Exploring the Enigmatic Link between Religion and Anti-Black Attitudes

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Abstract
This review explores social psychological perspectives on the complex relationship between religion and anti-Black prejudice in the United States. We examine the different ways in which religiosity has been conceptualized by behavioral scientists. We consider the methodological limitations of previous research, as well as how the advent of priming research introduces new empirical questions regarding religiosity and anti-Black prejudice, such as whether activation of different religious conceptions (e.g., God versus religion) or priming via different types of stimuli (e.g., words versus images) produces different outcomes. Finally, we discuss the lack of diverse samples in the present literature and highlight the need for additional research with Black American respondents. Conclusions consider the real world implications of links between religion and anti-Blackness for both White individuals (e.g., intergroup relations) and Black individuals (e.g., psychological functioning).

“At age 10…what called my attention to the neglect of Africa, was the Sunday school lessons with all those White Angels…and when they say God is love, God is kind, God is no respect of kith or kin, I kept wondering why didn’t he let one or two little Brown or Black angels sneak into heaven.” – John Henrik Clarke, Professor of African Studies

“And by the way, for all you kids watching at home, Santa just is white. But this person is maybe just arguing that we should also have Black Santa. But, you know, Santa is what he is, and just so you know, we’re just debating this because someone wrote about it, kids…Just because it makes you feel uncomfortable doesn’t mean it has to change. You know, I mean, Jesus was a white man too. He was a historical figure; that’s a verifiable fact—as is Santa, I want you kids watching to know that.” – Megyn Kelly, Fox News Anchor

Anti-Blackness can be found on every inhabited continent in the world (e.g., Bashi, 2004). In the contemporary United States, a society that has been dubbed by some as post-racial, conscious and unconscious racial biases persist across a variety of domains such as policing, hiring decisions, jury decision making, predatory lending practices, and physician/patient interactions, just to name a few (e.g., Cooper et al., 2012; Eberhardt, Davies, Purdie-Vaughns, & Johnson, 2006; Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014; Sommers & Marotta, 2014). As just one example, using primary and secondary school teachers as participants, Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015) recently chronicled the underlying psychological processes that contribute to dramatic racial differences in school discipline. Specifically, across two experiments, they found that racial stereotypes made it more likely for teachers to interpret the behavior of Black students (compared to White students) as a pattern of misbehavior. In addition, Black students’ infractions were perceived as being more extreme than identical infractions by White students and more deserving of discipline (i.e., school suspension). These findings are quite troubling given that racial disparities in discipline have been linked to the White/Black achievement gap (Townsend, 2000) and the school-to-prison pipeline (Fenning & Rose, 2007). And it is
noteworthy that such findings emerged even though most school teachers would probably endorse an egalitarian motivation to treat all students equally and fairly.

Despite examples like this one of the continuing, adverse impact of racial stereotypes and discrimination on the lives of Black Americans, many Americans continue to believe that anti-Black racism is a problem of the past (Norton & Sommers, 2011). For that matter, White Americans often express the belief that anti-White racism has become even more prevalent than anti-Black racism, and that any actions taken to improve the lives of racial minorities inevitably come at the expense of everyone else. This is an all-too common context of contemporary racial bias: persistent disparity accompanied by denial that the problem still exists.

Accordingly, behavioral scientists have, for several decades now, pondered questions such as how best to characterize, predict, and attenuate such racial bias (e.g., Allport, 1954; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010). This research has focused on the individual differences and contextual factors that render anti-Black attitudes (and behaviors) more likely. Although there is a large body of literature that has examined different strategies for “unmaking prejudice” (i.e., prejudice reduction) – such as attitude reconditioning, decategorization and recategorization, intergroup contact, and perspective taking – no one strategy is without flaws (for a review see Paluck & Green, 2009). And few strategies have considered the potential role of religiosity in such efforts, which is somewhat surprising given how many Americans self-identify as religious. Given that religious ideologies are often related to endorsement of humanitarian and egalitarian ideals (see Hall, Matz, & Wood, 2010), there would seem to be an intuitive basis for the prediction that the more religious individuals are, the less likely they are to demonstrate anti-Black bias or other forms of racial prejudice. Alas, as Gordon Allport articulated 50 years ago, and as the opening quotations above illustrate, the actual relationship between religion and racial bias is much more complex: “The role of religion is paradoxical. It makes prejudice and it unmakes prejudice” (Allport, 1954, p. 444).

