



# Discretionary policing: following religious beliefs or operational guidelines, decision-making, and citizen engagement

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Received: 16 August 2023 / Accepted: 15 February 2024 / Published online: 21 February 2024  
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## Abstract

In an Australian context, there is little research which examines whether officers following a religion will place religious ideologies beyond professional guidelines and whether there are differences between religious and non-religious officers regarding decision-making and use of discretion. This raises questions about how religious and non-religious officers will engage with citizens whose identities may be similar to, or different from the responding officer, and, whether the citizen's identity challenges an officer's religious ideologies; thereby shaping police-citizen interaction. Whether religious or non-religious police officers are more likely to police equitably is an area of research that needs systematic enquiry; especially given that officers who are religious could apply discretionary policing when adhering to religious beliefs or practices during decision-making, and, conversely, officers who are non-religious, could apply discretionary adherence to organizational rules, regulations, and police training. As such, this preliminary, exploratory study sought to address this gap in knowledge. Analyzing data collected from a sample of officers ( $N = 1425$ ) working in one Australian police organization, this study provides insight into how religious or non-religious beliefs shapes officers' discretionary decision-making, and citizen engagement.

**Keywords** Police · Policing · Religion · Discretion · Decision-making

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## Introduction

In Australia, the guidelines of professionalism set out by all Australian police organizations establish policing as a secular practice considered free from the influence of religious ideals and doctrine (ANZPAA n.d.). Although the secularization of policing is not outlined in formalized policy, Australian state police guidelines (developed over time from the Police Regulation Act (1862) and the Police Act (1990), stipulate that individuals entering a policing career are expected to place operational guidelines and the ethos of the police organization beyond all personal beliefs (including religious beliefs and practices); thereby, placing the ideologies of policing and the police institution in the consciousness of police officers as they engage in police work (Miles-Johnson 2022; New South Wales Police Professional Conduct Booklet 2017, Queensland Police Service Standards of Professional Practice 2019). This includes operational guidelines which stipulate that officers must perform their duties in accordance with Australian federal policing legislation and policy, whilst aligning their individual values with those outlined in each police organization's respective personnel handbook (Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency 2019), and their respective police organization's code of conduct and ethics (New South Wales Police Professional Conduct Booklet 2017; Queensland Police Service Standards of Professional Practice 2019). This suggests that whilst each Australian police organization recognizes the importance that religion and religious beliefs may have on its employees (all Australian police organizations employ an inter-faith chaplaincy service or referral-based service for pastoral care), intense training, workplace culture, and para-military style operationalization underpin policing practices, and these are instilled in officers as they respond to situations and engage with the public. During police-citizen interaction officers must recall legislation, policing information, and approved procedures and practices espoused by the organization (Standridge 2009; Verhage 2022). But when officers engage or interact with citizens, they are often required to make ethical decision-making. Although there is a great deal of ambiguity regarding ethical interpretation of religious beliefs and ideologies, it is argued that religion, religious beliefs, and ideologies are the most widely used systems of reasoning when deciding outcomes in relation to moral or ethical rationalization (Miles-Johnson 2022; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023).

Religious beliefs are defined as an idea or principle that members of a religion hold to be true (Herbut 2016). This includes any sincerely held belief or information regarding a theistic assumption, presumption or position, religious doctrine, dogma, or practice, regardless of whether or not the belief of information is endorsed by any other person or public or private entity (Herbut 2016). But if officers use religious beliefs and ideologies as a moral guideline for law enforcement beyond operational codes of conduct or police training, then the application of approved policing techniques becomes discretionary. It is argued, however, that police engage in informal discretionary practices daily (Standridge

2009; Bader et al. 2010; Bradford and Jackson 2017; Verhage 2022; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023). At every level of police work, officers are presented with challenges and choices regarding decision-making, especially at the micro level where frequently unsupervised decisions are made (Epiphanio 2020: 79; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023).

Yet discretionary policing applied as a formal policing practice (beyond policing guidelines), is strongly discouraged by police organizations who apply intense training of officers to instill adherence with formal codes of practice (Lauve-Moon and Park 2023). This is not to suggest that discretionary decision-making is not recognized by police organizations informally, because in context, discretion during police-citizen engagement is, at times, deemed necessary (Wortley 2003). This is so that police can interpret laws that are often descriptively vague, as well as give officers the flexibility to determine whether to arrest individuals, issue citations, or use force when conducting duties (Morgan and Miles-Johnson 2022). Discretionary policing, therefore, is a nuanced area of policing practice.

The ability to exercise discretionary judgment during citizen interaction grants the police (unlike judges, magistrates, or parole boards) the ability to act as (more or less) autonomous agents (Wortley 2003). Away from public scrutiny and unencumbered by due process (and not subject to review), an individual police officer can totally exonerate an offender by simply deciding to take some unofficial action such as issuing a caution or ignoring an offense entirely (Wortley 2003). But excessive police discretion creates opportunities for misconduct, which can damage police-community relations (Miles-Johnson 2019; Morgan and Miles-Johnson 2022). This is likely to happen when police subjectively assess policing situations and apply discretionary practices that allow personal bias to interplay during police-citizen engagement (Asquith and Bartkowiak-Theron 2021; Verhage 2022; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023).

Previous research examining discretionary decision-making and religious beliefs have analyzed this phenomenon in relation to decision-making in the military (see Hartle 2004; Palmer 2011; Hassner 2016), and correctional staff working in prisons (see O'Connor et al. 1997). It has examined how religion and discretionary decision-making effects correctional staff with Chaplaincy roles, as well as the discretionary decision-making of religious volunteers working in prisons (see Wilson et al. 2005; Johnson 2013; Denney 2017; Hallett et al. 2019). But there is a lack of knowledge regarding how police officers who are religious or non-religious could apply discretionary policing and adhere to religious beliefs or practices during decision-making or their own discretionary adherence to rules, regulations, and police training. Discretionary decision-making by religious or non-religious officers may have a positive effect on policing practice. Officers identifying as religious or non-religious may be more or less lenient on citizens they identify with during engagement, but this knowledge is missing from the extant policing literature. As such this research sought to address this gap in knowledge.

## Literature review

### Religious identification in Australia

In 2021, the Australian census data indicated that 43.9% of Australians identify as belonging to a Christian denomination, with the largest number of people (over five million Australians) identifying as Catholic (20%), and over three million people identifying as Anglican (9.8%). Although religious identity or religious affiliation may not be important for some people, and that attitudes towards religion vary across each Australian state (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021), religious institutions continue to play a large role within the lived experience of many Australian people (Cultural Atlas 2019). Religion, and religious institutions, also have a place within Australian society, and within the Australian criminal justice system (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). For example, many Australian aged-care facilities and charity organizations are owned or funded by religious institutions, as are many schools and hospitals (Bean 2020; Graham 2020).

Numerous public and privately run sectors of the Australian criminal justice system, such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers, social service agencies, and probation services, are contracted or subcontracted to religious organizations (Graham 2020). The Mercy Partners, for example, which is an initiative of the Catholic church, are contracted across New South Wales and Queensland to deliver aged care and community services, education, family and disability services, health services (hospitals, hospices, and rehabilitation centers), and social enterprise, which includes reintegration services, behavioral reform services, and probation services. Thus, at the core of Australian social services, and within many components of the Australian criminal justice system, are religious ideologies; ideologies that have shaped social, cultural, and/or legal responses to crime, and or police performance (Miles-Johnson 2022; Possamai and Tittensor 2022).

