Religion and Race

10

Race, Ethnicity, and Religious Identification
Racial Segregation in Congregations
Explaining Congregational Racial Segregation
Religion, Racial Prejudice, and Racism as a Worldview

Racism as a Worldview
Sources of Racism in Christianity
Meaning Factors
Belonging Factors
Institutional Factors
Social Conflict and Religious Expression: The Conflict Perspective
Summary

Here are some questions to ponder as you read this chapter

- How is religion connected to race and ethnicity?
- Why is there so much racial segregation in congregations?
- What is the relationship between religious conviction and racial prejudice? Is religious commitment contrary to ethnic or racial bigotry?
- How might meaning systems, belonging systems, and institutional systems of a religious community contribute to racism in different ways?
- How might religion foster prejudice at the same time it combats it?
- Does religion cause bigotry or merely justify social inequality and discrimination after the fact?
Writing in *The Souls of Black Folks* at the beginning of the 20th century, the pioneering sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois asserted, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” (Du Bois 1903:283). Over a century later, much has changed in American society. Racial minorities have increased their standing in almost every aspect of life, aided considerably by the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s (many of which were led by religious leaders as we will see in Chapter 13). For some, this racial progress culminated in 2008 when Barack Obama was elected president of the United States, though racial tensions are still evident as of this writing with nationwide protests surrounding the police killings of black men in Ferguson, Missouri, and Staten Island, New York.

Despite some progress, racial inequality persists. For example, African Americans overall still have lower levels of educational attainment than whites (more without a high school degree, fewer with college and professional degrees), as can be seen in Table 10.1 (page 250). They also continue to earn significantly less than whites, even if they have the same level of education. Further, at each higher level of education, the ratio of white to black income increases, from 1.08 for those without a high school degree to 1.25 for those with a professional degree. Consequently, whites are not only twice as likely to earn professional degrees as blacks (1.4% vs. 0.7%), but they also earn 25% more income when they do.

This economic inequality has a religious dimension. As we saw in the last chapter, denominations with a high proportion of African American members are lower on the socioeconomic hierarchy than historically white denominations. Indeed, the very fact that we can talk about black and white denominations suggests the reality (or at least legacy) of religious racial segregation. Civil rights leader (and sociology major) Martin Luther King Jr. wrote,

> It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning, the same hour when many are standing to sing, “In Christ there is no East or West.” Equally appalling is the fact that the most segregated school of the week is the Sunday School. (King 2010:207)

King then went on to quote Liston Pope, who lamented, “The church is the most segregated major institution in American society” (King 2010:207; Pope 1957).

In this chapter, we ask and answer the question, is the same true today? If so, what accounts for that religious racial segregation? Further, what is being done to overcome it?
Race, Ethnicity, and Religious Identification

A key starting point here is to look at religious self-identification by members of different racial and ethnic groups.\(^1\) We use data from the Pew Research Center Forum on Religion and Public Life’s U.S. Religious Landscape Survey to examine this issue. These data highlight the considerable differences in religious identification by race and how those differences are reflected in denominational racial composition (Pew Research Center Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008b). For example, Table 10.2 shows that more than three quarters (78%) of blacks are Protestant (including evangelical, mainline, and historically black churches), compared to just over half of whites (53%) and about a quarter of Asians (27%) and Latinos (23%). Of all Americans, 24% are Catholic, but 58% of all Latinos are Catholic, compared with 22% of whites and only 5% of blacks.

Looked at from the perspective of religious traditions in Table 10.3 on page 252, we see large concentrations of whites in Judaism, mainline Protestantism, Orthodoxy, Mormonism, and evangelical Protestantism. In addition to the historically black churches, African Americans are also overrepresented among Jehovah’s Witnesses and Muslims, and Asians are dramatically concentrated in the Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Latinos are overrepresented among Catholics and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Looked at either way, there continues to be a strong correlation between race/ethnicity and religion in American society.

\(^1\)Race refers to a supposed biological difference that distinguishes a group, and although there is no scientific concept of race, it remains a social distinction because people treat certain physical differences as though they matter. An ethnic group is a group with a cultural difference—variations in language, symbols, norms, values, and beliefs.
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Critical Thinking: What additional pattern do you see in Tables 10.2 and 10.3 that might be relevant to understanding race, ethnicity, and religion?

