Exposure to White Religious Iconography Influences Black Individuals’ Intragroup and Intergroup Attitudes

Simon Howard
Marquette University

Samuel R. Sommers
Tufts University

Objective: Recent studies have found that exposure to White religious iconography via priming techniques can increase White individuals’ anti-Black attitudes. To date, however, no research has examined the influence of exposure to White religious iconography on Black individuals’ intragroup and intergroup attitudes. We hypothesized that exposure to White religious iconography would influence Black individuals’ intragroup attitudes negatively.

Method: Black participants (N = 120) were either subliminally exposed to religious images (i.e., supernatural agents or concrete religious objects) or nonreligious images (i.e., nonsupernatural agents or nonreligious objects) before their intragroup/intergroup attitudes were assessed.

Results: Exposure to images of White Jesus, but not exposure to images of generic White men, churches, or nonreligious objects increased Black individuals’ explicit pro-White attitudes. In addition, exposure to White Jesus also led to increased devaluation of the ingroup; data on implicit attitudes were more mixed.

Conclusion: Although there are many contributing factors to explain why Black adults and children may internalize anti-Black attitudes, the potential role religion may play in such processes—specifically the exposure to White religious iconography—cannot be ignored.

Keywords: anti-Black prejudice, religiosity, priming, White supremacy, Christianity

And I always asked my mother, I said, “Momma, how come is everything White?” I said, “Why is Jesus White with blond hair and blue eyes? Why is the Lord’s Supper all White men? Angels are White, the Pope, Mary, and even the angels.” I said, “Mother, when we die, do we go to Heaven?” She said, “Naturally we go to Heaven.” I said, “Well, what happened to all the Black angels when they took the pictures.” I said, “Oh, I know. If the White folks is in Heaven too, then the Black angels were in the kitchen, preparing the milk and honey.” —Muhammad Ali during a 1971 interview with Michael Parkinson on the British TV talk show, Parkinson.

Black Americans tend to be the most religious group in the United States, with the overwhelming majority (84%) identifying with some sect of Christianity (Pew, 2009). Historically, for many Black Americans, Christianity has been a source of strength, comfort, hope and a tool used to combat racial oppression (e.g., Nat Turner, Black Liberation theology; see Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2003). However, some Black Americans have also criticized Christianity for having a negative impact on the lives of Black people (Jones, 1973/1997). For example, some of the most vocal criticism of Christianity 1 —currently and historically—has come from Pan-African and Black Nationalists (e.g., Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, Amos Wilson), as well as Black Liberation theologians (e.g., William Jones, James Cone, Jerimiah Wright). They have raised questions regarding the impact that the worship and exposure to White deities (in Catholicism and Protestantism, Jesus is God in human form) may have on the psychological processes of Black people and have spoken passionately about the detrimental effects that such exposure and worship may have on Black people, such as the internalization of anti-Blackness.

Many scholars contend that White religious iconography may play a role in the maintenance of ideological White supremacy (i.e., the belief that biological and cultural Whiteness is superior, whereas biological and cultural Blackness is inferior; Akbar, 1996; Blay, 2011; Howard & Sommers, 2015; Jones, 1997; Wilson, 1998). They theorize that not only do White depictions of religious iconography such as Jesus Christ symbolize ideological White supremacy, but this symbolism also reinforces, for Black and White people alike, conscious and unconscious associations of Whiteness with godliness (e.g., moral and physical superiority) and non-Whiteness or Blackness with ungodliness (e.g., inhuman, immoral, physically inferior). Recent empirical evidence does indeed suggest that exposure to White religious iconography, specifically Jesus Christ, can influence individuals’ anti-Black attitudes. Howard and Sommers (2017) demonstrated across two experiments that White participants primed with images of White Jesus exhibited increases in both subtle and implicit anti-Black attitudes. It is important to note that these findings remained

---

1 The criticism of Christianity by Pan-African and Black Nationalists has been directed towards westernized Christianity, which originated within European/Western civilization (e.g., Roman Catholicism and Protestantism). It is historically, culturally, and theologically distinct from Eastern Christianity, which originated in the Balkans, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. It is also distinct from Black Liberation theology.
significant even when controlling for participants’ preexisting religiosity, demonstrating how the influence of religious cognition on the attitudes of believers and nonbelievers alike can be similar due to the heavy influence of Christianity on American culture and values (Uhlmann, Poehlman, Tannenbaum, & Bargh, 2011).

