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1996

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Religion and Racism: An Examination  
of Values and Racial Attitudes

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Abstract

Throughout history, both the oppression and emancipation of racial and ethnic groups have often been conducted under the influence of religion. Contemporary research, often marked by contradictions itself, has also made note of this complex issue. To examine further the association of religious variables with racial attitudes and personal values, data were collected from 752 subjects. The results lent support to the hypothesis that when examining racial attitudes, religious affiliation is a less meaningful variable than the importance of spirituality in the lives of individuals; also, two values historically associated with religion, Humanitarianism and the "Protestant work ethic" were moderately associated with subjects' racial attitudes.

Religion and Racism: An Examination  
of Values and Racial Attitudes

"Some people say the only cure for prejudice is more religion; some say the only cure is to abolish religion" (Allport, 1954, p.444)

Throughout recorded history, prejudice and discrimination have been common social methods for dealing with intergroup differences. Organized religion has sometimes contributed to the perpetuation of intergroup inequality. Conversely, it has also contributed to the abolition of slavery and to the proliferation of international relief programs. Thus, the effect of religion upon interracial relations is neither simple nor unidirectional.

Earlier in this century, researchers investigating the complex association of religion and racism came to the perhaps ironic conclusion that individuals who accept an organized religion were more prejudiced in their racial attitudes than non-religious individuals (i.e., Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). This finding was replicated across several studies (Gorsuch & Aleshire, 1974). Allport (1954) asserted that "the chief reason why religion becomes the focus of prejudice is that it usually stands for more than faith--it is the pivot of the cultural tradition of the group" (p. 446). He pointed out that too often this blending of cultural and religious beliefs has led to the false presumption that cultural values hold the same sacrosanct status as religious doctrines. When this is the case, it becomes fairly easy to distort and abuse religious standards (Davies, 1988), which may then serve as a front for those seeking power at the expense of others. Allport therefore proposed that there are two seemingly incompatible influences of religion upon its members (and their biases) because there are two distinct types of motivation for membership. First, there are members who use religion for their own ends (this can range in magnitude from desires to simply expand social circles to desires for unimpeachable group leadership and wealth), and second, there are those who devoutly seek individual and, ultimately, world peace through spiritual enlightenment.

This dual-membership hypothesis, which later became embodied as the intrinsic/extrinsic paradigm of religiosity, is still the most widely examined theoretical framework in the literature (i.e., Donahue, 1985). However, much of this research has been contradictory or inconclusive, and some of it suggests that an alternative hypothesis is needed. For example, several recent researchers have found no relationship between degree of religious commitment and racial attitudes (Boivin, Darling, & Darling, 1987; Boivin, Donkin, & Darling, 1990; Wells & Daly 1992). However, others have found that strong, but not nominal, religious commitment is associated with lower levels of prejudice (Perkins, 1992; Ponton & Gorsuch, 1988). Still others have achieved mixed results (Herek, 1987; McFarland, 1989). The diversity of research findings throughout the past fifty years has led some to the conclusion that although Allport's hypothesis is generally supported, the relationship between religious variables and racist attitudes depends upon the context investigated (Cygner, Jacobson, & Noel, 1977; Griffin, Gorsuch, & Davis, 1987).

It is interesting to note that researchers not directly investigating religious variables have found that endorsements of humanitarian and egalitarian values correlate negatively with expressions of racism (Katz & Hass, 1988). Furthermore, these same researchers found that endorsements of beliefs associated with the "Protestant work ethic" (beliefs that people must work hard and sacrifice to merit success) are positively correlated with racism. While these results appeal to common sense, they are, in part, contradictory to some of the studies cited above. Although they did not intend a "religious interpretation" of their data, it is a relatively small step to overlay Allport's (1954) hypothesis on these researchers' results. Humanitarian/egalitarian values are characteristic of the majority of religious doctrines worldwide, and more devout followers of these would be expected to endorse such concepts. On the other hand, the "Protestant work ethic" is a cultural, rather than doctrinal derivation, which benefits individuals in power at the expense of those out of power (e.g., "Many

immigrants worked hard to achieve financial success, so why are \_\_\_\_ [insert out-group] so poor [between the lines, read 'lazy', 'ignorant', etc.]?". It therefore seems unlikely that individuals committed to universal fellowship would highly endorse this transformation of Biblical teachings. Thus, the apparent contradiction between Katz and Hass' (1988) study and the findings detailed previously is that religious affiliation often has a negative effect upon racial attitudes *despite the fact* that religious organizations endorse primarily humanitarian doctrines. This complex issue clearly warrants further study.