These cross-sectional data do not reveal changes in religious affiliation by race or ethnicity over time, but using other research strategies, scholars have suggested that despite considerable stability in African American religious identification there has been some loosening of the connection between African Americans and specific denominational affiliations. For example, the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) found a decrease from 50% to 45% in African Americans identifying themselves as Baptist, from 12% to 7% in those identifying with the “Mainline Protestant” tradition, and

### Table 10.2 Religious Identification by Racial Group—Reported in Percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Tradition</th>
<th>U.S. Population</th>
<th>White (%)</th>
<th>Black (%)</th>
<th>Asian (%)</th>
<th>Other/Mixed (%)</th>
<th>Latino (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Protestant</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historically Black Churches</td>
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<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular Unaffiliated</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Unaffiliated</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah’s Witness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Faiths</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other World Religions</td>
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<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Christian</td>
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<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


NOTES: Due to rounding, figures may not add up to 100%.

We added the bold font for emphasis to key numbers.
Table 10.3 Racial Composition of Religious Traditions—Reported in Percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Other/Mixed</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Population</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Protestant</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Faiths</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular Unaffiliated</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Christian</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Unaffiliated</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah's Witness</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historically Black Churches</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


from 9% to 6% in those seeing themselves as Catholic. These declines were offset by gains in the “Generic Christian” category from 9% to 15%, and in the “none” category from 6% to 11% (Kosmin and Keysar 2009). This is not to say that African Americans are becoming less religious, because even among “nones,” African Americans affirm religious convictions. The Pew Research Center Forum on Religion and Public Life’s (2008b) U.S. Religious Landscape Survey found that 71% of African American “nones” report that religion is very important or somewhat important in their lives, compared to only 41% of all “nones.” Thus, most African American
nones are what the Pew Research Center Forum on Religion and Public Life (2009) would call “religious unaffiliated.”

Latinos in the United States are increasingly drawn away from Roman Catholicism and toward evangelical Protestantism. Of Hispanic evangelicals, 51% are converts, and of that group, more than 80% are former Catholics (Pew Research Center Forum on Religion and Public Life 2007a). This mirrors a worldwide trend, one that is especially prominent in the historically Catholic countries of South America (Martin 1993; Stoll 1990).

In Chapter 9, we noted that looking at socio-economic differences at the denominational level obscures the higher levels of inequality at the local congregational level. The same is true for racial differences. The level of racial segregation we see at the level of denominational identification is even more pronounced in terms of congregational membership.

Racial Segregation in Congregations

The leading scholar investigating congregational segregation is Michael Emerson. In a series of studies, books, and articles, Emerson has documented the persisting religious racial segregation in American society (Christerson, Edwards, and Emerson 2005; DeYoung et al. 2003; Emerson 2006; Emerson and Smith 2000). Emerson and his colleagues operationalized racially segregated congregations in two different ways: binary and continuous.

First, they operationalized racially segregated congregations in a binary (either/or) fashion. Those in which 80% or more of the members are of the same race are considered segregated (or homogenous), and those in which less than 80% are of the same race are considered multiracial (racially mixed) (Emerson 2006). This percentage is not arbitrary but is based on studies of organizations which find that 20% is a sort of tipping point from tokenism to having enough of a critical mass to make a difference in the organization. It is also based on a mathematical reality that in an organization with at least 20% diversity, under random conditions the probability of interracial relationships is 99% (Emerson 2006; Edwards, Christerson, and Emerson 2013).

Using data from a nationally representative sample of American congregations, they found that 93% are racially homogenous by this definition. Only 7% are multiracial. What about even more extreme cases of racial segregations? Emerson and Kim also found that 9 out of 10 American congregations have 90% of their members coming from one racial group, and roughly 4 out of 5 congregations have 95% of their membership from a single racial group (Emerson and Kim 2003).

Second, they examined racially segregated congregations in a continuous fashion by looking at the likelihood that any two randomly selected members of the congregation will be from different racial groups (Emerson 2006). The method is called continuous because there is no single point at which we can say “this is a segregated congregation, and that is not.” Instead, we get a continuous string of probabilities called a “heterogeneity index,” which ranges from 0.0 (complete homogeneity) to 1.0 (complete heterogeneity). Put concretely, if a congregation has 50% of its members from one racial group and 50% from another, then the probability that any two randomly selected members will be of different racial groups is 0.5. The more diverse a congregation is, the higher the probability will be, and the less diverse the lower the likelihood. So, if there are four racial groups, each constituting a quarter of the membership, then the probability will be 0.75.