The majority of empirical research investigating the relationship between religiosity and anti-Black attitudes has been conducted with White American participants (Hall, Matz, & Wood, 2010; however see LaBouff et al., 2012). There has been an absence of empirical investigation on the relationship between religiosity and racial attitudes of Black individuals (Howard & Sommers, 2015). In particular, it remains unclear what, if any, effects religious primes have on Black individuals’ racial attitudes.

Although there have been no empirical investigations involving the effects of religious priming on Blacks’ intragroup attitudes, this is not to suggest that behavioral scientists have not been interested in the potential effects of White religious iconography on African Americans. For example, during the 1940s sociologist E. Franklin Frazier conducted qualitative research on how Black people viewed God. He asked Black youth “Is God a White man?” The majority of the answers to this question mirrored this response of one youth “I’ve never heard of him being a Negro. So He must have been a White man. People would think you were crazy if you told them He was a Negro, especially White people” (Blum & Harvey, 2012). Although this study took place during the 1940s, and Black people may have different answers to that question today, most religious iconography that Blacks are exposed to, as the opening quote suggests, continues to be White (e.g., Jesus, angels, God), even in predominately Black religious institutions (Blum & Harvey, 2012). This could, even unbeknownst to Black individuals, negatively influence their implicit attitudes (i.e., increase outgroup favoritism or increase negative associations with the ingroup).

The current experiment explores the influence of exposure to White religious iconography on Black participants’ racial attitudes through the use of a priming manipulation. We hypothesized that exposure to White religious iconography will influence Black individuals’ intragroup attitudes negatively. If evidence indicates that exposure to White religious iconography can negatively impact Blacks’ intragroup attitudes, then we may wish to give additional thought to where, when, and how religious imagery is displayed, and to what effect. This is especially true, given the potential implications of such work. For example, if such exposure increases Black individuals’ anti-Black implicit attitudes, this potentially could lead to negative effects on Blacks’ overall psychological well-being. Negative implicit attitudes held by Black people have been shown to be negatively correlated with their psychological health and overall life satisfaction (Ashburn-Nardo, 2010). Previous research has shown that Blacks commonly report strong explicit pro-Black attitudes (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 implicit 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.

Outgroup favoritism has also been documented with children as young as 3 (Clark & Clark, 1947). The Clarks’ experiments, colloquially known as “the doll studies,” presented Black children with two dolls that were identical, with one exception: one doll was Black and the other was White. This research identified a clear preference for the White doll among a majority of the Black children. The children were asked a series of questions, such as which doll would they rather play with, which one is the bad doll, which one is pretty, which one they liked best, and so forth. A majority of the children gave anti-Black answers (i.e., identifying the Black doll as the ugly doll, the bad doll, and the one they liked the least). Although the original Clark and Clark (1947) doll studies are more than a half-century old, later replications (Davis, 2005; Greenwald & Oppenheim, 1968; Lewis & Biber, 1951; Morland, 1962, 1966), as well as contemporary implicit association experiments with children (Newheiser & Olson, 2012) continue to demonstrate Black children’s internalized racism. 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. Although there are many contributing factors to explain why Black adults and children may internalize anti-Black attitudes, researchers cannot ignore the potential role religion may play in such processes, especially when religiosity is associated with a strictly White iconography.