In the present article, we address from a social psychological perspective the complicated and sometimes counterintuitive relationship that exists between anti-Black bias and religion. On the one hand, religion is the source of strength and support for many and has been found to correlate with a wide range of positive outcomes, including prosocial behavior (e.g., Pichon, Bocatto, & Saroglou, 2007) and self-control (e.g., McCullough, & Willoughby, 2009). On the other hand, prejudice predicted by or resulting from religion has been, and remains, a source of conflict and suffering throughout the world, for example, the use of Christianity to justify the barbaric treatment and enslavement of African peoples in the transatlantic slave trade (see Cannon, 2008), or as the basis for negative contemporary treatment directed toward Gays and Lesbians (see Gettleman, 2010 and Whitley, 2009 for a meta-analysis on the topic).

Specifically, in this review, we will first discuss the different ways in which psychologists have conceptualized religiosity. We will then review correlational findings regarding religiosity and anti-Black bias and discuss the limitations of this work. Next, we will review a limited amount of contemporary experimental research that has explored causal links between religion and anti-Blackness, mainly through the utilization of priming techniques. After that, we briefly consider psychological and social processes that may help account for the relationship between religiosity and anti-Blackness. Lastly, we will identify specific areas in need of future investigation, including the effects of religious imagery and the relationship between religiousness and race-related attitudes among racial minority individuals. In analyzing religiosity, this article will focus on Christianity because by and large the United States is a Christian nation with approximately 77% of its population identifying with one of the Christian religions (Gallup, 2012). Moreover, since the United States was founded by Puritans, many deep seated American values have been shaped by religious perspective, even among Americans who themselves are not religious (e.g., Protestant work ethic; Uhlmann, Poehlman, Tannenbaum, & Bargh, 2011. This focus also
reflects that the majority of the existing literature that has examined the relationship between religion and anti-Black attitudes has focused on Christianity, though certainly the extension of these analyses to other types of religious beliefs is yet another important area for future investigation.

Although religiosity has been linked to prejudice toward a variety of social groups such as gays (Whitley, 2009) and non-Christians such as atheists and Muslims (Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2012), prejudice directed at particular social groups is believed to stem from different sources. For example, evidence suggests that religious-based prejudice directed toward gays and non-Christians owes in large part to the perception of these groups as violating or threatening important religious worldviews/values. A majority of Black Americans, on the other hand, belong to some Christian denomination, which suggests that any link between religion and anti-Black prejudice must be based on other factors. Although there are basic affective, cognitive, and social mechanisms that contribute to all forms of prejudice, it is important to explore the nuances that are tied to specific target groups and differentiate the sources of prejudice. In the present review, we focus on anti-Black prejudice, in particular, in light of the unique historical legacy of anti-Blackness in America, the clear empirical evidence of persistent disparities along these lines in contemporary society, and the important research questions such focus permits regarding both Whites’ biases and Blacks’ internalized race-related attitudes.

Conceptualizing Religiosity

Religion is a subject that has been written about extensively for thousands of years across a wide array of perspectives. In terms of the behavioral sciences, there have been a number of ways in which theorists have approached the topic (e.g., see Oman, 2013, p. 29). One behavioral science definition of religion is provided by Rowatt, Carpenter, and Haggard (2013), who broadly characterize it as “a set of beliefs, practices, and rituals that provide adherents with a sense of meaning, purpose and value in life” (p. 170). They go on to define religiosity as both a perception of one’s own belief system and the degree to which one engages in religious acts such as attending services, personal prayer, and study of sacred texts. In short, the psychological study of religion has attempted to apply a scientific methodology to questions of religion, and in doing so has recognized the multiple different ways in which religiosity can be conceptualized.

Early research on the link between religiosity and racial attitudes focused on how an individual’s self-reported affiliation with Catholic or Protestant churches or frequency of attending religious services correlated with prejudice (e.g., Allport & Kramer, 1946; Stouffer, 1955). It did not take long for researchers to realize that these conceptualizations of religiosity—affiliation and self-reported behaviors—were too simplistic. More recently, researchers have begun to explore religiosity in terms of the effects of racial iconography, the distinction between adherence to religious principles versus belief in a supernatural agent, and the ways in which individuals vary with regard to how they approach religion. These various aspects of religiosity are ones to which we will return later in this review.