How do congregations fare in terms of this heterogeneity index? Not well. The average probability of randomly selecting two members of a congregation from different races is just 0.02—a 2% chance. This makes congregations far more segregated than even schools or neighborhoods. The heterogeneity index for schools in the United States is 0.40 and for neighborhoods is 0.20. Thus, Emerson, Mirola, and Monahan
PART V Religion and Social Inequality

concluded, “religious congregations are 10 times less diverse than the neighborhoods in which they reside and 20 times less diverse than the nation’s schools” (Emerson et al. 2011:161).

Recent data from the third wave of the National Congregations Study (NCS) reveal some improvement in the direction of more racial diversity in congregations. As Figure 10.1 shows, the percentage of Americans who attend congregations that are racially mixed (defined by Emerson’s 80% rule) grew from 15.3% in 1998 to 19.7% in 2012. This same figure also shows that the percentage of individuals who attend all-white congregations dropped by nearly half from 19.7% to 11.0%. Even within those congregations that are more than 80% white, there has been movement toward greater diversity (even if they are not yet considered “multiracial”). Of attendees, 69% are in congregations with at least some blacks (up from 57.4% in 1998), 61.7% with at least some Hispanics (up from 54.2%), and 48% with at least some Asians (up from 41.4%) (Chaves and Anderson 2014).

It must be said, however, that the movement toward multiracial congregations is almost always a one-way street with racial minorities

Figure 10.1 Increasing Ethnic Diversity of Religious Congregations in the United States

![Figure 10.1](chart.png)


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having to assimilate into the dominant majority culture. Korie Edwards’s research, which combines ethnographic observation of a multiracial congregation and quantitative analysis of NCS data, finds that multiracial congregations look much more like predominantly white congregations in terms of activities and practices (Edwards 2008). Thus, we should not mistake “multiracial” for “multicultural.” Becoming multiracial often means “Anglo-conformity.”

Even recognizing these limitations, these changes did not take place without some concerted efforts. Scholars studying this issue would no more claim American religion to be racially integrated than they would American society in general (Edwards et al. 2013). The bottom line of Emerson’s studies is that no matter how you operationalize congregational racial segregation, Martin Luther King’s and Liston Pope’s observations about religion being the most racially segregated institution in American society (and religious education the most segregated schooling) are just as true today as they were 50-plus years ago.

EXPLAINING CONGREGATIONAL RACIAL SEGREGATION

As with racial segregation in society generally, explaining religious racial segregation is challenging in its complexity. We briefly highlight several explanations for congregational homogeneity and for movements in the direction of greater congregational diversity, and then turn to a more extended consideration of the relationship between religion and racism.

In the first place, individuals often choose to associate with people like themselves. As the saying goes, birds of a feather flock together. This is known as “homophily” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). As noted in Chapter 9, this often takes place along social class lines, but it happens all the more so along racial lines. However, as sociological investigation has discovered, flocking together is not always a completely voluntary choice. Racial segregation in congregations, then, is a classic example of the mix of choice and constraint. As Karl Marx said, “[People] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past” (Marx [1852] 2008:15). This fundamental sociological insight is highly applicable to this issue. The “black church” in the United States is a case in point, as we will see more fully in Chapter 12. It is an integral part of the black community in the United States, valued by its members and chosen by many of them. Still, the emergence of the black church is rooted in slavery and racial discrimination in the 19th century, not simply preference by blacks to be around people like themselves. Indeed, some have called the black church a “semi-involuntary institution” for this reason (Nelsen, Yokley, and Nelsen 1971).

Immigrant groups have also often chosen to form and maintain segregated religious congregations when faced with language barriers and other forms of social exclusion (recall Chapter 3). Historically, many Lutheran, Methodist, and Catholic congregations in the United States conducted worship services in German, Welsh, and Italian, and going to worship was a comfortable reminder of the home country. This pattern is also evident today in the vast number of Asian immigrant religious communities across the country, such as First Chinese Baptist Church (Walnut, California), Korean-American Calvary Baptist Church (Seattle, Washington), and Chinese American Family Bible Church (Virginia Beach, Virginia). Incredibly, in Columbus, a midsize city of 250,000 people in southwestern Georgia, there are four separate Korean Protestant congregations, including two Presbyterian congregations: the Korean Full Gospel Church, Korean Presbyterian Church, Hallelujah Korean Presbyterian, and Korean Peace Baptist Church. Like the African American church, these Asian
ethnic congregations also exemplify the principle of choice under constraint.