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 White supremacist ideologies are embedded in the historical and cultural fabric of the United States (Adams, Biernat, Branscombe, Crandall, & Wrightsman, 2008; Feagin, 2013; hooks, 1989; Salter & Adams, 2013; Wilson, 1998) and that these ideologies can influence the psychological processes of both racial majority and minority group members. Work on system justification theory and outgroup favoritism offers both theoretical and empirical support for this notion (Jost, 2001; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Dasgupta, 2004). System justification theory postulates that members of low-status groups (e.g., Blacks) often demonstrate outgroup favoritism toward members of high-status groups while also internalizing negative ingroup stereotypes as a means of justifying the existing social system (i.e., White supremacy2), a process that tends to operate in an unconscious way. This theory helps explain why Black individuals are more likely to exhibit preference toward Whites on implicit measures (i.e., limited controlled response), but hold more favorable explicit ingroup attitudes (see Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004 for a review, also Dasgupta, 2004.). Due to their history of being an oppressed racial minority in the United States, Blacks may often feel pressured to strongly identify and promote their Blackness explicitly, to counter cultural anti-Black narratives. However, due to the combination of chronic exposure to negative portrayals of their ingroup and positive portrayals of Whites, automatic implicit preference for the

2 White supremacy (racism) “Refers to a political, economic and cultural system in which Whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources. Conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of White dominance and non-White subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings” (Ansley, 1989, p. 1024).
outgroup (i.e., Whites) is likely to occur, while implicit ingroup favoritism is often nonexistent (Dasgupta, 2004; Jost et al., 2004).

By this account, system justification theory would suggest that exposure to White religious iconography is likely to contribute to some of the variability seen in Black individuals’ implicit attitudes, especially because White religious iconography leads to positive associations with White people (e.g., associated with God). The present experiment may shed light on the complicated questions regarding the relationship between religion and anti-Black prejudice generally, as well as the variability of Black individuals’ racial implicit attitudes.

Method

Participants and Design

One hundred twenty adult Black participants from the Greater Boston area (71 women, $M_{age} = 24.90$) were approved to be recruited and compensated $10 for their participation in this experiment by the Internal Review Board at Tufts University. A power analysis indicated that our sample size provided approximately 80% power to detect a medium effect size ($f = .30$). All power analyses were conducted using G*Power 3 (Düsseldorf, Germany; http://www.gpower.hhu.de/en.html). Participants were recruited from an online advertisement asking for the participation of those who identify racially as Black/African American. Although all participants self-identified as Black/African American and were born and raised in the United States, the sample was ethnically diverse: 49.1% of the sample self-identified as African American/Black, 25.8% identified as African (e.g., Ghanaian, Nigerian), 17.5% self-identified as Afro-Caribbean (e.g., Jamaican, Haitian), 5% identified with two or more ethnicities (e.g., Italian/African American, mixed), and 1.6% identified as American. Of the 113 participants who reported their religious affiliation, 85.8% self-reported some affiliation with Christianity (e.g., Baptist, Methodist), 4.4% reported being affiliated with Islam, 3.5% reported not having a religious affiliation, 1.8% identified as atheist, and the remaining 1.8% reported idiosyncratic responses (e.g., truth, God). Participants also self-reported on how religious they see themselves on a single-item measure with a scale of 1–7 (“To what extent do you consider yourself a religious person?”), where higher scores indicated higher levels of religiosity. The mean of this measure suggested a sample moderately high in religiosity ($M = 5.64, SD = 1.53$). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four priming conditions (i.e., supernaturnal agent: White Jesus; nonsupernatural agent: White male; concrete religious object: church; and neutral nonreligious object) in a between-subjects design.

Materials: Picture Stimuli

Religious stimuli were culled from the Internet. The two categories of religious images used for this study were images of supernatural agents (i.e., White Jesus) or concrete religious objects (i.e., churches); neutral images were of fruit (i.e., oranges). Stimuli for the White nonsupernatural agent were standardized faces used in previous face-recognition experiments in our lab and all were White American adult men. All images of White Jesus were headshots (e.g., Warner Sallman’s Head of Christ) with a neutral expression (images are available from the researcher upon request). Masks for each image were created by digitally altering the images. Each image had its own mask, created by “stain glassing” the image (a special-effects option in Adobe PhotoShop), which clusters adjacent colors and results in a stained-glass appearance. The masked image was then rotated 180 degrees.