The effect of religious ideologies on people working within these spaces, especially in policing, raises questions about the influence of such beliefs on a police officer's ability to adhere to operational guidelines and professional standards of conduct. It also raises questions about their interaction with individuals who may challenge normative boundaries that shape inter-group perceptions and interaction between officers and citizens (Miles-Johnson 2022). Psychological, emotional, mental, and physical reactions underpin police interaction with citizens, and police officers base much of their interaction on each of these components (Bradford and Jackson 2017; Findlay 2020; Feys 2023). Police-citizen interaction is also underpinned by personal experiences, previous (or perceived) professional engagement, perceptions of normative behavior associated between groups of people, and, whether these experiences were positive or negative (Bradford and Jackson 2017; Findlay 2020; Feys 2023). They are also influenced by the level of implicit or explicit bias police and citizens may have towards one another (Sandhu and Haggerty 2017). But if interaction and subsequent decision-making is based on an officer's religious beliefs, then it is likely that the officer will differentially (positively or negatively) police citizens (Miles-Johnson 2022). This is because

decision-making may be based on practices not determined appropriate by operational policy, legislation, or deemed professional by the organization (Standridge 2009; Miles-Johnson 2022; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023).

### **Police discretion and decision-making**

Police action is guided by decision-making (Huff 2021). It is underpinned by evidence and legislation, and the application of operational guidelines set out by an organization to direct police response in each situation (Feys 2023). Across the globe, police response is typically dictated by legislation (principally when a situation is supported by clear evidence of a breach of law), but police officers can (informally) use their discretion when responding to less serious offences or when there is a lack of evidence, or it is unclear (Nowacki and Spencer 2019). For example, in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, in non-felony arrest situations (often referred to as a summary offence or minor criminal offence in Australia), police officers have substantial discretion, especially when determining whether to act on misdemeanors and violations (Findlay 2020; Del Pozo et al. 2021; Goold 2022; Feys 2023; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023; Maile et al. 2023). According to The Australian Law Reform Commission Report (2022), police discretion is a necessary feature of the Australian criminal justice system, because the use of discretion provides officers' the opportunity to make flexible decisions within the limits of the law (Findlay 2020; Feys 2023). An Australian officer's ability to draw upon or choose between an alternative set of options regarding policing response positions discretion at the forefront of their decision-making (Huff 2021; Feys 2023). As such, police discretion is often considered a controversial matter because the law is meant to be uniformly enforced (Feys 2023). In Australia all persons are meant to be treated equally under the law, but every level of police work is argued to involve an officer's decision-making; whereby, officers make decisions on available evidence and then apply discretionary decision-making to the outcome of the situation (to proceed or recede legal action) (Findlay 2020; Miles-Johnson 2022; Feys 2023). And whilst this is a similar process that occurs in many police jurisdictions across the globe, police discretionary decision-making shapes each of the stages of the criminal justice system and related processes (Nowacki and Spencer 2019; Findlay 2020; Huff 2021; Goold 2022; Maile et al. 2023).

This can have positive outcomes for citizens and police alike; but it can lead to ad hoc decision-making and differential provision of services or response, as well as lead to unethical behaviors and misconduct (Bader et al. 2010; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023). Discretion is complex, it is not only shaped legislation and operational guidelines but by many factors and the characteristics of a situation (Nowacki and Spencer 2019). It is influenced by the psychological, emotional, mental, and physical reactions that an officer experiences in relation to a circumstance (Miles-Johnson 2019). It is also influenced by the officer's demographic characteristics and external social-ecological influences such as location and level of crime in each community (Huff 2021). An officer's ability or inability to correctly recognize and interpret a situation (and then take appropriate action) is similarly determined by

their recalling of previous experience (positive or negative) when policing in a similar situation. It is also determined by an officer's morals, bias, or attitude towards the situation or towards the individual or group of people involved (Miles-Johnson 2019; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023).

When applying discretion in practice, police-citizen engagement and subsequent outcomes are likely to be subject to an officer's value systems and ideologies (Verhage 2022). Most police work occurs away from public view, and at times transpires without the presence, influence, or control of superior officers (Porter and Prenzler 2016; Miles-Johnson 2019). When low visibility policing occurs, it is argued that an officer's values systems and ideologies (which form their background characteristics), as well as the influences on these (such as morals, attitudes, and beliefs), become significant predictors or risk factors associated with misconduct (Bradford and Jackson 2017; Sandhu and Haggerty 2017). When officers are challenged by situations which require discretionary practices or decision-making processes (such as during police-citizen encounters), lack of discretion and biased policing is likely to be influenced by an officer's background characteristics (Clark-Miller and Brady 2013; Joubert and Grobler 2013). The outcome of which (positive or negative policing, and the resultant hostility displayed), is often shaped by an officer's level of bias (explicit or implicit) towards the individual or group of people being policed (Bradford and Jackson 2017; Sandhu and Haggerty 2017). This is problematic because police officers can use and apply discretionary policing at multiple points throughout citizen-police encounters (Verhage 2022; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023). These typically include deciding to stop and search a person, or to not intervene, and, whether to issue citations/warnings, or determining how much help a victim of crime needs, and how much response is needed in relation to an individual entering the criminal justice system (Verhage 2022).

### **Religious beliefs, discretion, and differential policing**

The discretionary application of religious beliefs beyond operational practices by officers following a religion raises questions about the inability of religious officers to disassociate themselves from their identity as a citizen during professional work (Bader et al. 2010; Miles-Johnson 2022; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023). Upon joining the police, officers are expected to adhere to policing guidelines and place their identity as an officer beyond their identity as a civilian (Clark-Miller and Brady 2013; Joubert and Grobler 2013; Miles-Johnson 2019, 2022). Yet research suggests that individuals place their loyalty to moral and religious values associated with a religion above other tenets or practices espoused by other institutions; unless these align with the religion being followed, and this behavior further supports practices which reinforce religious values espoused by a religion (Bader et al. 2010; Possamai and Tittensor 2022; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023). Miles-Johnson (2022) argues that this practice then influences the way individuals behave or interact with others. This is challenging for Western police organizations because many of them embed religious beliefs within department guidelines, such as initially swearing an oath of service "*Under God*" or "*So help me God*" or promising to uphold "*the preservation of life*", or following guidelines and operational practices which adhere

to religious principles underpinning most Christian religions (Standridge 2009). Yet officers are expected to base their interaction and engagement with citizens on their recollection of training, and the information contained within policing and operational guidelines; as well as adherence to practices within legislation, and professional codes of conduct (Miles-Johnson 2019; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023).

Officer discretion is not limited to law enforcement situations, it is applied in other policing circumstances, such as during public service response and order maintenance (Huff 2021). Officer discretion in these situations can be just as complex as discretion applied during law enforcement. This is because public service response and order maintenance is heightened by the expectation that police organizations will offer a provision of services deemed appropriate for all members of society (Clark-Miller and Brady 2013; Joubert and Grobler 2013; Findlay 2020; Feys 2023). There is an expectation that police will fulfil the needs of multicultural and multiracial communities, while at the same time being able to adapt to altering racial, ethnic, religious, social, and cultural structures within society (Hebbani and McNamara 2010; Miles-Johnson 2019, 2022). How police engage with citizens in these circumstances (and the discretionary practices applied) conveys messages about equitable and procedurally fair treatment of individuals and groups of people (Hebbani and McNamara 2010; Miles-Johnson and Fay 2022; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023).

Police officers and police organizations, however, are heavily criticized for differential policing and disparate treatment of diverse people during police-citizen encounters in many contexts (Hebbani and McNamara 2010; Clark-Miller and Brady 2013; Joubert and Grobler 2013; Miles-Johnson 2019, 2022). This is not to suggest that all policing is negative or has adverse outcomes. Policing has improved, and numerous police organizations employ strategies or initiatives which are designed to uphold professional standards and equitable policing (Sandhu and Haggerty 2017). But, as previously stated, there are many complaints by citizens towards the police, particularly from members of minority groups who report police mistreatment during interaction (Hebbani and McNamara 2010; Bradford and Jackson 2017; Miles-Johnson 2019, 2022).