Whereas many Asians in the United States become Christian upon their immigration, other immigrants bring their religion with them (Yang 1999). For some of these groups, it is impossible to separate their racial/ethnic identity from their religious identity. This is the case for Hindus from India. Consequently, peering into a Hindu temple in the United States today one is likely to find mostly individuals of Indian descent (Emerson and Kim 2003).

Uniracial congregations are not only created but also perpetuated by people’s homophilous social networks. Since we already know that most people are recruited into religious groups through family and friendship networks (Chapter 6), and because family and friendship connections tend to be racially homophilous, recruitment into religious groups will also be racially homophilous.

How, then, do we explain the change over the past two decades in the direction of greater diversity in congregations? First, individuals who tend to have racially heterogeneous friendship networks or who live in racially diverse neighborhoods will be more likely to attend racially diverse congregations. This can be a sort of catch-22, however, because the most common way people meet their diverse friends is in church (Emerson 2006).

In the same way that demographic imperatives help create racially segregated congregations, they can also contribute to the movement toward multiracial ones. Non-European immigration has diversified American society as a whole in the past half-century, and this becomes reflected in all institutions over time. Edwards and her colleagues observe that from 1970 to 2010, the Latino population in the United States grew from 6.4% to 16.3%, and the Asian population grew from less than 1% to nearly 5% (Edwards et al. 2013). Although they often initially migrate to ethnic enclaves, over time as they become more assimilated into the population they also can find their way into white congregations, helping them to become more diverse.

Marriage across racial lines has also increased considerably in recent years. In 1980, 3.2% of all marriages and 6.7% of new marriages were interracial. By 2010, 8.4% of all marriages and 15.1% of new marriages were interracial (Wang 2012). To the extent that married couples worship together—and as we discussed in Chapter 6, they do very often—this will also make religious congregations more diverse.

These explanations for racial homogeneity apply to congregations from all religious traditions, so the processes that underlie them are not unique to any one faith tradition. On the other hand, racial homogeneity in congregations is not equally distributed across religious traditions. According to Emerson, Catholic parishes are three times more likely to be multiracial than Protestant congregations (15% vs. 5%). This is due both to the geographical reach and very large size of most Catholic parishes and to a cultural embrace of diversity (Emerson 2006).

Because of this, Catholic parishes are also most likely to be multicultural. A recent study has identified over 6,000 Catholic parishes (35.9% of all U.S. parishes) that serve a particular racial, ethnic, cultural, or linguistic community (Gray, Gauthier, and Gaunt 2014). Of Catholic parishes, 29% celebrate at least one Mass per month in a language other than English, and 4% celebrate Masses in two or more non-English languages (Gray et al. 2014). In the Archdiocese of Chicago, Masses are celebrated in English, Spanish, Polish, and 46 other languages including Tagalog (for Filipinos), Vietnamese, and Haitian French Creole. Of course, the majority of multicultural Catholic parishes (69% nationally) serve Hispanic or Latino Catholics. To take one example that is close to home for one of your authors, Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, is home to a large community of Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants. Each Sunday, Masses are said in English and
Spanish, and the two-year process of confirmation puts white and Mexican American/Mexican immigrant adolescents together in the same experience. During the Mass at which they receive the sacrament of confirmation, the instructions, prayers, readings, and songs are in both English and Spanish.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that so few Protestant congregations are multiracial, the most conscious efforts to become more diverse are seen among these churches. Beginning in the 1990s and accelerating in the first decades of the 21st century, efforts have included books, Facebook pages, blogs, Twitter accounts, organizations, and conferences, all “explicitly committed ... to the imperative of diversity, further encouraging pastors and congregations to actualize successful integration” (Edwards et al. 2013:216). Many congregations are attempting to focus on changing the type of music they play to attract more diverse attendees. The next “Doing Research on Religion” box explores the connection between worship music and multiracial congregations and finds the relationship may not be what it seems.

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**DOING RESEARCH ON RELIGION**

**Worship Across the Racial Divide**

Some believe that the lack of multiracial congregations has to do with the preferred styles of worship in various racial communities, especially tastes for different kinds of music. If worship music were more diverse, so too would be the worshippers. Sociologist Gerardo Marti set out to investigate this question: What role does music diversity play in making congregations more inviting to people of different backgrounds? For example, if a white congregation wants to be more inviting to African American congregants, should it play more Gospel music or African American spirituals? If a congregation wants to attract more congregants of Mexican descent, should it play more Latin music? What if it wants to attract more Asian or South Asian or African congregants?