Measures of Intragroup/Intergroup Bias

Explicit attitudes (feelings thermometer). In the feelings-thermometer task, participants were asked to indicate their feelings toward 11 different social groups. For each group, participants were presented with a sliding scale from 0 (cold) to 100 (warm), with a neutral midpoint at 50, and were asked to indicate how they felt toward the group by sliding the scale, which resembles values on a thermometer, to the appropriate number. Responses were coded such that a higher number indicated a higher level of warmth or positive feelings toward the target groups, whereas lower numbers reflected colder or more negative attitudes toward target groups (e.g., Bobo & Zabrinsky, 1996). In addition, although primarily interested in feelings toward African Americans and White Americans, we included another ethnic group (i.e., Asian American) to evaluate the specificity of the manipulation (Inbar, Pizzaro & Blume., 2012).

The Appropriated Racial Oppression Scale (AROS). We used the 24-item AROS (Campon & Carter, 2015) to measure intragroup negativity (i.e., appropriated racial oppression or internalized racism). The AROS assesses the beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions of participants’ appropriation of racial oppression (i.e., an individual’s racial self-image based on direct and indirect negative sociocultural stereotypical messages communicated throughout one’s life). The AROS consists of four subscales (Emotional Responses, American Standard of Beauty, Devaluation of Own Group, Patterns of Thinking). The Emotional Responses (ER) subscale measures emotional responses to internalized racism such as shame, anger, embarrassment, depressive symptoms, and low collective self-esteem (seven items, $\alpha = .83$). An example item reads, “In general, I am ashamed of members of my racial group because of the way they act.” The American Standard of Beauty (ASB) subscale measures an individuals’ endorsement and/or adoption of White American cultural standards of beauty (six items; $\alpha = .85$). An example item reads, “I prefer my children not to have broad noses.” The Devaluation of Own Group (DVOG) subscale measures individuals’ judgments of others of their race based on White cultural standards, values, and beliefs (eight items; $\alpha = .86$). An example item reads, “Whites are better at a lot of things than people of my race.” The Patterns of Thinking (PT) subscale measures thinking that maintains the status quo (three items; $\alpha = .70$). An example item reads, “Although discrimination

---

Footnotes:

3 The ethnicity item that was included in the demographic survey was a free response item to allow participants to self-identify ethnically how they wished. Two participants in the sample identified as “American,” however both participants identified racially as Black/African American on a race identification item.

4 Appropriated racial oppression as defined by Campon and Carter (2015) "indicates a kind of cultural learning that corresponds to inclusion and absorption of ideas, customs, beliefs, behaviors and other racial elements . . . and it involves conscious and subconscious efforts to dissociate from one’s racial group and to identify with White Americans” (p. 2).
in America is real, it is definitely overplayed by some members of my race.” All items in AROS are rated on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicate greater appropriated racism/intragroup negativity.

**Race-Implicit Association Test (R-IAT).** The R-IAT (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) was used to measure implicit attitudes toward Black individuals. The R-IAT is a computerized task that measures the strength of automatic associations between target categories (e.g., Black faces and White faces) and positive or negative words (e.g., “peace,” “evil”) by measuring how quickly people categorize the stimuli. Specifically, the R-IAT used here measured how quickly people categorized Black and White faces with pleasant versus unpleasant adjectives. Implicit racial bias against Black/African Americans is reflected by the degree to which individuals are associated with Black people.