### **Police decision-making, citizen identity and outcomes of justice**

Interaction and subsequent decision-making fortified by religious beliefs, adds complexity to outcomes of justice for those citizens whose identities may challenge religious ideals or behaviors; particularly those espoused by, or considered acceptable by, officers identifying with or following a religion (Voas 2007; Clark-Miller and Brady 2013; Joubert and Grobler 2013; Miles-Johnson 2022). Numerous citizen complaints have been recorded regarding discretionary policing during police-citizen encounters by people whose identities challenge police (see Hebbani and McNamara 2010; Miles-Johnson 2019; McInnes 2022; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023). Research suggests that many citizens (regardless of identity) experience discretionary policing (see Hebbani and McNamara 2010; Miles-Johnson 2019; McInnes 2022). Members of minority groups identified by differences in race, and/or ethnicity, such as members of the African American

community, and members of the Hispanic and Latino community in the United States, and Indigenous Aboriginal people, and Sudanese African people in Australia, experience higher levels of differential policing than other citizens (Hebbani and McNamara 2010; Miles-Johnson 2019; McInnes 2022).

This is problematic, because multidimensional factors often underpin a person's level of bias towards individuals or groups, and these factors are typically based on cultural, organizational, personal, and behavioral constructs (Miles-Johnson 2019; McInnes 2022). The constructs interrelate with social phenomena that originates from family, community, and cultural beliefs, attitudes, and values (Prideaux and McFadyen 2013; Possamai and Tittensor 2022). But when religion is included in this construct, while it is unknown how this may shape policing practice, its place of dominance or importance within these factors is likely to intrinsically change a person's attitudes, values, and behaviors; especially when the level of religiosity is high, or when religious ideologies are challenged (Prideaux and McFadyen 2013; Possamai and Tittensor 2022).

It is also acknowledged that some police officer's interaction and subsequent decision-making may be based on their level of spirituality rather than religious beliefs. Defining the difference between religious beliefs and spirituality is challenging because although there are multidimensional constructs to both religious affiliation and spirituality, research suggests that there is an intrinsic religious orientation accounted for within levels of spirituality (see Berkel et al. 2011; Paul Victor and Treschuk 2020). This is because spirituality is abstract and subjective, and often misunderstood because of its deep association with either one religion or many (Jones 2018). But spirituality is defined differently to religion (Jones 2018).

People interpret and experience spirituality in different ways, but spirituality is underpinned by the practices of a religion, which then becomes defined by the level of interconnection an individual has with the religion (Florczak 2010; Lavorato Neto et al. 2018; Yesilcinar et al. 2018). Spirituality, therefore, is about the connection an individual has within or outside an organized religious system. As such, it can be an experience gained from the blending of different religious and philosophical traditions (Burkhart and Hogan 2008; Lavorato Neto et al. 2018). Religion and religious beliefs are also attributed to traditional values and practices related to a certain group of people or faith, usually guided by tradition, rules, culture, and ways of living (Yesilcinar et al. 2018). Religion, therefore, is likely to increase perceptions of social distance between police and citizens, which is an interactional phenomenon that many police organizations are intentionally trying to diminish (Linos 2017).

### **Religion, religious identity, and perceptions of social distance**

How social distance between police and citizens is reduced, is an ongoing debate in much of the policing literature examining police-citizen engagement (see Rowe and Ross 2015; Linos 2017). One idea, frequently deployed as strategic plan, is to employ more officers from diverse racial, ethnic, sexuality, gender, and religious groups (Queensland Police Service 2020; Victoria Police 2020; New South Wales Police, n.d.; Northern Territory Police, n.d.). But the reality of Australian policing



in the twenty-first century is that the number of officers who identify as white, heterosexual, cisgender, Protestant Christian or Catholic, outnumber officers from diverse groups, or other religions (Novich et al. 2018; Miles-Johnson and Fay 2022). There is a wide body of Australian research that has examined inclusion of members in policing from diverse racial, ethnic, sexuality and gender diverse groups, (see Asquith and Dimopoulos 2005; Robinson 2015; McLeod 2018; Linklater 2022; Miles-Johnson and Fay 2022). There is, however, little Australian research which has examined specific inclusion of members of diverse religious groups in policing, and the affect this has on citizen engagement and decision-making. As such, it is not clear whether inclusion of officers from diverse religious groups will diminish social distance between officers and citizens; especially if there is a history of poor interaction and high levels of mistrust between police and citizens (Miles-Johnson 2022).

The inclusion of officers from diverse or mainstream religious groups does not guarantee that police-citizen engagement will be more professional or less professional than officers who identify as non-religious (Clark-Miller and Brady 2013; Joubert and Grobler 2013). It is debatable whether officers from diverse or mainstream religious groups will improve policing practices because many religions invoke membership by observance to specific behavioral practices (Bader et al. 2010). These are usually underpinned by religious scripture or text considered sacred by the group (Bader et al. 2010; Possamai and Tittensor 2022). Interpretation of such texts describes and proscribes behavioral practices and qualities. But if these are not followed, it negatively categorizes people as non-members (Possamai and Tittensor 2022), and this can have a negative effect on interaction.

Daily life practices may vary between religions regarding the application of religious principles (Bader et al. 2010). For many religions, following practices based on religious ideas fortifies everyday life choices, and complex decision-making, and how people interact with another (McFadyen and Prideaux 2014). The application of such practices is often supported by notions of reward and punishment (Standridge 2009). Many historical religious ideologies are underpinned by the notion that those who do not follow the principles of a religion are likely to suffer persecution, punishment, and sometimes death (Standridge 2009; Bader et al. 2010; McFadyen and Prideaux 2014; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023). A person's level of religiosity, therefore, is likely to shape their interaction with others, and the expectations regarding how situations may evolve (Miles-Johnson 2022).

### **Level of religiosity and police discretion in practice**

Placing loyalty to moral and religious values that are associated with a religion, particularly those which go beyond other tenets or practices advocated by other institutions or organizations, is a normative practice (Winright 2022). But the extent to how this is expressed depends on the level of religiosity an individual has, and, whether other institutions or organizations directly associate with a religion that is being followed (Miles-Johnson 2022). The outcome of this loyalty is that an

individual's behavioral practices reinforce the religious values advocated by the religion being followed (Winright 2022). This reinforcement shapes the way a person behaves or interacts with others (Clark-Miller and Brady 2013; Joubert and Grobler 2013; Miles-Johnson 2022).

This is problematic when considering police-citizen interaction because an officer is meant to adhere to policing guidelines, ethical behaviors, and the values and beliefs upheld by the organization (Johnson 2017). This adherence places their loyalty to the organization beyond beliefs and practices associated with civilian life (De Camargo 2016; Johnson 2017). But if an officer makes discretionary decisions based on their level of religiosity or loyalty to religious beliefs, and these exceed organizational policies or practices, then it is likely that they will police citizens differentially; thereby, resulting in positive or negative outcomes of justice (De Camargo 2016; Johnson 2017; Miles-Johnson 2022). Religions are often intolerant, discriminatory, and condemning of people who do not follow the same religion and are usually prejudiced towards people who present a threat to the religion or religious ideals espoused by the group or who are not considered acceptable by the religion (Voas 2007; Standridge 2009; Bader et al. 2010; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023). Making discretionary decisions based on religious ideals, therefore, and not the practices of the organization, is challenging to the notion of police work being serviced orientated, and the expectation that officers will police all people in an equitable manner (Voas 2007; Standridge 2009; Bader et al. 2010; Miles-Johnson 2022; Lauve-Moon and Park 2023).