In *Worship Across the Racial Divide: Religious Music and the Multiracial Congregation*, Marti reports on his study of 12 racially integrated congregations in Southern California. *Racially integrated* here is understood in the common way (all of the congregations have at least 20% of the members coming from a different racial group than the majority), and the congregations in the study come from a range of different denominational and theological traditions. Marti’s conclusions are based on two years of ethnographic observation and over 100 interviews with church leaders, musicians, and worship leaders.

Marti’s basic finding is that music does matter in multiracial congregations, but not necessarily in the way most people think it will. Playing distinct genres of music for diverse groups can actually reinforce boundaries rather than breaking them down. It can become a sort of tokenism that highlights differences rather than transcending them. For example, an otherwise white congregation putting “Go Tell It On the Mountain” or another African American spiritual into their rotation of hymns is not going to attract more African Americans just by doing that.

(Continued)
Insofar as racial or ethnic segregation of religious groups is related to we/they categories and thinking, there are important issues raised about the role of religion in transcending or fostering racism. This brings us to a robust body of research on the relationship between religion and racism.

Critical Thinking: What seems to you to be the most important factors in racial and ethnic segregation? What empirical data or studies support your position? What data or research provides the greatest challenge to your position? What might be some consequences of this segregation for the larger society?

Religion, Racial Prejudice, and Racism as a Worldview

Religion and Prejudice

In the 1950s, empirical studies showed that religiously affiliated people were more racially prejudiced than nonmembers. Despite the fact that Christianity claimed to enhance fellowship and love among people, the research indicated a correlation between Christianity and bigotry. In the 1960s, several survey studies that were better designed revealed that although church members were more prejudiced than nonmembers, the most active members were less prejudiced than any other group. The earlier studies had lumped together all members without regard to level of commitment or amount of participation in the life of the religious community. Because there are larger numbers of marginal members in most religious groups than there are active members, the statistics were weighted heavily in the direction of marginal member attitudes. The evidence indicates that infrequent attenders are more prejudiced than nonattenders but that frequent attenders are the lowest of all on scales of prejudice (Allport 1966; Gorsuch and Aleshire 1974; Perkins 1983, 1985). A cross-national study that compared prejudice in 11 European countries also found that adherence to the doctrinal
beliefs of the Christian church was related to low levels of prejudice (Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Hello 2002).

The relationship between religion and racial prejudice is complex, with studies finding that type of theological orientation and other factors play a role in racial and ethnic attitudes. In the remainder of this chapter, we explore the possibility that religion may simultaneously contribute both to tolerance and to bigotry.

Critical Thinking: Why did the figures on the relationship between religion and racial prejudice change when more complex measures of religious commitment were introduced?

RACISM AS A WORLDVIEW

The belief that some categories of human beings are biologically or genetically less human than others is actually a modern phenomenon (Jordan 1968; Kelsey 1965; Mosse 1985). Of course, people throughout history have believed that those who had different values, beliefs, or styles of life were stupid or inferior. Ethnocentrism (prejudice based on differences in cultures) is a universal phenomenon. One can also find occasions in history when “outsiders” have been excluded because they were not of the same lineage. The articulation of a systematic philosophical and “scientific” statement that divides humans into higher and lower orders of being, however, has been given credence only since the 18th century (Jordan 1968; Mosse 1985). George Kelsey did an incisive analysis of the modern racist worldview and its fundamental difference from the basic worldview of Christianity (Kelsey 1965).

The important characteristic of racism is that a person’s inherent worth is judged on the basis of his or her genes. The philosophical foundations of racism are naturalistic. For the racists, a person’s value is understood in terms of that which is below themselves—their animal nature and, specifically, their genes. The quality of a person’s life is determined by ancestry and genetic structure. Persons who are racist feel superior to or of greater worth than someone who has a “less human” genetic structure (different skin color, hair color, facial features, etc.). In other words, their sense of worth is centered on their genes (Kelsey 1965).

H. Richard Niebuhr, who uses a broad definition of religion, points out that faith focuses on that which makes our life worth living. He insists that whatever provides one with a sense of worth and meaning is properly termed one’s “god” (Niebuhr 1960). Elsewhere, he talked of faith as “trust in that which gives value to the self” (Niebuhr 1960:16). In fact, the term worship refers to a celebration of the center of worth or the center of all other values. Literally, the word worship means a state or condition of worth. Kelsey cited Niebuhr’s definition of faith and went on to explain how racism serves as a faith worldview:

The racist relies on race as the source of his [or her] personal value. . . . Life has meaning and worth because it is part of the racial context. It fits into and merges with a valuable whole, the race. As the value-center, the race is the source of value, and it is at the same time the object of value. (Kelsey 1965:27)