Correlational Findings

Early research on the link between religiosity and prejudice concentrated on the association between religious affiliation/involvement and racial prejudice, though, of course, the correlational nature of these investigations prevents causal conclusions. Of 17 studies on the topic published between 1940 and 1975, 13 demonstrated a positive relationship between religiosity and anti-Black prejudice, such that increased religiosity was associated with increased prejudice (Batson & Burris, 1994). For example, Allport and Kramer (1946) reported that individuals who identified as Protestant and Catholic were more likely than those with no religious
affiliation to hold anti-Black attitudes. Hall et al. (2010) conducted a meta-analytic review of past research on religiosity and racism in the United States since the 1964 Civil Rights Act and found that the extent to which religiosity was linked to racial prejudice depended on social-cognitive orientations. Specifically, three common orientations with regard to religiosity have been referred to as *intrinsic*, *extrinsic*, and *quest/agnostic* (for a summary of these religious orientations, see Hall et al., 2010 meta-analytic review; Allport, 1966; Allport & Ross, 1967; Batson, 1976; Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis 1993).

**Intrinsic.** Individuals who have an intrinsic religious orientation are characterized by sincere belief in their religion and attempt to live their lives as their religion dictates (Allport & Ross, 1967; Allport, 1966). How does such an orientation predict intergroup attitudes and tendencies? Intrinsically religious individuals have been found to self-stereotype and apply to themselves the ideal characteristics of their religious group (Burris & Jackson, 2000), which often includes self-reported racial tolerance (Batson, Naifeh, & Pate, 1978; Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010). In other words, for the intrinsically religious individual, it is often important to see the self as egalitarian because that is what is expected of the religious. However, on indirect, less controllable measures of racial attitudes (e.g., choosing to interact with a White person versus a Black person), this ostensible racial tolerance often fades. For example, in one study, Batson, Flink, Schoenrade, Fultz, and Pych (1986) had White participants choose between two theaters in which to watch a movie. In one theater, they would be sitting next to a White student, whereas in the other theater, they would be sitting next to a Black student. In one condition, the movie playing in both theaters was identical, while in the other condition, the theaters played two different movies. In the condition where both theaters were playing the same movie, a decision to sit next to a White student versus a Black student could give the impression that one is prejudiced. Individuals with an intrinsic religious orientation more often chose to sit next to the Black student in this condition, whereas in the condition where the theaters played different movies (i.e., where the decision could be interpreted as a preference for the movie, not for the White versus Black student) they more often chose to sit with the White student. In other words, the greater racial tolerance self-reported by intrinsically religious individuals has not always been observed to the same degree in terms of actual behavior.

**Extrinsic.** Individuals who have an extrinsic religious orientation are more likely to view religion as a means to an end (Allport & Ross, 1967; Allport, 1966). They tend to use religion for social status, social networks, acceptance, and security (Allport & Ross, 1967). For example, those who attend religious events to create or preserve social connections while only selectively following the teachings of their religion – such as a politician who attends church in order to secure or gain votes – would be characterized as having an extrinsic approach to religion. It has been shown that extrinsically religious individuals place value on social conformity and respect for tradition (Hall et al., 2010), and these values may contribute to the expression of prejudice. Indeed, Schwartz and Huismans (1995) found that values of social conformity and traditionalism are positively correlated with intergroup bias, and other research has demonstrated that individuals who are extrinsically religious tend to self-report greater levels of racial prejudice (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005).

**Quest/Agnostic.** Other religious individuals are characterized as being on a spiritual quest for existential meaning. Such people question religion and have religious doubts, yet still continue to claim some form of religious identification (Batson, 1976). Quest/Agnostic individuals tend to resist conformity or the status quo values, which may also relate to institutionalized racism.
Individuals with this “religious” (placed in quotation marks since some might question whether such individuals truly are religious) orientation tend to demonstrate greater racial tolerance relative to those who are intrinsically or extrinsically prejudiced (Batson, 1976; Donahue, 1985). Indeed, in the Batson et al. (1986) movie theater study introduced above, participants who had a quest orientation chose more often to sit next to the Black student regardless of experimental condition.

In a more recent correlational analysis, Rowatt, LaBouff, Johnson, Froese, and Tsang (2009) collected data from over 1,500 American adults (88.2% White) and analyzed self-reported measures on religiosity and social attitudes toward social groups that have been historically disadvantaged in the U.S. (e.g., Asians, Blacks and Latinos). They found that religiosity was only marginally related to general racial prejudice, but the authors noted that since some of the questions regarding social attitudes toward historically disadvantaged ethnic groups were high in face validity and potentially reactive (e.g., Are you uncomfortable being in-laws with a Black person?), participants may have sought to control their responses in order to appear more egalitarian. Indeed, both religious and non-religious individuals will often self-report racial tolerant attitudes primarily because of a desire not to appear racist (Plant & Devine, 1998), identifying yet another methodological limitation to studies reliant solely upon correlational data and self-report measures.