Starting with two research questions: (1) *'when engaging with citizens in general duties policing situations, which variables predict the likelihood that officers following a religion will use discretion and apply religious beliefs beyond legislative and operational guidelines'*, and, (2) *'when engaging with citizens in general duties policing situations, which variables predict the likelihood that officers not following a religion will use discretion, beyond legislative and operational guidelines'* this preliminary, exploratory study sought to address the gap in knowledge regarding whether religious or non-religious police officers are more likely to police equitably, and examined data collected from a sample of officers ( $N = 1425$ ) working in one Australian police organization. The results from this study will provide police scholars and practitioners (in Australia and globally), a better understanding of how officer decision-making processes are affected by religious or non-religious beliefs, and use of discretion, and this will help police organizations create policies and guidelines to address this challenge.

## Methods

An email was sent by one of Australia's largest police organizations (de-identified for ethics reasons<sup>1</sup>) to its officers working in general duties policing inviting them to participate in an online survey regarding religious or non-religious belief, and citizen engagement, professional conduct, decision-making, and judgement of

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<sup>1</sup>Ethics approval #2000000899.

people classified by specific identifiers. Officers working in general duties in Australia typically comprise constables, senior constables, sergeants, and senior sergeants. In Australia, it is the general duties police officers who are the first responder at any reportable crime or public call for assistance. General duties police are dispatched in shifts, 24 h a day, seven days a week and are, therefore, the police officers who engage with citizens on a daily basis. It is acknowledged that senior ranked officers such as inspectors and superintendents may offer additional insight into decision-making practices, but at stated, this research was focused on the officers who engage with citizens regularly.

The organization had not previously engaged in religious research and policing, and as such it clearly outlined that the research was being conducted independently of the police organization, and that the researcher had no affiliation with the organization.<sup>2</sup> The email outlined that responses from all officers regardless of religious (or non-religious) identity would be welcome. The participants were informed that the survey would include items asking about citizen engagement, professional conduct, decision-making, and judgment of citizens from groups considered similar to, or different from, the responding officer. Items in the survey asked officers about citizen engagement with people identified by race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and gender-diversity.

The email included an online link to the survey and participants were informed that individual survey responses were anonymous and would not be disclosed to the organization. It stated that participation would not impact on their professional relationship with (or standing within) the organization. Precise participation rates could not be calculated. This is because the initial number of general duties police officers emailed by the police organization was not disclosed to the researcher, and disclosure of the exact number of officers employed within the organization would identify enable its identification. The police organization was concerned that participant tracking, and collection of Internet Protocol (IP) addresses could compromise the organization. As such no IP addresses were recorded in the final data set and minimal participant tracking was applied. For example, to prevent duplicate submissions, it was agreed that participant tracking via IP addresses could be used to restrict participant completion of the survey, with each respondent being able to complete the survey once. At the start of the survey, all participants were reminded of this restriction via the online information sheet, and all participants were aware of this restriction during survey completion and at the completion of the survey in the statement of implied consent. Because IP addresses were not recorded it could not be determined how many participants attempted then disengaged from the survey, but analysis of the final data set indicated that those participants who completed the survey did so at a 100% completion rate. It was anticipated that the survey would take participants between 20 and 30 min to complete, but because a survey-timer was not used in this research, average completion times could not be calculated. The police organization was also concerned that survey completion could be completed during shift-work or in the workplace and all participants

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<sup>2</sup>The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

were encouraged via the information sheet to complete the survey during break times or before or after work.

### **Participant demographics—religious and non-religious officers**

The final sample of participants included in this study comprised  $N = 1425$  officers. Despite not being able to disclose which Australian police organization participated in the research, the demographic characteristics of the participants in the final sample are representative of the organization. This is because it employs more male than female officers (approximately one-third of its officers are female) and has a smaller number of officers who identify as being a member of a diverse sexual or racial group (such as being a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer communities, or being a member of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community). It also employs more officers aged between 18 and 35 years of age than officers aged between 36 and 60<sup>3</sup> years of age (Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency 2019). In accordance with the ethics agreement, identifying information such as badge number or rank of officer was not collected to ensure participant anonymity. The religious demographic characteristics of the participants in the final sample are also representative of the religious demographics of Australian people and reflect religious data that was collected in the 2021 Australian census data. For example, most religious participants in this study identified as Catholic (43.3%) and Anglican (15.8%), which is like the Australian census data, which indicated that the majority of Australians identify as Catholic and Anglican above other religions or no religious identity (see Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). The total sample demographic information for religious and non-religious participants are shown in Table 1.

The total sample religious affiliation for all participants are shown in Table 2.

The sub-sample of religious participants included in this study comprised  $N = 879$  officers. Like the demographic characteristics of the combined religious and non-religious participants, the demographics of the religious officers are representative of the organization, because like the police organization, the religious officers comprised more male (77.7%) than female (22.3%) officers, and has a smaller number of officers who identify as being a member of a diverse sexual (4.8%) or racial (0.3%) group (such as being a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer communities, or being a member of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community). It also comprised more officers aged between 18 and 35 years of age (76%) than officers aged between 36 and 60 years of age (24%). The sub-sample of non-religious participants included in this study comprised  $N = 546$  officers. Like the demographic characteristics of the combined religious and non-religious participants, and the religious participants, the demographics of the non-religious officers are representative of the organization, because like the police organization, the non-religious officers comprised more male (75.5%) than female officers (24.5%), and has a smaller number of officers who identify as being a member of a diverse sexual (5.1%) or racial (0.6%) group (such as

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<sup>3</sup>This is the official retirement age of police officers in Australia.

**Table 1** Total sample—participant demographics, religious and non-religious officers

Demographics		<i>n</i>	%
Gender:	Male	1095	76.8
	Female	330	23.2
Age:	18–35 years of age	1102	77.3
	36–52 years of age	323	22.7
Sexuality:	Gay	26	1.8
	Lesbian	53	3.7
	Heterosexual	1346	94.5
Identity:	Member of racial or ethnic group	151	10.6
	Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander	6	0.4
Highest level education:	Part secondary school	63	4.4
	Year 12/senior year completed	418	29.3
	Trade qualification or apprenticeship	139	9.8
	Certificate or diploma	415	29.1
	Bachelors degree (including honours)	303	21.3
	Masters degree	85	6.1
	Doctorate	2	0.1

*N* = 1425

**Table 2** Total sample—participant's religious affiliation

Religious affiliation	<i>n</i>	%
Catholic:	617	43.3
Anglican:	226	15.8
Greek orthodox:	18	1.3
Islam:	17	1.2
Jewish:	1	0.1
No religious affiliation:	546	38.3

*N* = 1425

being a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer communities, or being a member of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community). It also comprised more officers aged between 18 and 35 years of age (79.5%) than officers aged between 36 and 60 years of age (20.5%). The comparative religious and non-religious participant's demographic information is shown in Table 3.

### Research questions and survey items

Answering a 'conditional branching' or 'skip-logic' item asking participants whether they choose to follow a particular religion, participants answering 'Yes' or 'No' completed mostly identical surveys, with variations in survey items only relating to four items asking participants answering 'Yes' (to following a particular religion), about 'Following Religious Beliefs' and operational guidelines or four items asking participants answering 'No' (to following a particular religion), about

**Table 3** Comparative participant demographics—religious and non-religious officers

Demographics:		Religious officers		Non-religious officers	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gender:	Male	683	77.7	412	75.5
	Female	196	22.3	134	24.5
Age:	18–35 years of age	668	76	434	79.5
	36–52 years of age	211	24	112	20.5
Sexuality:	Gay	12	1.4	5	0.9
	Lesbian	30	3.4	23	4.2
	Heterosexual	837	95.2	518	94.9
Identity:	Member racial or ethnic group	93	10.6	58	10.6
	Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander	3	0.3	3	0.6
Education:	Part secondary school	39	4.4	24	4.4
	Year 12/senior year	242	27.5	176	32.2
	Trade qualification/apprenticeship	88	10	51	9.3
	Certificate or diploma	251	28.6	164	30
	Bachelor degree	201	22.9	102	18.7
	Master degree	58	6.6	27	5
	Doctorate	0	0	2	0.4

*N* = 1425

‘Following Operational Guidelines’ and decision-making processes; all other survey items were identically applied. The survey items were adapted from previous research examining police engagement with citizens (See Clark-Miller and Brady 2013; Joubert and Grobler 2013; Miles-Johnson 2022) and were included in the survey to elicit preliminary, exploratory data from the participants (see Appendix A—a selection of items used to determine religious or non-religious beliefs within the survey).

