs. Applications: The explanatory power of valuable beliefs. *Psychological Science*, 16, 826 – 832.