Kelsey contrasts this with the worldview of Christian theology. The source of personal worth for the Christian is found not in one’s biological nature but in one’s relationship with God. In this sense, Christian theology has allowed for only one distinction between persons: that between the regenerate and the unregenerate. The means of saving or improving human life is not through biological controls but through divine grace. Humans have worth because of their relationship with that which transcends them, not because of something they inherit through their genes. By contrast, racism assumes some segments of humanity to be defective in their essential being and thereby incapable of full regeneration (Kelsey 1965). The assumed defect is not one of
character or spirit but a defect of creation: Biologically, some people are less human.

Of course, many persons in American society are racist and still consider themselves Christian. Kelsey suggested that such persons are, in fact, polytheists; they worship more than one god. The question is which center of worth predominates in any given situation? Such persons do not have a single worldview that gives unity, coherence, and meaning to life. Most of them are unaware of and unconcerned with theological contradictions in their outlook or the fact that they are actually polytheists.

The official position of all major denominations in the United States is that Christianity and racism are mutually exclusive. Racism is viewed as a form of idolatry (worship of a false god) that is utterly incompatible with Christian theology. The line of argument generally follows the same pattern Kelsey outlined. Yet, despite the fact that racism and Christianity involve assumptions that are logically contradictory and incompatible, the two ideologies have historically existed together and have even been intertwined. Let us investigate some of the ways that Christendom may have unconsciously contributed to racist thinking and actions.

Critical Thinking: George Kelsey argued that racism is a religion and that many Americans are polytheists—having more than one “center of worth” that makes them feel valuable and that guides their evaluations of others. Does his argument have merit? What is your rationale for your judgment?

Sources of Racism in Christianity

Christianity may have unwittingly contributed to racism through its meaning system, its reference group influences (belonging factors), or its organizational strategies (institutional factors). In the following pages, we explore how each of these types of factors may be conducive to the formation and/or the persistence of racism.

Meaning Factors

We will explore four meaning factors in Christianity that may have affected the development and persistence of racism, but first it is necessary to make a distinction between types of racism. In his psychohistory of white racism, Joel Kovel identifies two types of racist thinking. Dominative racism is the desire by some people to dominate or control members of another group. It is usually expressed in attempts to subjugate members of the out-group (Kovel 1970). This is the sort of racism that historically was predominant in the southern United States. White slave owners, for example, would live and work in close proximity to African Americans, even assigning black women to breast-feed and care for their children. White men also visited slave row for sexual purposes. Whites did not mind associating with blacks on a daily basis and having contact with them—as long as blacks knew their place! African Americans were not to get “uppity” or self-assertive.

This sort of racism is quite different from the racism of the North, where the racism was of the aversive variety. Aversive racism is expressed in the desire to avoid contact with African Americans rather than the desire to subjugate them. In fact, northerners have often been quite moralistic about the dominative racism of the South, while they were systematically restricting blacks to isolated neighborhoods and ghettos. Part of the reason that school desegregation has been more difficult in the North than in the South is that aversive racism has resulted in more isolated housing patterns. Therefore, desegregation has required a more significant cost. Meanwhile, with the decline of dominative racism in the United States in recent decades, other expressions of racism have been on the rise (Bonilla-Silva 2009; Farley 2010; Yancey 1999).
Most measures of racism have not controlled for these two types of racism, but those studies that have made the distinction have found aversive racism even where people reject more blatant dominative racism (Gaertner and Dovidio 1986; Yancey 1999). Today, few Americans think it is acceptable to discriminate against a person on the job because of the color of her or his skin. Yet although survey data point to growing acceptance of the principle of interracial dating and marriage (Newport 2013), only 26.4% of whites in the 2012 General Social Survey said they would favor a close relative marrying a black person (Djamba and Kimuna 2014). The only study on religion and racial prejudice that controlled for aversive types of racism found lower levels of aversive prejudice among people who attend interracial congregations (Yancey 1999). Unfortunately, as we have already seen, that is a very small percentage of the faith communities in North America.

**Moral Perfection and Color Symbolism**

The distinction between dominative and aversive racism is significant because Christian groups may at times contribute to aversive racism even while it fights against dominative racism. Gayraud Wilmore has suggested that certain strains of Protestant theology have placed heavy emphasis on the moral purity and perfection of the “saved.” The desire for moral purity was especially strong among New England Puritans and later among the Perfectionists. An important aspect of this Puritanism was the desire to avoid contact with anything that was evil or could be polluting.