To understand how religious or non-religious belief shapes citizen engagement, professional conduct, decision-making, and judgement of people classified by specific identifiers, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and gender-diversity were used in the survey as separate categories, and as intersectional types of identity. ‘Race’ was defined as a representation of a human population distinguished by physical characteristics. ‘Ethnicity’ was applied as a term to represent minority groups with a shared history, identity, geography, and cultural roots (which occur despite racial difference). Differences in ‘sexuality and gender-identity’ were defined in relation to non-heteronormative or non-heterosexual expressions of sexuality and gender such as those expressed by gay and lesbian communities and members of gender diverse communities. Two dichotomous categorical independent variables were created from the data. One independent variable ‘Following Religious Beliefs’ was created from the responses by participants answering ‘Yes’, they choose to follow a particular religion. To minimize confusion or misinterpretation of the phrase ‘beyond’, information in the survey explained to participants that ‘beyond’, in this context, referred to applying religious teachings and doctrines

outside the understanding, application, or limits of legislative and operational guidelines. The other independent variable ‘Following Operational Guidelines’ was created from the responses by participants answering ‘No’, they do not choose to follow a particular religion.

It was also acknowledged that many policing situations may not be influenced by a binary application of religious or non-religious behavior, and that religion may have an impact on some policing situations over others. It was also acknowledged that the survey questions may not capture the nuances of decision-making, but it was determined that by placing policing in a binary context, it would enable the predictor variables to provide preliminary, exploratory data, as an indication of the relative importance of each on determining whether following or not following religious or non-religious beliefs shapes citizen engagement, professional conduct, decision-making, and judgement of people classified by specific identifiers.

Predictor (dependent) variables were created as scales from items in the survey using standardized Likert-type scale responses ranging from 1 = Strongly Agree to 5 = Strongly Disagree. These included scales built from all officer’s responses (regardless of yes/no answers to following a religion) to items asking them about citizen engagement, professional conduct, decision-making, and judgment (See Appendix B—a selection of survey items used to determine judgement of citizens during police interaction with religious officers). High scores awarded for citizen engagement, professional conduct, decision-making, and judgement would suggest that religious and non-religious officers strongly disagree that policing of people classified by specific identifiers, such as race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and gender-diversity are influenced by religious beliefs. Low scores awarded for citizen engagement, professional conduct, decision-making, and judgement would suggest that religious and non-religious officers strongly agree that policing of people classified by specific identifiers, such as race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and gender-diversity are influenced by religious beliefs. The predictor variables, their Cronbach Alphas, the minimum and maximum score, and the mean and standard deviations for each scale are shown in Table 4.

In addition to the predictor variables, demographic variables relating to the gender and age of the officers were included in the analyses. Given that 95.1% of officers identified as heterosexual, 89.4% identified as not being a member of a racial or minority racial group, and only 0.4% of officers identified as Aboriginal Australian, the participant’s sexuality, ‘race’ and ethnicity were not included in the final model. It was recognized that the uneven distribution of the participant’s gender (1095 or 76.8% males and 330 or 23.2% females) and age

**Table 4** Predictor variables—Cronbach’s alphas, minimum and maximum scores, and mean and standard deviations

Scale	# Items	$\alpha$	Min score	Max score	M	SD
Citizen engagement	6	0.80	6	30	10.64	3.61
Professional conduct	4	0.83	4	20	8.81	3.15
Decision-making	6	0.89	6	30	9.61	3.76
Judgement	6	0.71	6	30	18.08	2.07

(1102 or 77.3% aged 18–35 years of age, and 323 or 22.7% aged 36–52 years of age) could distort the results. Gender and age, however, were included in the final analysis because previous literature (MacVean and Cox 2012; Paoline et al. 2015) indicates that professional engagement between police and citizens is strongly influenced by each of these variables. Brandl et al. (2001), also argue that the age of officers has varying degrees of positive and/or negative engagement; particularly when young male officers interact with people from diverse groups.

As such a series of non-parametric statistical Mann-Whitney U tests analyses techniques were applied because the outcome variables were not normally distributed between the two groups (religious and non-religious officers) and within each group (religious or non-religious officers). The analyses of results using the Mann Whitney U tests follow a within-group comparison (comparisons of the independent variables within each group) and not a between-group comparison. It was also decided that alongside the Mann Whitney U tests, two separate Binary Logistic Regressions would be performed on the results for religious and non-religious officers. These were performed to further assess the ability of the variables to predict how religious or non-religious belief shapes citizen engagement, professional conduct, decision-making, and judgement of people classified by specific identifiers, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and gender-diversity.

## Results

### Mann-Whitney U tests—following religious beliefs

When the participant's religious belief was used as the independent variable for participants who selected 'Yes' to following a particular religion ( $N = 879$ ) the results of the Mann-Whitney U tests indicated that there was a significant difference within this group of officers. Judgement of people from groups classified by specific identifiers that are similar to, or different from the officer's own identity was found to be significant when officers follow their religion's teachings and doctrines as closely as possible and frequently apply them in different contexts at work, beyond legislative and operational guidelines,  $U = 59,553$ ,  $z = -2.91$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ,  $r = 0.10$ . This suggests that religious officers are likely to differentially judge citizens based on their identity or identifiers during engagement. When the participant's gender and age were added to the model, the results of the Mann-Whitney U tests showed that there was a significant difference between the age of religious officers and three of the predictor variables. The significant predictor variables were citizen engagement  $U = 61,789$ ,  $z = -2.73$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ,  $r = 0.09$ , professional conduct  $U = 58,758$ ,  $z = -3.71$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $r = 0.13$ , and decision-making  $U = 58,625$ ,  $z = -3.79$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $r = 0.13$ . This suggests that religious officers of different ages are more likely to differentially police people from groups classified by specific identifiers that are similar to, or different from, their own. The results for the Mann-Whitney U tests within the group of religious officers, gender, and age and each of the variables are shown in Table 5.