**Procedure**

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four priming conditions, two of which were religion-oriented; the other two were nonreligious. Participants were first told that they were participating in a study that looked at the cognitive responses of individuals who have been presented with rapidly presented visual stimuli. They were then told that after the presentation of stimuli and a brief delay, they would first complete a questionnaire which would be followed by a categorization task. Depending on the condition to which participants were assigned, they were subliminally primed with religious images (i.e., White Jesus or churches) or nonreligious images (i.e., White men or fruit). Participants were instructed to focus their attention on a dot probe prior to each trial. Immediately following the disappearance of the dot, one of the images from their experimental condition was presented for 30 ms. Immediately following the image, a stain glassed mask that was flipped 180 degrees appeared for 1,000 ms. The presentation phase lasted 5 min and six–eight images were used for each condition, with each image presented multiple times during the presentation phase. Following the presentation phase, participants completed a series of thermometer items and the AROS (Campon & Carter, 2015), which was followed by the R-IAT (Greenwald et al., 1998). Next, participants completed some demographic items (e.g., ethnic background, religious affiliation, self-reported religiosity). Last, participants were debriefed and thanked for their time.

**Results**

A one-way between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine the effects of priming (White Jesus, church, White man, fruit) on explicit and implicit measures of intragroup bias."5

**Explicit Attitudes Toward African Americans and White Americans**

Regardless of whether participants were primed with supernatural agents (White Jesus; M = 88.97, SD = 13.18), concrete objects (church; M = 90.93, SD = 14.91), or White men (M = 93.42, SD = 7.19), they did not self-report colder feelings toward their ingroup on the thermometer scale than did individuals primed with neutral images (M = 92.43, SD = 12.08), F(3, 117) = .500, p = .683. It is important to note that the results reported here are consistent with previous findings demonstrating that African Americans’ self-reported explicit attitudes toward the ingroup are often at or near ceiling (e.g., Ashburn-Nardo, Knowles, & Monteith, 2003; Ashburn-Nardo, Monteith, Arthur, & Bain, 2007; Livingston, 2002).

ANOVA did indicate a significant main effect of priming on participants’ feelings toward White Americans, F(3, 117) = 4.96, p = .003, partial $\eta^2 = .114$ (see Table 1 for cell means). Post hoc comparisons using Tukey’s honest significance difference (HSD) test indicated that participants in the White Jesus condition (M = 72.10, SD = 16.71) exhibited significantly more warmth toward White Americans than did participants in the neutral condition (M = 61.23, SD = 13.83), p = .027, the White male condition (M = 58.26, SD = 12.58), p = .002, and the church condition (M = 62.03, SD = 15.70), p = .046. No other significant pairwise comparisons emerged. To control for participants’ self-reported religiosity, we used an ANCOVA. This analysis indicated that the observed difference in warmth toward White Americans remained significant even when controlling for participants’ self-reported religiosity F(3, 117) = 4.93, p = .003, partial $\eta^2 = .114$.

**Explicit Attitudes Toward Asian Americans**

To further examine the specificity of the priming manipulation, we examined whether the priming manipulation affected attitudes toward another racial outgroup other than White Americans (i.e., Asian Americans). ANOVA revealed that, regardless of whether participants were primed with White supernatural agents (White Jesus), concrete objects (Church), or White men, they did not self-report warmer feelings toward Asian Americans on the thermometer scale than did individuals primed with neutral images ($M_{White\, Jesus} = 65.10, SD = 20.41, M_{church} = 66.40, SD = 17.23; M_{White\, men} = 66.50, SD = 12.19, M_{neutral} = 61.43, SD = 11.31$); F(3, 117) = .799, $p = .497$ (see Table 1 for cell means), suggesting that exposure to White religious iconography may only increase Black individuals’ positive attitudes toward Whites, but no other ethnic outgroups.