Wilmore related this to the cultural symbolism of European and American society. Perhaps this is most vividly seen in the color symbolism of the European languages, which is especially noticeable in English (Wilmore 1972). For example, prior to the 16th century, the definition of black, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, included the following:

Deeply stained with dirt; soiled, dirty; foul. . . .

Having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister. . . .

Foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horrible, wicked. . . .

Indicating disgrace, censure, liability to punishment, etc.

In discussing this phenomenon, historian Winthrop Jordan went on to say, “Black was an emotionally partisan color, the handmaid and symbol of baseness and evil, a sign of danger and repulsion. Embedded in the concept of blackness was its opposite—whiteness. . . .” White and black connoted purity and filthiness, virginity and sin, virtue and baseness, beauty and ugliness, beneficence and evil, God and the devil” (Jordan 1968:7). Even much of the artwork of this period showed the Devil as dark-skinned and the saintly figures as white. This color symbolism cannot be traced particularly to Christian teachings, but Christian responses to persons with dark skin may have been influenced by this symbolic association. Use of language in shaping attitudes may be especially important in the case of children (Van Ausdale and Feagin 1996).

Interestingly, there is empirical evidence supporting this claim of color symbolism. Athletic teams that wear black uniforms have more penalties called on them than teams with lighter-colored uniforms (Frank and Gilovich 1988; Lidwell 2013). No one argues that this is a conscious process—in sports or in religion—but the association of blackness with something sinister (an association that does not occur in all languages or cultures) may have affected the way religious people perceived people with dark skin.

Wilmore argued that areas of the United States that have been especially strongly influenced by Puritanism and Perfectionism are more likely than other areas to have strong aversive racism. Ownership of slaves was often condemned by these groups because it might compromise the moral righteousness of the owner—and moral purity was essential to these
pietists. However, many of these same pietists did not want to have to associate with these dark-skinned people. Although the source of the feelings was probably only partially conscious to the individuals, they often felt that blacks were unclean—in body and in soul. They simply wished to avoid contact. Dominative racism was condemned; aversive racism was not.

Jordan showed that, among some of the religious groups that opposed slavery, the opposition was based largely on concern for how slaveholding might corrupt the soul of the owner. In this case, the ultimate goal is the purity and righteousness of the dominant group member more than concern for minority group members who were suffering (Jordan 1968). For example, one of the primary reasons for the abolitionism of Quaker John Woolman in the mid-1700s was that slaveholding created a feeling of superiority and pride in the owners. Pride—considered the most heinous of sins—was a source of evil. Slavery was bad for the slave owners, and by 1776, the Society of Friends was excommunicating any Quaker who owned slaves (Jordan 1968).

The Quakers were more effective than most groups at setting up programs to educate African Americans and to provide them with resources for economic independence. Their stance against dominative racism was unparalleled among religious groups. Yet, Quaker pietism may have created an unconscious aversive form of racism among some members of this group, which sought purity above all else (Jordan 1968).

The Protestant emphasis on moral purity or perfection is perhaps the most important unwitting contributor to the formation of racist attitudes among American Christians. However, this doctrinal emphasis contributed primarily to just one type of racism and only in the context of certain other cultural attitudes and structural circumstances. Pietism in the modern United States may not have the same effect. There are other aspects of Christian thought, however, that may contribute to the persistence of racism in American society.

Critical Thinking: Wilmore argued that when color symbolism of European languages combined with puritanical pietism, the result was aversive racism. What is most and least convincing about this argument? How would a conflict theorist critique this argument?
Freewill Individualism and Failure to Recognize Institutional Discrimination

Rodney Stark and Charles Glock, among others, have pointed to the importance of the Christian emphasis on free will and a radial individualism before God. The doctrines of sin and salvation are based on the assumption that humans are free and responsible beings. After all, if a person was entirely predetermined in his or her behavior, one could not hold him or her responsible or guilty for an act. Guilt implies freedom of choice, with the wrong choice having been made by an individual. One implication of this view is that each individual is viewed as getting his or her just deserts in society because one’s circumstances are considered a result of personal choices, lifestyle, and willingness to work hard. Stark and Glock put it this way:

Christian thought and thus Western civilization are permeated with the idea that [people] are individually in control of, and responsible for, their own destinies. If I am really the “captain of my soul” and “the master of my fate,” then I have no one but myself to thank or blame for what happens to me. (Stark and Glock 1969:81)