To shed further light on the relationships of religious affiliation and religiosity with racial attitudes and personal values, each of these were measured in the present study. In an attempt to replicate the results of Katz and Hass (1988), the measures they used for personal values were also used here. Because the vast majority of previous studies have employed predominantly Protestant Christian populations, individuals from various religious affiliations, including non-Christian religions, were included in the study. Also, because the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) did not allow Africans or African Americans to hold Priesthood offices until 1978 and because fundamentalist orientations have been associated with prejudicial attitudes (i.e., Gorsuch & Aleshire, 1974), investigation of a largely LDS population seemed particularly relevant to the issue. The hypotheses which guided the investigation were as follows: 1) Individuals affiliated with a religious organization will report having more prejudicial racial attitudes than atheists or agnostics; 2) The importance of spirituality in the lives of subjects will be more discriminating of racial attitudes than religious affiliation; 3) Endorsement of humanitarian values will correlate positively with racial acceptance and negatively with racist attitudes; and 4) Endorsement of values associated with the "Protestant work ethic" will correlate negatively with racial acceptance and positively with racist attitudes.

## Methods

Sample

Seven hundred fifty-two college students (62% women and 38% men) enrolled in introductory courses in psychology or sociology were recruited for the present study. Subjects were primarily Caucasian (79%) and middle class (mean of 3.38 across four 5-point scales measuring socioeconomic status). As expected, the population was predominantly LDS ( $N = 534$  or 71%), but there were sufficient numbers of agnostics ( $N = 80$ ), non-LDS Christians (Protestants and Catholics;  $N = 67$ ), non-Christians affiliated with an Oriental religion (Buddhists, Taoists, and Confucians;  $N = 42$ ), and atheists ( $N = 29$ ) represented in the total sample to conduct between-group analyses. Because some of the participants did not complete all of the items on the measures used in this study, the analyses that follow were conducted with slightly fewer (13-35) subjects than the total sample.

Instrumentation

All subjects were administered a questionnaire containing the following previously published scales: (a) a revised form of the Social Distance Scale (Bogardus, 1933; Byrnes & Kiger, 1988), on which higher scores indicate greater acceptance of interracial contact; (b) the Modern Racism Scale (McConahay, 1986), on which higher scores are indicative of prejudicial attitudes; and (c) the Humanitarian/Egalitarian and Protestant Ethic Scales (Katz & Hass, 1988), on which higher scores indicate greater endorsement of the value measured. Evidence of adequate validity and reliability for each of these scales has been reported by their respective authors and elsewhere in the scientific literature.

In addition, subjects were asked to rate the importance of spirituality in their lives by indicating whether they felt it was "not at all important", "somewhat important", "important", or "vital" to them. Although there are several problems inherent in using a Likert-type scale to distinguish groups, a straightforward, self-selection procedure seemed desirable. More complex measurement of spirituality has generated its own difficulties (Boivin et al.,

1990). Moreover, because existing metric scales were primarily designed to measure Christian spiritual commitment, they were inappropriate for use in the present study.

### Results

Data collected on the dependent measures indicated that as a group, subjects had moderately positive (accepting) racial attitudes and that they also mildly endorsed humanitarian and, to a lesser degree, "Protestant work ethic" values. All dependent measures had relatively normal distributions, with the exception of the Social Distance Scale (SDS), for which the mode was the highest score possible (that of greatest racial acceptance). Thus, the ceiling effect characterizing the SDS may have unduly affected some of the analyses that follow.

To compare scores on the dependent measures across the five groups of religious affiliation, multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were conducted. Separate analyses for the measures of racial attitudes and the measures of personal values both yielded statistically significant results ( $F = 2.42, p < .015$  and  $F = 8.02, p < .001$ , respectively). To verify the source of the group differences, post-hoc analyses were conducted using univariate analyses and subsequent Tukey-HSD tests. Regarding the measures of racial attitudes, these revealed that the differences across groups on the Modern Racism Scale (MRS) were not statistically significant ( $F = 1.52, p = .195$ ). However, there were statistically significant differences ( $F = 4.08, p < .003$ ) on the SDS, with Christian groups (both LDS and non-LDS) reporting more accepting attitudes than the Oriental non-Christian group. Group scores on both the SDS and MRS are reported in Table 1. For the measures of personal values, post-hoc analyses revealed that statistically significant differences existed on both the Humanitarian/Egalitarian Scale (HES;  $F = 3.11, p < .015$ ) and the Protestant Ethic Scale (PES;  $F = 15.68, p < .001$ ), with LDS Christians endorsing more humanitarian beliefs than Agnostics and more beliefs in the "Protestant work ethic" than both Agnostics and non-LDS Christians.