**Intragroup Negativity (AROS)**

Although ANOVA did not reveal an effect of priming on participants’ overall AROS score (Campon & Carter, 2015), F(3, 117) = .942, p = .423 (see Table 1 for cell means), there was a significant effect on the DVOS subscale of the AROS F(3, 117) = 3.07, p = .030, partial $\eta^2 = .074$. Post hoc comparisons using

---

5 Participants’ self-reported religiosity scores did not differ across condition ($M_{White\, Jesus} = 5.60, SD = 1.59, M_{church} = 5.60, SD = 1.45$; $M_{White\, men} = 5.50, SD = 1.70, M_{neutral} = 5.87, SD = 1.41$; F(3, 117) = .312, $p = .816$.
Tukey’s HSD test indicated that participants in the White Jesus condition (M = 2.80, SD = .90) exhibited significantly more devaluation of their own group than did participants in the neutral condition (M = 2.26, SD = .56), p = .028 and marginally more so than participants in the White male condition (M = 2.35, SD = .75), p = .090. This effect held even when controlling for participants’ self-reported religiosity F(3, 117) = 3.28, p = .024, partial η² = .079.

ANOVA also indicated a marginal effect of priming on the PT subscale of AROS (F(3, 117) = 2.65, p = .052, partial η² = .064. The means were in the pattern of the prediction (MWhite Jesus = 3.64, SD = 1.25, Mchurch = 3.00, SD = 1.08; MWhite man = 2.98, SD = 1.20, Mneutral = 2.83, SD = 1.31).

**Implicit Anti-Black Bias (IAT)**

ANOVA indicated a significant main effect of priming on participants’ R-IAT (Greenwald et al., 1998) scores, F(3, 110) = 3.25, p = .025, partial η² = .081 (see Table 1 for cell means). Post hoc comparisons using Tukey’s HSD test indicated that participants in the White Jesus condition (M = .44, SD = .56) exhibited significantly more implicit anti-Black bias than did participants in the White male condition (M = .09, SD = .42), p = .034. No other significant pairwise comparisons emerged, but the difference of the means for implicit anti-Black attitudes between participants in the White Jesus condition and those in the neutral condition (M = .12, SD = .49) approached significance (p = .065) and were in the direction of predictions. To control for participants’ self-reported religiosity, we again used an ANCOVA. This analysis indicated that the IAT difference remained significant, even when controlling for participants’ self-reported religiosity F(3, 110) = 3.21, p = .026, partial η² = .081.

**Discussion**

The findings of the present experiment provide initial support that exposure to White religious images can influence Black individuals’ explicit and implicit intragroup/intergroup attitudes. Specifically, this experiment provides evidence that depicting Jesus as a White man can increase Black individuals’, explicit pro-White attitudes (i.e., greater feelings of warmth toward Whites), the devaluing of their ingroup, and implicit pro-White/anti-Black bias.

Although an increase in positive attitudes toward outgroup members is often viewed positively, in societies where racially stratified hierarchies exist (i.e., the United States), it can often lead to unintended negative consequences (Dixon, Levine, Reicher, & Durrheim, 2012). For example, increases in positive attitudes toward Whites have led Blacks to identify less with the ingroup, underestimate the existence of racial oppression, and participate less in collective action that challenges social inequality and benefits the ingroup (Dixon, Tropp, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2010; Wright & Lubensky, 2008).

Furthermore, it is important to note that exposure to White Jesus did not lead to a general increase in positive attitudes toward all ethnic outgroups. There was no effect of priming on participants’ attitudes toward Asian Americans, providing further evidence that exposure to White Jesus increases Blacks’ pro-White attitudes specifically. The fact that there was no evidence suggesting that White religious iconography reduces Blacks’ explicit pro-Black attitudes demonstrates the importance of including explicit, subtle, and implicit measures of intragroup bias to get a more complete picture of Blacks’ intragroup bias. With the feeling-thermometer item alone, we only got a fraction of the story of the influence of White religious iconography on Black participants’ attitudes. However, as mentioned previously, Black Americans’ self-reported explicit attitudes toward their ingroup are often near ceiling, which may reflect Black individuals’ self-protective strategies, and which are often adopted by stigmatized groups (Ashburn-Nardo, 2010) even as their implicit attitudes are more malleable.