In short, although there has been a 60-year history of investigating the relationship between religiosity and prejudice – research that has, more often than not, identified a positive correlation between the two constructs – an understanding of this link remains incomplete. As referenced above, the majority of the empirical investigations examining the link between religiosity and prejudice have been correlational, preventing determinations of causality. Moreover, most of the data from these investigations have been reliant on self-report measures. Because of social desirability effects, self-reported measures are often unreliable, especially with regard to racial attitudes (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005; Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010).

Recently, this concern regarding social desirability effects for self-report measures has led researchers to adopt subtle and indirect ways to measure prejudice (e.g., Implicit Association Test or IAT, Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998; RAS, Saucier & Miller, 2003; Symbolic Racism Scale, Henry & Sears, 2002). For example, Rowatt and Franklin (2004) explored the relationship between various dimensions of religiosity and implicit racial prejudice assessed via the IAT, a computer-based test designed to measure an individual’s unconscious attitudes. The race-based IAT works by measuring the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., Black people) and adjectives/evaluations (e.g., good, bad). The IAT records reaction time as participants categorize Black or White faces and pleasant or negative adjectives. A respondent is described as having an implicit bias against Black individuals relative to White individuals if it takes them longer to group pleasant words with Black faces and unpleasant words with White faces than it does to group together Black faces/pleasant words and White faces/unpleasant words. Because the IAT requires participants to make categorizations as quickly as possible without sacrificing accuracy, researchers believe that the IAT can address the concern of social desirability effects because people are less able to control their automatic responses. Rowatt and Franklin found no statistically significant relationships between implicit racial bias as captured by the IAT with either an intrinsic, extrinsic, or quest religious orientation.

Although the use of indirect measures of racial attitudes has the potential to further our understanding of the relationships between different religious orientations and prejudice (Batson et al., 1986; Rowatt & Franklin, 2004), the majority of the work is still correlational and thus incapable of providing casual links between religiousness/religiosity and prejudice. In addition, other variables known to be correlated with racial prejudice (e.g., age,
socioeconomic status, education) are also strongly correlated with religiosity (Hill, 2005), serving as potential third variables that further complicate efforts to draw causal conclusions based on correlational research.

**Experimental Findings**

To address some of these shortcomings, more recently, researchers have also started manipulating individuals’ thoughts regarding religion through priming, or by exploring the effects of the subliminal presentation of religion-related stimuli on participants’ subsequent attitudes and perceptions related to race (e.g., Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2010, 2012; LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, & Finkle, 2012). Indeed, research has indicated that the associations between religiosity and different consequences may function unconsciously (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999), with evidence supporting this notion first documented with regard to religious priming and prosocial behavior (Pichon et al., 2007; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). For example, Pichon et al. (2007) subliminally primed participants with positive religious words and found that these words not only activated the concept of prosociality but also increased individuals’ intent to help.

With regard to racial prejudice and religion, Johnson et al. (2010) were the first to provide evidence of a causal link between religion and prejudice through the use of priming. In this research, participants completed what is known as a lexical decision task, in which they were charged with determining whether various strings of letters were nonsense or actual words. While they were completing this task, they were also subliminally presented with either Christian words (e.g., sermon, Christ, Bible, Jesus) or neutral words (e.g., shirt, butter, switch). Results indicated that the subliminal presentation of religious concepts significantly increased both implicit and explicit negative anti-Black attitudes, as assessed afterward. This finding has since been replicated using a more ecologically valid design, in which researchers recruited participants as they passed by either a religious or non-religious building and found that those in the religious context reported more negative attitudes toward Blacks relative to those in the non-religious context (LaBouff et al., 2012).

Although the advent of priming methods in the study of prejudice and religion has advanced the research literature, it has also led to new questions. For example, in prosocial behavior research, it has been demonstrated that there are theoretical distinctions between religion and God, with activation of these distinct concepts of religion leading to different outcomes in prosocial behavior (e.g., providing help to an ingroup or outgroup). Preston et al. (2010) argue “that religion and belief in God are both related to moral behavior, but are guided by different moral concerns” (p. 581). The chief moral concern of religion is cooperation and protection among the ingroup, whereas the concept of God has as its chief moral concern virtue, defined as obedience to God and following the moral rules of God. Across three studies, Preston and Ritter (2013) found evidence supporting this notion, finding increased prosocial behavior toward the ingroup after activating the concept of religion, but increased prosocial behavior toward the outgroup when the concept of God was activated.