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Insert Table 1 about here

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Identical analyses were conducted using the importance of spirituality as the independent variable. As above, both MANOVAs with the measures of racial attitudes and personal values yielded statistically significant results ( $F = 5.30, p < .001$  and  $F = 9.33, p < .001$ , respectively). Regarding the measures of racial attitudes, group differences on both the SDS and the MRS were statistically significant ( $F = 8.67, p < .001$  and  $F = 2.64, p < .049$ , respectively). Post-hoc analyses revealed that subjects who indicated that spirituality was a "vital" part of their lives scored higher (more accepting of interracial contact) on the SDS than did subjects who indicated that spirituality was "not at all important", "somewhat important", or "important" in their lives. Similarly, subjects in the "vital" group scored lower (indicating less prejudice) than subjects in the "not at all important" group on the MRS. Group scores on the SDS and MRS are reported in Table 2.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Regarding the measures of personal values, scores on both the HES and PES were statistically significant across groups ( $F = 13.9, p < .001$  and  $F = 8.2, p < .001$ , respectively), with the "vital" group endorsing the values associated with both of these scales more than the other three groups and with the "not at all" group endorsing humanitarian values less than any other group.

To measure the degree of association between the measures of racism (SDS and MRS) and the measures of personal values (HES and PES), Pearson product moment correlations were computed (see Table 3). The overall magnitude

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Insert Table 3 about here

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of these correlations was moderately low, although an observable pattern emerged across groups. In general, the correlations between the SDS and HES were positive, indicating that greater endorsement of humanitarian values was moderately associated with higher levels of interracial comfort. Backing up this finding is the fact that MRS scores, which increased with greater endorsement of prejudicial statements, correlated in a moderately negative pattern with HES scores. However, with the exception of the atheist group, scores on the measure of "Protestant work ethic" beliefs (PES), did not appear to be strongly related to measures of racial attitudes.

#### Discussion

The overall scores of the subjects indicated mildly accepting racial attitudes. However, about 15% of the sample scored as having neutral to rejecting racial attitudes. This finding, coupled with the fact that the measures used in this study are fairly transparent, and thus susceptible to social response biases, lends support to the assertion of several researchers that racial attitudes are not yet in an optimal state in the United States (e.g., McConahay, 1986).

The first hypothesis of the present research, that individuals affiliated with a religious group would score as being more prejudiced than atheist or agnostic subjects, received little empirical support. The two groups consisting of members of Christian denominations had the least prejudicial attitude scores of all the groups, but individuals affiliated with religions originating in the Orient scored as being more prejudiced than all other groups. However, this latter difference in group scores only reached statistical significance with the two Christian groups on the SDS. This particular finding is difficult to explain from a theoretical or empirical standpoint, because no previous studies assessing the racial attitudes of individuals affiliated with Oriental religions were located in the literature. Although individuals of Asian descent were represented in all five religious affiliation groups, the vast majority of the Oriental non-Christian group was comprised of Far-East Asians (Japanese, Koreans, and Taiwanese) temporarily

residing in the U.S. to complete college degrees. Thus, it is probable that the results obtained here were affected by the intermediating variable of culture. Research which more directly addresses religious and cultural differences is clearly warranted, if these results are replicated elsewhere.

In line with the second hypothesis, larger mean differences (higher effect sizes) were found on measures of racial attitudes across the groups of reported spirituality than across religious affiliation. Results of these analyses also lent strong support to the dual membership hypothesis outlined by Allport (1954), in that only the "vital" group differed statistically, in a positive way (more racially accepting and more endorsing of humanitarian values), from the other groups.

Consistent with the third hypothesis and with research conducted by Katz and Hass (1988), endorsements of humanitarian/egalitarian values correlated positively with racial acceptance (SDS) and negatively with racist attitudes (MRS). However, it is important to note that the magnitude of these correlations was moderate to low, varying substantially across religious affiliations.

Inconsistent with the fourth hypothesis and with research conducted by Katz and Hass (1988), endorsement of values associated with the "Protestant work ethic" were not significantly correlated with measures of racial attitudes for the total sample. Inspection of Table 3 reveals that although the PES was always correlated in the expected direction with the MRS, this was not the case with the SDS for the LDS Christian group. Unfortunately, it is unclear as to why this group's endorsements of the "Protestant work ethic" were not associated with the SDS in the hypothesized direction. The fact that the LDS Christian group comprised the majority of the sample population explains the similar coefficients achieved with the total sample. However, it is of note that the magnitude of the correlations between the PES and measures of racial attitudes across groups were generally low, only reaching moderate proportions with the atheist group. Although this finding is tentative at

best, it may suggest that the PES is of more utility with non-religious populations.