Indeed, exposure to images of White Jesus did negatively influence Black participants’ implicit pro-White/anti-Black attitudes, namely exposure to White Jesus increased pro-White/anti-Black bias. Although post hoc comparison only revealed a marginal effect compared with the control condition, it is important to note that the effect of exposure to White Jesus did significantly differ from exposure to images of generic White men. This finding suggests that there are qualitative differences between exposure to a White supernatural agent who is portrayed as the son of God and exposure to a generic White male, further supporting the notion that White depictions of Jesus Christ may both symbolize and reinforce ideological White supremacy.
Furthermore, on the AROS (Campon & Carter, 2015), which is a subtle measure of intragroup attitudes, exposure to White religious iconography also had a negative effect on Black individuals’ intragroup attitudes. Specifically, Black participants’ judgments of other Black people who had been exposed to images of White Jesus were more negative than Black participants’ judgment in the control condition. In addition, exposure to White Jesus marginally increased participants’ thoughts that downplay racial oppression relative to Black participants exposed to nonreligious objects. Although the priming manipulation failed to reveal a significant effect on the AROS overall, the effects found on the DVOG and PT subscales suggest that exposure to images of White Christ may only influence Blacks’ support of the status quo and their judgments of other Black people based on White cultural standards, values, and beliefs. There may be no influence of exposure to White religious iconography on Black individuals’ emotional responses to internalized racism (e.g., shame, anger, embarrassment) or individuals’ endorsement and/or adoption of White American cultural standards of beauty, however, this may be dependent on the associations tied to the White religious icon used.

For example, White images of Christ have been theorized to symbolize and reinforce ideas of White superiority. By Christian accounts of Jesus being the son of God/human form of God, he is associated with being omnipotent and omniscient. These associations may help explain why in the present study we observed effects on certain subscales of the AROS that may be more related to these associations (i.e., PT, and DVOG) and not on others that may be less related (e.g., ASB and ER). Future research should explore whether other religious icons that have different associations and are commonly depicted as White (e.g., the Virgin Mary) have an effect on these other subscales. Taken together, the results from this experiment provide compelling evidence that, exposure to White religious iconography can negatively influence Black individuals’ intragroup attitudes and increase implicit and explicit pro-White attitudes regardless of participants’ self-reported religiosity. These findings are troubling given the ubiquity of the White Jesus image not only in the United States, but elsewhere as well. For example, Warner Sallman’s Head of Christ, which depicts Jesus as a blond-haired, blue-eyed White man, is purported to be the visualization of Jesus held by “hundreds of millions” of people (Lippy, 1994) due to how widely the image has been distributed (reproduced over a billion times; Newsweek staff, 2007).

**Limitations and Future Directions**

The present research is not without its limitations; first, it took place in what Hood and colleagues (2009) have referred to as the North American Protestant “box,” where most studies on the psychology of religion have been geographically conducted. Future researchers should step out of this box and conduct research in other regions of the world. However, regarding the investigation of the effects of exposure to White religious iconography specifically, researchers should be mindful of the sociohistorical context of the country in which such research is being conducted. The United States, for example, has a long, complicated colonial history steeped in religiously oriented White supremacy. We suspect that if the experiment here were conducted in other countries that have similar histories to the United States—or have their own unique histories of dealing with White supremacy, European colonialism, and imperialism—the results from those experiments would mirror the results presented here. A particularly interesting future direction in this domain that would expand this work would be to conduct experiments in predominately Black countries that have an extensive history of White supremacy and White colonialism (e.g., Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, and Jamaica), where a significant number of the population has been converted to Christianity and, consequently, is exposed to images of a White Jesus. A related vein of research would be to investigate the effects of White religious iconography in non-White areas of the world that have had a substantial presence of Christian missionaries and thus, heavy exposure to White religious iconography.