**Table 5** Mann-Whitney U tests—within group responses, following religious beliefs, gender, and age, and predictor variables

<i>Following religious beliefs:</i>					<i>U</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
Citizen engagement					66,019	-0.83	0.41	0.03
Professional conduct					68,984	0.12	0.91	0.004
Decision-making					67,305	-0.42	0.67	0.01
Judgement					59,553	-2.91	0.004**	0.01
<i>Gender &amp; following religious beliefs:</i>					<i>U</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
<i>Male</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>%</i>					
683	77.7	196	22.3					
Citizen engagement					64,052	-0.93	0.35	0.03
Professional conduct					62,064	-1.58	0.11	0.05
Decision-making					63,949	-0.98	0.33	0.03
Judgement					64,978	-0.64	0.53	0.02
<i>Age &amp; following religious beliefs:</i>					<i>U</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
<i>18–35</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>36–52</i>	<i>%</i>					
668	76	211	24					
Citizen engagement					61,789	-2.73	0.006**	0.09
Professional conduct					58,758	-3.71	0.001**	0.13
Decision-making					58,625	-3.79	0.001**	0.13
Judgement					71,986	0.48	0.63	0.02

*N* = 879

\*\**p* < 0.01

**Mann-Whitney U tests—following operational guidelines**

When ‘Following Operational Guidelines’ was used as the independent variable for the participants who selected ‘No’ to following a particular religion (*N* = 546), the results of the Mann-Whitney U tests showed that there was no significant difference between any of the officers within this group and the predictor variables. This would suggest that non-religious officers are following operational guidelines when policing all citizens. When the participant’s gender and age were added to the model, the results of the Mann-Whitney U tests showed that there no significant difference between the age of non-religious officers and any of the predictor variables. This would suggest that the age of non-religious officers does not influence police engagement. There was, however, a significant difference between the gender of non-religious officers and two of the predictor variables. The significant predictor variables were following operational guidelines and citizen engagement *U* = 24,493, *z* = -1.99, *p* = 0.04, *r* = 0.09, and decision-making *U* = 22,762, *z* = -3.15, *p* = 0.002, *r* = 0.13. This would suggest that male and female non-religious officers are more likely to differentially police people from groups classified by specific identifiers that are similar to, or different from, their own. The results for the Mann-Whitney U tests within the group of non-religious officers, gender, and age, and each of the predictor variables are shown in Table 6.

The Mean, Median, and Standard Deviation for within group comparison of religious officers (following religious beliefs) and each of the predictor variables, and gender, and age group, are shown in Table 7.

**Table 6** Mann-Whitney U tests—within group responses, following operational guidelines, gender, and age, and predictor variables

<i>Following operational guidelines:</i>					<i>U</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	
Citizen engagement					22,139	1.63	0.10	0.07	
Professional conduct					21,883	1.44	0.15	0.06	
Decision-making					21,088	0.86	0.39	0.04	
Judgement					22,541	-0.95	0.34	0.04	
<i>Gender &amp; following operational guidelines:</i>		<i>Male</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
		412	75.5	134	24.5				
Citizen engagement					24,493	-1.99	0.04*	0.09	
Professional conduct					28,447	0.54	0.59	0.02	
Decision-making					22,762	-3.15	0.002**	0.13	
Judgement					28,013	0.26	0.79	0.01	
<i>Age &amp; following operational guidelines:</i>		<i>18–35</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>36–52</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
		434	79.5	112	20.5				
Citizen engagement					21,433	-1.95	0.05	0.08	
Professional conduct					23,519	-0.54	0.59	0.02	
Decision-making					23,908	-0.27	0.78	0.01	
Judgement					22,860	-0.99	0.32	0.04	

*N* = 546

\**p* = < 0.05

\*\**p* = < 0.01

**Table 7** Mean, median, and standard deviation—within group comparison, religious officers, and predictor variables

		Citizen engagement	Professional conduct	Decision-making	Judgement
Male officers ( <i>n</i> = 683)	<i>M</i>	10.77	8.92	9.72	18.11
	<i>Md</i>	10	8	9	18
	<i>SD</i>	3.57	3.15	3.77	2.01
Female officers ( <i>n</i> = 196)	<i>M</i>	10.51	8.53	9.45	18.01
	<i>Md</i>	10	8	8	18
	<i>SD</i>	3.61	3.04	3.75	2.26
18–35 years ( <i>n</i> = 668)	<i>M</i>	10.89	9.05	8.86	18.07
	<i>Md</i>	10	8	8	18
	<i>SD</i>	3.59	3.11	3.82	2.09
36–52 years ( <i>n</i> = 211)	<i>M</i>	10.14	8.12	9.92	18.13
	<i>Md</i>	10	8	10	18
	<i>SD</i>	3.46	3.09	3.49	1.99

*N* = 879

The Mean, Median, and Standard Deviation for within group comparison of religious officers (following religious beliefs) and each of the predictor variables, and gender, and age group, are shown in Table 8.

**Table 8** Mean, median, and standard deviation—within group comparison, non-religious officers, and predictor variables

		Citizen engagement	Professional conduct	Decision-making	Judgement
Male officers ( <i>n</i> = 412)	<i>M</i>	10.71	8.74	9.784	17.83
	<i>Md</i>	10	8	9	19
	<i>SD</i>	3.76	3.11	3.89	2.41
Female officers ( <i>n</i> = 134)	<i>M</i>	9.92	8.595	8.62	17.87
	<i>Md</i>	10	8	7.5	19
	<i>SD</i>	3.22	3.40	3.09	2.42
18–35 years ( <i>n</i> = 434)	<i>M</i>	10.64	8.84	9.58	17.92
	<i>Md</i>	10	8	8	19
	<i>SD</i>	3.62	3.15	3.79	2.34
36–52 years ( <i>n</i> = 112)	<i>M</i>	10.03	8.62	9.39	17.54
	<i>Md</i>	10	8	8	19
	<i>SD</i>	3.74	3.31	3.58	2.68

*N* = 546

### Binary logistic regression analysis

Prior to analysis, collinearity diagnostics were run on all of the predictors in the model. There were no tolerance values less than 0.1 and the variance inflation factor values indicated that the model had not violated the multicollinearity assumption. A Pearson Correlation analysis indicated that there is a significant positive relationship between the Citizen Engagement and Professional Conduct variables  $r(1425) = 0.22$ ,  $p = 0.001$ , and the Citizen Engagement and Decision-Making variables  $r(1425) = 0.34$ ,  $p = 0.001$ , and a negative relationship between the Judgement and Professional Conduct variables  $r(879) = -0.002$ ,  $p = 0.96$ . A distribution of error analysis indicated that Citizen Engagement ( $\sigma_M = 0.09$ ), Professional Conduct ( $\sigma_M = 0.08$ ), Decision-Making ( $\sigma_M = 0.08$ ), and Judgement ( $\sigma_M = 0.06$ ), had minor deviations from the mean. Each of the categorical dependent variables regarding following or not following religious beliefs and the independent variables (citizen engagement, professional conduct, decision-making, judgement, gender of officer, and age of officers) were entered into each binary logistic regression model to assess how well they predict or explain differences between religious or non-religious officer's responses within each group. The binary logistic regression analysis assessing the religious officer's responses was found to be statistically significant,  $X^2(6, N = 879) = 19.25$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . This indicates that the model was able to distinguish between religious officer's responses to each of the variables. The model as a whole explained between 2.2 (Cox and Snell R square) and 3.3% (Nagelkerke R square) of the variance between variables, and correctly classified 77% of cases. Only one variable (judgement of citizens) made a statistically significant contribution to the model, with an odds ratio of 0.86. This suggests that religious officers who

follow their religion's teachings and doctrines as closely as possible, and frequently apply them in different contexts at work beyond legislative and operational guidelines, are almost one-time more likely than other religious officers to judge citizens identified by race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and gender-diversity. The results for this model are presented in Table 9.

The binary logistic regression analysis assessing non-religious officer's responses was not found to be statistically significant,  $X^2(6, N = 546) = 8.61, p = 0.2$ . This indicates that the model was not able to distinguish between non-religious officer's responses to each of the variables. This is interesting given that the Mann Whitney U tests indicated that the gender of the non-religious officers does have a significant impact on two of the predictor variables, citizen engagement and decision-making. The logistic regression model as a whole only explained between 1.6 (Cox and Snell R square) and 2.7% (Nagelkerke R square) of the variance between variables and it correctly classified 84% of cases of non-religious officers who would follow the legislative and operational guidelines of the police organization as closely as possible, and frequently apply them in different contexts at work, rather than use their discretion. The results for this model are presented in Table 10.