How may this distinction relate to prejudice? In some experiments, as detailed above, researchers have exposed participants to a series of words (e.g., bible, religion, God, faith) to activate religious concepts and then measured participants’ racial attitudes. However, there has been no research to date that has examined differences in the patterns of prejudice that could be activated by the use of different kinds of religious word primes (i.e., religion versus God). If Preston and Ritter’s (2013) findings delineating distinctions between these types of stimuli and priming outcomes are extrapolated, one could hypothesize similar effects with anti-Black prejudice: individuals primed only with religion would demonstrate increased racial prejudice, whereas individuals primed with only God would demonstrate increased tolerance.
An alternative hypothesis is that the concept of God could also elicit anti-Black attitudes, depending on how God is perceived. It has been shown that individuals who read violent passages ostensibly taken from the Bible and sanctioned by God (e.g., depicting God in a violent light) subsequently display an increase in aggressive behavior over and above those who were told that the passage came from an ancient scroll (Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, & Busath, 2007). Although this effect was more pronounced for individuals who believe in God and/or the Bible, it also occurred for those who did not. Research may find that priming different God concepts may also lead to different patterns of prejudice.

Psychological and Social Processes

Even when taken together, recent findings from empirical priming studies, the large body of correlation research, and recent meta-analysis (see Hall et al., 2010), it remains unclear exactly how and in what fashion religiosity has causal effects related to anti-Black prejudice. In the following section, we will explore psychological and social processes that may help explain continued efforts to bridge this gap in the literature. The processes raised in this section include religious group identification leading to ingroup/outgroup distinctions and the spreading semantic activation of religious concepts. However, these are by no means an exhaustive list of possible explanations for a relationship as complicated as religion and prejudice, but rather constitute a starting point in the effort to identify additional social psychological explanations for this link (and additional questions for future investigation).

Ingroup/outgroup and religious group identity

Martin Luther King is credited for saying that “Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of America.” Nine out of ten Christian congregations in the U.S. are racially segregated (Scheitle, 2010). Because of this, it has been suggested individuals from other races are perceived as belonging to religious outgroups even if they share one’s religion (Hall et al., 2010). Thus, when it comes to the relationship between religiosity and racial prejudice, at least in the case of White American Christians, it seems that race can serve as a proxy for religious affiliation. For example, when Christians in the U.S. were primed with religious concepts, it increased anti-Black prejudice, even though the majority of African Americans identify as Christian (Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2010).

Another reason why Christianity may be associated with White prejudice toward African Americans is because anthropomorphized supernatural beings such as God, Jesus Christ, and angels are often depicted as White, which may contribute to ingroup/outgroup distinctions. This notion will be revisited in more detail below. But in short, because of these anthropomorphized supernatural images, White individuals may associate the ingroup (i.e., fellow White individuals) with moral superiority and the outgroup (i.e., Black individuals) as morally inferior, a tendency which has the potential to increase intergroup prejudice (Cohen, Montoya, & Insko, 2006; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005).

Activation of related constructs related to prejudice

Johnson, Rowatt, and LaBouff (2010) proposed that the activation of religious concepts may also spread activation to related constructs, such as right-wing authoritarianism (RWA, Altemeyer, 1981) and religious fundamentalism (RF, Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992), which in turn can activate anti-Black prejudice. Consistent with this notion, Johnson et al. (2011) found that RWA accounted for the relationship between religiosity and negative racial attitudes...
toward African Americans, whereas RF helped explain the relationship between religiosity and prejudice directed toward value-violating groups (e.g., gays, atheists). They suggest that the “strong punitive tendency among aggressive authoritarians… may be what leads to increases in negative attitudes toward African Americans and possibly other minorities” (p. 854). Another related construct that may be activated when religiosity is primed is Protestant Puritanism, specifically the component of the Protestant Ethic (Uhlmann, Poehlman, & Bargh, 2009). Correlational and experimental evidence suggest that Protestant Ethic is related to anti-Black attitudes as well (for a meta-analysis, see Rosenthal, Levy, & Moyer, 2011).