Although not related to one of the original four hypotheses, an interesting aspect of the data collected here was that a high percentage (approximately 54%) of the respondents indicated that spirituality was a "vital" part of their lives. Wells and Daly (1992) reported that only 13% of their subjects considered themselves strongly religious. One reason for this difference may be semantic: perhaps individuals who are not strongly affiliated with a church (non-orthodoxy) endorse the word "spiritual" more than "religious" because of the institutional overtones associated with the latter. The most apparent reason, however, for the usually large endorsement of spiritual inclination is that the majority of subjects in this study were affiliated with the LDS Church, and a full two-thirds of this group, by far the greatest percentage of any other, indicated that spirituality was "vital" in their lives. Although it is unclear why such a large proportion of LDS Christians would endorse this category, some possible reasons include a tightly knit social structure and a strong emphasis upon spiritual well-being.

The overall pattern of scores across groups on the measures of personal values was also revealing. For reasons open to speculation, LDS Christians scored the highest on both the Humanitarian/Egalitarian Scale and the Protestant Ethic Scale, indicating greater concomitant acceptance of two often incompatible ideas, and agnostics scored the lowest of all groups on both scales, indicating less acceptance of either of these two values.

There are several limitations inherent in the present research which should be mentioned and improved upon in future (replicative) research. The most notable of these is the uneven distribution of the sample population across religious affiliation. Samples drawn from different regions of the U.S. would most likely be more demographically representative than the present one, although it should be kept in mind that investigation of a LDS sample seemed especially pertinent to the hypotheses of the present research. A second limitation was that the population was comprised of college student

volunteers. Although this sampling procedure reduced the potential confound of education level, it also reduced the amount of variance which may have been added had a more diverse population been used. Also, because college students may be in a transition period regarding their philosophical worldviews, their religious commitment (and non-commitment) may not be as solidified as that of a more mature adult population. Finally, the self-selection of subjects into one of four categories of spirituality was, by any standards, artificial, but again, setting imposed cut-offs on an integer metric scale may not have been any less so. The need for more reliable and valid measures of spiritual commitment has already been cited (Boivin et al., 1990).

Taken as a whole, the results presented here suggest that although the relationships between religious variables and racial attitudes are complex, they are still amenable to common sense -- and to theory. Allport's (1954) hypothesis was partially supported by the data presented here. The length of time since its publication may indicate that theory has not kept pace with the data of disconfirmatory studies, but a likely alternative is that the theory may not yet be adequately or equivalently operationalized across studies. While a consensus as to the operational definition of spiritual commitment may not be easily reached, it is clear with at least with one aspect of human relations that spirituality warrants more attention in the research literature.

The other aspect of this study that should spur further research was the relationship of two common personal values with racial attitudes and spirituality. That individuals who have a high regard for spirituality should endorse humanitarian values may well have been expected, but their seemingly paradoxical high acceptance of the "Protestant work ethic" warrants additional insight. Because there are a myriad of other personal values associated with religious doctrines, numerous investigations regarding racial and ethnic issues could be generated, without necessarily presenting them to subjects in a religious context. The refinement of theory can only be accelerated by such explorations.

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Table 1

Religious affiliation group means and standard deviations on measures of racial attitudes

Group / Measure*	<u>N</u>	Mean	<u>SD</u>
<b>Atheists</b>			
SDS	29	102.8	32.1
MRS	29	15.4	5.4
<b>Agnostics</b>			
SDS	74	103.4	24.2
MRS	80	16.2	4.9
<b>Non-LDS Christians</b>			
SDS	65	112.2	24.5
MRS	67	16.4	6.3
<b>LDS Christians</b>			
SDS	518	110.0	21.9
MRS	521	16.1	4.5
<b>Oriental Non-Christians</b>			
SDS	41	99.7	23.8
MRS	42	17.9	4.4

\*Higher scores indicate greater racial acceptance on the SDS and greater prejudice on the MRS.



Table 2

Importance of spirituality group means and standard deviations on measures of racial attitudes.

Group/Measure*	<u>N</u>	Mean	<u>SD</u>
<b>"Not at all Important"</b>			
SDS	22	95.0	28.7
MRS	23	18.2	7.0
<b>"Somewhat Important"</b>			
SDS	116	103.9	23.7
MRS	119	15.8	5.3
<b>"Important"</b>			
SDS	190	105.1	23.0
MRS	197	16.7	4.5
<b>"Vital"</b>			
SDS	397	112.5	21.9
MRS	398	15.9	4.5

\*Higher scores indicate greater racial acceptance on the SDS and greater prejudice on the MRS.

Table 3

Correlations between measures of racial attitudes and measures of personal values.

Variables	Religious Preference									
	LDS Christian		non-LDS Christian		Oriental non- Christian		Agnostic		Atheist	
	SDS	MRS	SDS	MRS	SDS	MRS	SDS	MRS	SDS	MRS
HES	.26**	-.34**	.10	-.32*	.41*	-.04	.21	-.18	.14	-.14
PES	.04	.08	-.03	.11	-.14	.13	-.13	.18	-.28	.31

NOTE: \* =  $p < .01$ , \*\* =  $p < .001$