To a certain degree related to the issue raised above, even within the North American Protestant box, we do not know if the effect of exposure to White supernatural agents extends to respondents of other racial groups. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, it has been theorized that supernatural agents depicted as White both symbolize and reinforce an ideology of White supremacy, thus exposure to such iconography may lead to increases in pro-White bias, as well as anti-Black attitudes among other racial groups such as Latino and Asian Americans. This might especially be the case among subcultures in which lighter skin tones are associated with higher status, power, prestige, and higher desirability, whereas darker and Black skin tones are viewed as inferior and undesirable (Uhlmann, Dasgupta, Elgueta, Greenwald, & Swanson, 2002).

Future inquiry should also include an exploration of the effects of exposure to Black religious iconography on Black individuals’ implicit intragroup attitudes. Recall that Black individuals commonly self-report explicit pro-Black attitudes near ceiling, while holding more mixed implicit attitudes toward their ingroup. Although Black individuals sometimes display outgroup favoritism, they also at times display neither an ingroup nor an outgroup bias on implicit measures. Exposure to Black religious iconography may increase Black participants’ implicit ingroup favoritism, a result that could be viewed positively or negatively (i.e., an absence of ingroup or outgroup bias has been interpreted as a lack of implicit prejudice). However, considering the work on social identity that illustrates that ingroup favoritism has adaptive self-esteem-enhancing properties (Turner & Tajfel, 1986), as well as the research that demonstrates that negative implicit intragroup attitudes are linked to lower levels of overall psychological well-being for African Americans (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2007), finding ways to increase implicit ingroup favoritism for members of systematically oppressed groups, such as African Americans, is an endeavor worth pursuing. Research has shown that even individuals assigned to minimal groups6 exhibit implicit ingroup favoritism (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2001); however, the prevalence of cultural White supremacy and anti-Blackness in the United States weakens implicit ingroup favoritism for Black people, an otherwise naturally occurring bias. In sum, exploring ways to increase

---

6 “Minimal groups” refers to an experimental methodology that randomly assigns participants to ingroups and outgroups, often based on arbitrary, superficial, or bogus information. The minimal group paradigm aims to investigate the minimal conditions necessary for in-group favoritism and out-group derogation to occur based on a sense of group membership (for an example, see Tajfel, 1970).
Blacks’ ingroup implicit attitudes, one of which may be exposure to Black religious iconography, warrants further research.

Another idea for future inquiry would be to explore the effects of supraliminal priming of White religious iconography on racial attitudes. One might question whether supraliminal exposure to White iconography might have similar (or stronger) effects to subliminal primes. The use of a subliminal priming paradigm in the present study reflected the concern that supraliminal primes may also cause reactivity to some self-report measures (e.g., the AROS: Campón & Carter, 2015). In addition, exposure to subliminal primes has been found to increase negative racial attitudes in previous studies (e.g., Howard & Sommers, 2017; Johnson, Rotwatt, & LaBouff, 2010). But the effect of nonsubliminal exposure to such iconography in real-life settings (such as churches and media depictions) remains an important question, one that calls for additional studies using supraliminal priming manipulations.

Conclusion

In Ebony magazine, in the late 1950s, Martin Luther King Jr. had a column called “Advice for Living” in which people asked the civil-rights leader questions spanning a wide array of topics. In one edition, King was asked, “Why did God make Jesus White, when the majority of peoples in the world are non-White?” King replied the following.

The color of Jesus’ skin is of little or no consequence. The significance of Jesus lay, not in His color, but in His unique God-consciousness and His willingness to surrender His will to God’s will. He was the Son of God, not because of His external biological make-up, but because of His internal spiritual commitment. He would have been no more significant if His skin had been black. He is no less significant because His skin was white. (1957, p. 53)

The point that King attempted to make, as do many who are asked a similar form of this question, is that Jesus transcends race and that “the color of Jesus’ skin is of little or no consequence.” However, the work presented here suggests otherwise; the color of Jesus’ skin is of consequence, specifically in that White depictions of Jesus, and presumably other White religious iconography, can lead to an increase in Blacks’ negative attitudes toward their ingroup. The present findings add to our understanding of the complex relationship between religiosity and anti-Black attitudes, while also identifying additional research questions for future exploration.

References