Additional Unanswered Questions and Future Directions

In addition to unanswered questions that exist regarding the precise nature of the causal relationship between religion and prejudice, there are specific areas for future inquiry that seem particularly important and fruitful for shedding light on these issues (see Table 1 for list of future directions, some of which are also expanded upon below). In particular, future inquiry should investigate the factors that shape the influence of religious imagery on racial attitudes, investigate religious priming and its effects on Black respondents’ attitudes, and explore the role of mortality salience in religious-based anti-Black attitudes.

Religious images and anti-black attitudes

One area of research that needs to be investigated is the potential for religious stimulus type (i.e., words versus images) to have differential effects on racial prejudice. Will priming individuals with images have the same effect on anti-Black attitudes as priming individuals with religious words? Will certain religious images elicit anti-Blackness while others elicit tolerance (e.g., supernatural agents versus institutional/inanimate objects)? Based on the priming literature, there is reason to think that religious images would have a similar effect as religious word primes; however, different images (e.g., churches versus Jesus/God) may lead to different outcomes. The role that images have in associative learning and memory is unique because images

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tend to be representative, or symbolic, of the experiences to which they are associated (Paivio, 1969). It has been both theorized (Akbar, 1984, 1996; Bargh & Chartrand, 1999) and demonstrated empirically (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001; Weisbuch–Remington, Mendes, Seery, & Blascovich, 2005) that religious and cultural symbols activate complex knowledge in an unconscious and automatic fashion. For example, Weisbuch–Remington et al. (2005) give the example of a cross, “which is an object or image (i.e., two perpendicular lines) that becomes a symbol only when it evokes images of Christianity” (p. 1204). Although words can also bring to mind images, the effect of images has been demonstrated to be more powerful (Carr, McCauley, Sperber, & Parmelee, 1982; Nelson, Reed, & Walling, 1976; Paivio, 1969). Based on such evidence, one could expect that religious images may have an even stronger effect on anti-Black attitudes than lexical primes.

But, what about certain types of images relative to one another? There may be certain images that shift anti-Black attitudes more so than other images. For example, images of institutional/concrete concepts (e.g., churches, cathedrals) may lead to different patterns of anti-Black attitudes than supernatural agents (e.g., God, Jesus, angels; Ritter & Preston, 2013). As mentioned earlier, God and other supernatural agents may lead to a moral concern of following God’s rules, which in turn may lead to increased tolerance toward Blacks. However, it is also possible that images of supernatural agents such as Jesus may lead to increased anti-Black attitudes. Although there is no scholarly agreement on the appearance of Jesus, as the opening quotations of this paper illustrate, he is almost always depicted as a White man. Some have suggested that depicting Jesus as a White man symbolizes and reinforces White Supremacy – namely, the ideological belief that biological and cultural Whiteness is superior, whereas biological and cultural Blackness is inferior (Akbar, 1984, 1996; Blay, 2011; Welsing, 1981; Wilson, 1993). As Blay (2011) writes:

> If, Christ, the Son of God, is portrayed as White, the logical assumption is that God too is White. And if, as according to Christian doctrine, God made man in His image and gave him authority over all other creatures, approximations of this whiteness when embodied by “man on earth” communicate not only a greater nearness to God, but humanity itself. In the Manichean sense, then, whiteness, embodied by humanity, communicates moral and physical superiority. Conversely, blackness, the absence of whiteness, communicates inhumanity, immorality, and physical inferiority, divinely subjected to the dominance of God and/or His earthly counterpart -- man (read: White man) (p. 10).

Questions regarding the effects of supernatural agent images on individuals’ anti-Black attitudes produce competing hypotheses that need to be addressed empirically. One hypothesis might be that exposure to images of supernatural agents (e.g., White Jesus) will increase racial tolerance toward Blacks because of concerns of morality; however, it could also be hypothesized that exposure to images of White supernatural natural agents will lead to increased racial prejudice toward Blacks because these images lead to a sense of ingroup superiority and outgroup inferiority. One way to test whether or not depictions of Jesus as a White man will influence White individuals’ belief in racial superiority and dominance would be to measure their social dominance orientation scores (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). SDO scores represent an individual’s preference for hierarchy within any social system and the domination of lower-status groups and have been shown to be malleable depending on context and situation (Guimond, Dambrun, Michinov, & Duarte, 2003; Kteily, Sidanius, & Levin 2011). If White individuals’ SDO scores increase after being primed with an image of White Jesus, but not after being primed with religious concrete/institutional objects, it would suggest that certain depictions of supernatural agents as White influence White individuals’ sense of racial superiority, which can lead to intergroup prejudice.
Another important question to ask is whose anti-Black attitudes will be influenced by such racial priming? The majority of the research looking at anti-Black attitudes has been conducted with White participants (Hall et al., 2010). As referenced above, using a multinational sample, LaBouff et al. (2012) demonstrated that participants self-reported more anti-Black attitudes when approached in a religious context versus a non-religious context in London, England. Although the sample was multinational, it can be inferred that anywhere between 65-75 percent of their participants were White, based on the percentage of their participants’ nationalities.