**Table 9** Logistic regression analysis—within group responses, religious police officers, and predictor variables

	$\beta$	S.E.	Wald	df	p	Odds ratio	95% C.I for odds ratio	
							Lower	Upper
Citizen engagement	-0.02	0.03	0.95	1	0.33	0.98	0.93	1.03
Professional conduct	-0.001	0.03	0.003	1	0.96	1.0	0.95	1.06
Decision-making	-0.001	0.03	0.002	1	0.97	1.0	0.95	1.05
Judgement	-0.15	0.04	15.47	1	<0.001	0.86	0.80	0.93
Gender	-0.09	0.20	0.20	1	0.66	0.92	0.62	1.35
Age	-0.30	0.20	2.3	1	0.13	0.74	0.50	2.30

*N* = 879

**Table 10** Logistic regression analysis—within group responses, non-religious police officers, and predictor variables

	$\beta$	S.E.	Wald	df	p	Odds ratio	95% C.I for odds ratio	
							Lower	Upper
Citizen engagement	0.06	0.04	3.07	1	0.08	1.06	0.99	1.14
Professional conduct	0.05	0.04	1.55	1	0.21	1.05	0.97	1.14
Decision-making	-0.009	0.04	0.06	1	0.80	0.99	0.92	1.06
Judgement	-0.08	0.05	2.56	1	0.11	0.93	0.85	1.02
Gender	0.01	0.28	0.001	1	0.97	1.01	0.58	1.75
Age	-0.17	0.31	0.30	1	0.58	0.84	0.46	1.54

*N* = 546

## Limitations

The research was conducted as a preliminary, exploratory study with one Australian state police organization; therefore, generalizability of the results is limited. Similar research with other Australian police organizations could determine if the results of this study are representative of all Australian officers regarding religious or non-religious beliefs, and citizen engagement, professional conduct, decision-making, and judgement of people classified by specific identifiers. The results from this study may be skewed by the dominance of officers who identify as male, heterosexual, Protestant Christian or Catholic, and who do not identify with a racial or ethnic minority group. The inclusion of more female officers, and officers who do not identify as a member of a majority religion or sexual identity, and officers who do identify as a member of a racial or ethnic minority group, may offer further insight whether religious or non-religious beliefs shape citizen engagement, professional conduct, decision-making, and judgement of people classified by specific identifiers. This research examined aspects of police engagement with citizens, but it did not examine aspects of police culture as an influence on decision-making and citizen engagement and how underlying and often negative components of operational police culture may affect decision-making during police-citizen engagement. Future research, therefore, could include examination of police culture, which may offer further insight into how religious or non-religious beliefs shape citizen engagement, professional conduct, decision-making, and judgement of people classified by specific identifiers. The sample included in this study, however, is reflective of many police organizations in Australia (and in the West) who are dominated in number by officers who identify as male, Protestant Christian, or Catholic, who are not a member of a racial or minority group and who identify as heterosexual. Finally, it is acknowledged that although all participants were encouraged via the information sheet to complete the survey during break times or before or after work, participation in the research and completion of the survey may have occurred whilst officers were conducting shift-work. As such, survey completion may have been undertaken quickly, and this may have resulted in an under-reporting of responses to the surveys, biased answers, or it may have increased the likelihood of socially desirable responses from participants regarding use of discretion. This could result in officers underestimating the amount of religious reasoning or discretion they use when decision-making. It would be prudent, therefore, to replicate this study in the future to remove any effects of social desirability and to conduct a comparison study with officers in the field. To increase the generalizability of the results, repeating the study during various times throughout the officer's careers could add further knowledge to this area because officer's religious belief may change as well as their level of professional conduct, decision-making, and use of discretion.

## Discussion

When policing people classified by specific identifiers that are similar to, or different from, the officer, the data collected from religious officers suggests that their use of discretion, decision-making, and subsequent policing response is likely

to go beyond legislative and operational guidelines; particularly with citizens whose identity is considered different to the officer in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and gender-diversity. Following religious teachings and doctrines closely, and then applying them in various contexts at work, is likely to result in differential policing by religious officers that may be underpinned by implicit or explicit bias. Negative bias, intolerance, and discriminatory condemnation of people are traits typically associated with religious judgement (Prideaux and McFadyen 2013; Possamai and Tittensor 2022) and although the effect size statistic is small, the significance of judgement by religious officers in a policing context cannot be discounted. Many religions espouse pro-social care and support of others, but they are, simultaneously, intolerant of people who do not follow the same religion or who are not considered acceptable under religious ideologies (Voas 2007). The negative judgement of religious officers in relation to people identified as being different to themselves is problematic.

Miles-Johnson (2022) argues that when a police officer with strong religious values has their values or ideologies challenged when interacting with an individual whose identity, lifestyle, culture, religion, race, or ethnicity is at odds with an officer's religion, then negative judgement and ensuing behavior is likely to occur. The implications for this are that a religious police officer is more likely to discretionally apply religious values and ideologies during citizen interaction, and how these are actioned by an officer may result in misconduct. Although religion is frequently associated with negative judgement and ensuing poor treatment, it can have a positive effect on attitudes and perceptions of others, and the level of care people demonstrate to others. Bennet and Einolf (2017) argue that social solidarity and informal social capital are underpinned by religion and religious beliefs, and people living in religiously diverse countries and members of minority religious groups are highly likely to help others, particularly strangers. Under this premise, religious beliefs may promote prosocial norms and values, and the possibility of altruism or solidarity stemming from religion beliefs or religious practices between citizens should not be discounted (Possamai and Tittensor 2022). In addition, internal norms and values influenced by religious beliefs or practices may help motivate people to help others (Miles-Johnson 2022).

Police officers by virtue of their profession are positioned to help and respond to citizens in times of crisis and during victimization. It is likely, therefore, that their religious beliefs could motivate positive actions and heighten levels of professionalism during police-citizen engagement. But many religions are formed under the idea of a divine command theory, whereby the direction of judgement is often negative, provided by a 'willful and rational god' who rewards or punishes people based on the religious tenets set out by (and espoused by) the commands of the 'god' (Miles-Johnson 2022). This premise underpins most religious ideologies which dictates how individuals adhere to religious tenets and express themselves and perform subsequent behaviors, and these tenets apply to all followers regardless of gender or age (Possamai and Tittensor 2022).

According to the Pew Research Center (2018), there is no statistical difference in levels of religious belief between younger and older adults (Pew Research Center 2018). When there is a difference, the significance levels are found in younger

adults who are found to be less religious and hold fewer religious beliefs than older people. The results from this research, however, suggest that when officers follow a religion, younger police officers aged 18 to 35 years of age within this group are more likely than older police officers aged 36 to 52 years of age within this group to use discretion when decision-making, and apply religious beliefs beyond legislative and operational guidelines.

It is acknowledged that the effect size statistics for these predictor variables are small, and the significance of age and religion within the group of religious officers may be a result of the larger cohort of younger officers in this study, but the combination of age and religion has implications for policing in terms of discretionary decision-making. The subsequent outcome regarding police action is that it is likely to result in differential policing, and therefore, misconduct by younger aged religious officers. The age of an officer in relation to misconduct has been found to be significant in studies examining policing (see Wood et al. 2019; Cubitt et al. 2020; Cubitt and Birch 2021). Age and religion as a combination of factors, however, is an area of research that needs systematic enquiry. Lack of self-control, life-experience, or maturity in decision-making, and as well as the influence of religious tenets and beliefs may shape a religious younger aged officer's decision-making processes. Understanding how religion may form an antecedent to misconduct (especially in young officers) will therefore, help police organizations develop preventative, and where necessary, intervention policies for at-risk officers.