It therefore remains unclear what, if any, effects religious primes have on Black individuals’ racial attitudes. Blacks commonly report explicit pro-Black attitudes that are quite high (i.e., at or near ceiling effects on many scales), while holding more mixed implicit attitudes toward their ingroup (Ashburn-Nardo, Knowles, & Monteith, 2003; Livingston, 2002; Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002). As such, Blacks sometimes display outgroup favoritism (i.e., relatively pro-White attitudes), resulting in negative evaluations of ingroup members. For example, Ashburn-Nardo and Johnson (2008) found that participants who implicitly favored Whites liked Black partners less than White partners on tasks related to intelligence. Perhaps religious images of supernatural agents such as White Jesus or White angels would unconsciously exaggerate such a White supremacist ideology in Black individuals resulting in a further increase in pro-White attitudes.

The finding that Black individuals’ implicit attitudes are often in line with their White counterparts (i.e., pro-White bias) is consistent with the notion that Blacks and Whites socialized in similar environments that tend to produce and reinforce positive images associated with White people (e.g., Jesus, angels, Santa Claus, superheroes) and negative images associated with Black people. This likely contributes to some of the variability seen in Black individuals’ implicit attitudes, especially since African Americans are more religious on a number of measures (e.g., religious affiliation, religious service attendance, frequency of prayer, and importance of religion in one’s life) than the rest of the United States population as a whole (Pew Research, 2009).

A potential study that could be designed to investigate some of these questions would subliminally prime White and Black participants with an image of either a White Jesus, a Black Jesus, a religious image of a non-supernatural agent (e.g., a church), and a neutral image, and then measure participants’ anti-Black attitudes using an implicit association test (IAT: Greenwald et al., 1998). We predict that for both Black and White participants primed with an image of a White Jesus, there would be an increase in anti-Black attitudes relative to all other images. We also predict that a religious image of a non-supernatural agent would increase anti-Black attitudes among White individuals but to a lesser extent than that of a White Jesus. For Black individuals, the results could be comparable; however, given that it has been theorized that the concept of religion triggers ingroup cooperation and protection, an image of a non-supernatural agent could also have no effect on Blacks’ anti-Black attitudes or could even increase implicit pro-Black attitudes.

For White participants, the effects of an image of a Black Jesus may lead to multiple possible outcomes with one being no effect on anti-Black attitudes. Since Jesus is most commonly depicted as White, and wide cultural knowledge of a Black Jesus does not exist, there may be no recognition of a Black Jesus as a symbol of Christianity. Another possible outcome is that an image of a Black Jesus may be symbolically threatening to White individuals (Stephan, Ybarra, & Morrison, 2009), which would result in an increase in anti-Black attitudes. In the case for Black individuals, the effects of an image of a Black Jesus may also result in multiple possible outcomes. One possibility would be no effect; however, another possible outcome is that an image of Black Jesus may result in an increase in pro-Black attitudes in the face of a positive ingroup image.
Terror management theory, religiosity, and anti-black attitudes

Terror Management Theory (TMT) proposes that a wide range of human behavior, including prejudice and intergroup conflict, is motivated by the uncomfortable awareness that our own deaths are ultimately inevitable (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). This awareness of the inescapability of death has the potential to be a constant source of anxiety. From a TMT perspective, our immersion in shared cultures (cultural worldviews) offers protection from this fear of death by giving our lives meaning, value, order, and a sense of permanence. For example, many religious worldviews can provide a literal transcendence of death through the belief in life after death (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). TMT also proposes, however, that people’s motivation to protect themselves from death through cultural worldviews could lead to outgroup bias and derogation when differences between people are perceived as a threat or challenge to one’s belief and value systems (Greenberg et al., 1997).