Developing prevention and intervention policies regarding misconduct is not a new idea (see Quispe-Torreblanca and Stewart 2019). Developing prevention and intervention policies that include an officer's religious beliefs, level of religiosity and age, and how this shapes misconduct, has not however, been considered in previous strategies. If police organizations want to prevent misconduct in relation to religious officers' applying religious beliefs beyond legislative and operational guidelines, then the religious identity and the age of an officer should be a key component within prevention and intervention strategies. Given that police organizations in Australia (as in other Western police organizations) are dominated by the number of officers who identify as Catholic or Protestant Christian, and are young, and male, officers' religious beliefs should be outlined within organizational guidelines as a potential causal factor underpinning officer decision-making, and how this may trigger misconduct.

Despite police organizations being dominated by numbers of male officers, research suggests that there are statistical differences in levels of religious belief between genders (Pew Research Center 2016). Women are more likely than men to have higher levels of religiosity and are more likely to acknowledge the importance of religion in their lives (Pew Research Center 2016). In this research, however, the gender of an officer identifying as religious was not significant in relation to any of the predictor variables. Despite the cohort of religious participants being dominated in number by male officers identifying as Catholic, the responses given by religious female officers did not significantly change the results.

The gender of officers not identifying as religious, however, was significant in terms of the number of non-religious officers within that group using their discretion beyond legislative and operational guidelines during general engagement with

people classified by specific identifiers. Within the group of non-religious officers, it was also significant in terms of non-religious officers and decision-making during police-citizen engagement. Though the effect size statistics for each of these predictor variables is small, the significance of gender and non-religious officers and policing of people classified by specific identifiers different to their own may be a result of the larger cohort of male officers within the non-religious officer group. The combination of gender and using discretion beyond legislative and operational guidelines for non-religious officers, has, however, similar implications to those for religious officers in terms of policing and discretionary decision-making, and police action that may result in differential policing and misconduct.

There is much debate regarding why gender differences exist within levels of religiosity (such as physical or physiological causes, or socialization into gender roles and existential security), but differences between men and women and levels of religiosity are formed by multiple factors; particularly among women identifying as belonging to a Christian denomination (Pew Research Center 2016). The propensity of religious female officers to differentially police diverse people classified by specific identifiers is an under-researched area, even though gender is often discussed as a key identifier in terms of police officer misconduct (Huff 2021). But much of the misconduct research examining the effect of gender on policing is dominated by research analyzing male officers, usually because the number of male officers participating in the studies (and working in police organizations) outnumber female officers. Accordingly, results are mixed regarding whether the gender of an officer has a direct outcome on police behavior and misconduct (Oberfield 2014; Shoub et al. 2021).

Some researchers argue that even though men and women are employed equally as officers, research examining police misconduct should examine this phenomenon in relation to all officers regardless of sex (Oberfield 2014). Research should identify attributes leading to misconduct as a set of attitudes and behaviors, rather than originating from the biological difference (or lived experience) between officers (Shoub et al. 2021). Each of these arguments bear consideration, but in this study, the number of male participants outnumbered female participants in the non-religious cohort. Officers in the non-religious group (dominated by the number of male officers) are more likely to use discretion beyond legislative and operational guidelines, which indicates that gender, as causal factor in relation to misconduct, cannot be ignored. The gender of an officer as a predictor variable to differential policing needs to be accounted for so that police organizations can prevent inappropriate behavior and potential misconduct. Identifying gender as a key determinant in discretionary policing practice has, therefore, implications for strategic recruitment goals relating to long-term service provision, academy, and field training. It should also be a key component within prevention and intervention strategies regarding discretionary decision-making and policing of people classified by specific identifiers.

The results in this research suggest that the background characteristics of religious and non-religious officers in this study will shape their interaction with people classified by specific identifiers. Religious and non-religious socialization, the lived



experiences of officers, levels of maturity in terms of age and the level of life experience officers bring to the job, will certainly shape their behavior, interaction with others, as well as substantive policing outcomes (Miles-Johnson 2019; Shoub et al. 2021). This is important to acknowledge, because when police discretionary decision-making occurs, it typically happens at the situational level (Epiphanio 2020; Del Pozo et al. 2021; Huff 2021). If background characteristics are accounted for in terms of how religious and non-religious officers use discretion, then the identification of such traits may ascertain why officers' decision-making processes are swayed in terms of moving away from following legislative and operational guidelines.

Identifying and then isolating a set of traits or principles that can be set out in policy regarding officer decision-making and discretionary policing may be challenging. In addition, creating policy to target or regulate every potential decision-making opportunity or discretionary policing situation an officer could face is likely to be impossible (Huff 2021). But creating guidelines that could increase the cognitive awareness of officers, specifically regarding how their background characteristics may shape their decision-making process is likely to improve policing practice (Miles-Johnson 2019). In situations where a clear decision-making outcome or policing response is difficult, increasing the cognitive awareness of an officer's subjective perspective of a situation is also likely to improve their decision-making processes (Miles-Johnson 2019).

During initial academy training, and throughout deployment, each phase of policing is meant to foster constancy in terms of officers being able to engage professionally in police work and offer the same level of professionalism during police-citizen engagement (Miles-Johnson 2019; Epiphanio 2020). For many individuals, however, the background characteristics they bring with them into policing are ingrained, which means that they may struggle to observe policing guidelines and some ethical behaviors endorsed by an organization (Le Count 2017; Miles-Johnson 2019). To address this, police organizations must make careful reforms to initial training programs, and in socialization processes of officers undertaking police work. This means that the intent of police organizations to instill a consistent set of attitudes and behaviors in officers that underpin decision-making (which follow legislative and operational guidelines), must consider, and then address, the likelihood that religious and non-religious officers will make differing decisions regarding police response; especially decision-making which is based on factors that go beyond initial training, workplace culture, the demands of police work, and length of service.

## Conclusion

Accepting, and then understanding that officer decision-making processes for religious and non-religious officers are affected by, respectively, religion, and use of discretion, will help police organizations create policies and guidelines to address this challenge. Police work is underpinned by citizen engagement, yet when officers interact with citizens whose identities are different to their own, the

probability of religious officers equitably policing all citizens is going to be reduced. When a young, religious officer is challenged by the identity of a citizen or a group of people, or when the response situation or evidence presented is unclear, they are likely to apply discretionary decision-making to determine an outcome of justice. In doing so they are likely to refer to religious tenets, beliefs or ideologies espoused by the religion they follow, and negatively judge the individual or group of people. This has negative implications regarding outcomes of justice, and differential policing of people considered different to the officer. It has negative outcomes regarding police misconduct as religious officers move away from applying legislative and operational guidelines, and equitable policing practices. Non-religious officers are likely to apply discretionary decision-making beyond legislative and operational guidelines, particularly when engaging with people classified by specific identifiers different to their own. But the sample of officers in this study was dominated by the number of officers who identified as following a religion, which indicates that the police organization where this research took place, must recognize, and then create policy, which addresses the likelihood that religious officers will make differing decisions; especially in relation to following legislative and operational guidelines. This has implications for all police organizations who employ high numbers of religious officers. Until police organizations acknowledge that the religious identity of an officer should be a key component within prevention and intervention strategies regarding misconduct, then misconduct is likely to continue where response situations challenge an officer's religious beliefs, tenets or ideologies espoused by the religion.

**Supplementary Information** The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-024-00859-z>.

**Acknowledgements** Not applicable.

**Author contributions** This research was conducted solely by the contributing author.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions.

**Data availability** Ethics restrictions apply to the availability of the data and so are not publicly available. The data are, however, available from the author upon reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Ethical approval** Queensland University of Technology Approved Human Research—Negligible-Low Risk #2000000899. All research was performed in accordance with Queensland University of Technology Approved Human Research—Negligible-Low Risk.

**Informed consent** Informed consent was obtained from all participants and/or their legal guardians for participation in the study.

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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