Evidence supporting TMT comes from two decades of research that has repeatedly demonstrated that when people are reminded of mortality (mortality salience [MS]), they tend to defend their world views by derogating, stereotyping, and aggressing toward outgroups (for a review see Greenberg & Kosloff, 2008). MS may help explain religious-based anti-Black attitudes because many religious concepts – i.e., supernatural agents, spirits, resurrection, heaven – may make mortality more salient and thus lead to anti-Black attitudes. There is some empirical evidence that indirectly supports this notion. We know that MS increases the belief in supernatural agents (at least for Christians; Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006), which leaves the possibility that there may be a bidirectional relationship between MS and religious concepts generally. And MS has been shown to increase White individuals’ support for White supremacy: Greenberg, Schimel, Martens, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (2001) found that exposure to MS increased White participants’ sympathy with racist White individuals, suggesting that MS can increase affiliation and protection of White supremacist beliefs. Given the link between religiosity and mortality salience, TMT is another area ripe for exploration in the effort to better understand the link between religion and anti-Black attitudes.

Conclusions

In this review, we have explored the relationship between religion and anti-Black attitudes and identified areas in need of future research. Early studies demonstrated the correlational nature of religiosity and racial prejudice, whereas priming studies have now documented a causal relationship between religion and anti-Black attitudes. However, the use of priming in the psychological study of religion is still in its beginning stages, and important questions (e.g., the effect of religion on Blacks’ anti-Black attitudes) have arisen based on recent findings.

Given how pervasive religion and religious imagery are in the United States, this research area has a number of real world implications. If religion has the potential to increase implicit anti-Black attitudes for Whites, then religious environments or spaces that have religious paintings or pictures may complicate interracial interactions that occur within these contexts. It has been shown that negative implicit racial attitudes can influence White individuals’ avoidance of Black individuals (McConnell & Leibold, 2001). In addition, this research may also serve to influence movie and television writers to consider diversifying their cast when producing works on religious and biblical stories. There has been a recent string of movies and television programs such as The Bible (2013), Exodus: Gods and Kings (2014), Noah (2014), and Passion of the Christ (2004) to name a few, that have had no or a very few Black characters. The potential negative effects that these all-White cinematic portrayals of biblical characters may have on interpersonal interactions are enough for a call for greater diversity in casting for such works.
As mentioned earlier, African Americans tend to be the most religious group in the U.S. Given that most of the images of supernatural agents that Blacks are exposed to are White (e.g., Jesus, Angels, God), even in predominately Black religious establishments, this could, unbeknownst to Black individuals, be influencing implicit negative attitudes toward the ingroup. If this is indeed the case, it could prove to be detrimental to Black individuals’ psychological health. Implicit negative attitudes have been shown to have a negative effect on the overall psychological well-being (i.e., less positive psychological function and increased depression) of African Americans (Ashburn-Nardo, Monteith, Arthur, & Bain, 2007). Since individuals tend to be socialized in religion during their childhood, this may begin to happen at a young age.

For example, it has been close to 70 years since Kenneth and Mammie Clark conducted their experiments colloquially known as “the doll studies”, which were designed to study the development of the sense of self-esteem in Black children. The doll test presented children with two dolls that were identical, except for race, with one doll being Black and the other White. The child would be asked a series of questions in regards to the doll such as what doll would they rather play with, which one is the bad doll, which one is good, which one is pretty, which one is ugly, etc. The experiment identified a clear preference for the white doll among a majority of the Black children in the study. The results from Clark and Clark (1947) and the replications that have followed since demonstrate Black children’s internalized racism. Although there are many contributing factors to explain why Black children may internalize anti-Black attitudes, the present review suggests that we cannot ignore the potential role religion may play in such processes, especially when religiosity is associated with a strictly White iconography.

In sum, to date, the research investigating religion and anti-Blackness primarily has been concerned with how the motives to be religious can influence Whites’ racism, specifically toward Blacks, but how religion may underlie implicit internalized prejudice for Blacks remains understudied. Given how pervasive anti-Blackness continues to be in the United States, it is important to consider the construct from all directions and to identify factors that contribute to its pervasiveness, including those that may seem counterintuitive, such as religion. The objective of this review has been to serve to influence discussion on ways to reduce prejudice among both religious and non-religious individuals by exploring how religious group membership, concepts, and imagery contribute to racial bias, of forms both directed toward the outgroup and internalized.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Ariel Goldberg for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper. This research was supported by an NSF Graduate Research Fellowship awarded to Simon Howard.

Short Biographies

Simon Howard is a PhD candidate pursuing his degree in Social Psychology at Tufts University. His research interests fall within the domains of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. Current research involves exploring the relationship between religiosity and anti-Black attitudes, the internalization of prejudice among Black/African American individuals, stereotype threat, and cross-race eyewitness misidentifications.

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Note

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