This doctrine is significant in race relations because some Christians put the blame for disadvantage on those who are disadvantaged. Although there is no evidence that the doctrine of freewill individualism contributes to the formation of prejudicial attitudes, it may disincline those who are affluent to help those who have been subjected to poverty and discrimination (Stark and Glock 1969). The doctrine reinforces the attitude that those who are down and out are probably getting what they deserve. Persons who hold such a view are not likely to want to change the institutional structures of society that systematically discriminate. In fact, they are not likely to recognize the existence of institutional discrimination at all. Institutional discrimination refers to policies that discriminate against members of a particular group, even if those enacting the policies are not themselves prejudiced (Bonilla-Silva 2009; Merton 1949). Frequently, such policies are not intentionally directed against members of a particular group, but because members of that group are disproportionately represented in a certain socioeconomic position, they are disproportionately affected.

One example of intentional institutional discrimination is the California Alien Land Law of 1913, which specified that foreign-born individuals could not own farmland unless they were American citizens or were eligible to become citizens. This in itself does not seem to discriminate unduly against any particular group. However, Congress had previously passed a law that specified that people of Japanese origin were not eligible for citizenship. Likewise, there were the literacy tests that required a person to be able to read and write before he or she was allowed to vote in certain southern states in the 1950s. Such laws were disproportionately disfranchising to blacks. African Americans were not the only ones who could not vote, nor were all blacks prohibited, but there is no question that illiteracy was higher in the African American community and that African Americans were disproportionately affected. Restricting the right to vote almost always has a greater impact on minorities by disfranchising them.

Sometimes discrimination in one institution affects discrimination in another. This is called indirect institutional discrimination. For example, discrimination in education has often led to discrimination in the job market. Because African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics have poorer educational backgrounds (with poorly funded and staffed schools in their neighborhoods), they do not meet the job qualifications for the better-paying jobs in our society. The employer is not purposefully discriminating against members of these ethnic groups, but the net effect is that racial and ethnic minorities are underrepresented in the professional positions in our society. Institutional or systemic
discrimination is discriminatory in effect, even if not in intent. This is a major reason for the substantial income gap between blacks and whites reported in Table 10.1.

Stark and Glock found that those who hold to traditional Christian doctrines of total free will, individual responsibility, and moral retribution (punishment for lack of adherence to moral standards) are more likely to believe in rugged individualism and are less likely to work for the reduction of institutional discrimination.

Hence, a particular religious belief (freewill individualism) may contribute to apathy about racial discrimination. It is not at all clear that religious beliefs cause complacency. In fact, it is likely that these beliefs simply justify complacency rather than cause it. They allow people to ignore structural inequality and to benefit from their own unacknowledged privileges without feeling guilty (Farley 2010; Kinder and Sears 1981; Lewis 2003; Rothenberg 2012). The religious beliefs do not contribute to the formation of racism, but they do contribute to its persistence. Many scholars who study race and ethnic group relations believe that the more virulent form of racism in American society is the color-blind claim that refuses to recognize the way in which racism operates at the macro levels of society as part of the structure and can therefore exist and affect lives entirely independently of individual prejudices (Ballantine, Roberts, and Korgen 2016; Bonilla-Silva 2009; Farley 2010; Rothenberg 2012). This is called “symbolic racism,” and it is the most common form of racism in the United States today (Farley 2010).

**Particularism and Antipathy to Outsiders**

Another set of religious beliefs is also correlated with certain kinds of prejudice. This set revolves around the assumption that one’s own religion is uniquely true and legitimate and that all others are false. Only members of one’s own group are expected to be saved. Glock and Stark referred to this orientation as particularism.² Not all religious people are particularistic. However, some groups teach that persons who are members of any other denomination or any other faith are damned (Glock and Stark 1966). Glock and Stark found that among Christians particularism is highly correlated with anti-Semitism. It is also highly correlated with antipathy toward atheists and agnostics (Glock and Stark 1966). However, they did not find a correlation between particularism and white–black prejudice (Stark and Glock 1969). This is no doubt due to the fact that both blacks and whites in the United States are predominantly Christian, though as we have seen, there is a substantial portion of the Muslim community in the United States who are African American. Moreover, as discussed further in the “Global Perspectives” box, cross-national studies of attitudes in European countries have found religious particularism to be a strong predictor of prejudice against ethnic “others” (Scheepers et al. 2002).

Further, since the terrorist events of 9/11, there have been high levels of animosity toward any Arab Americans who are assumed to be Muslim (Farley 2010). In many communities, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 resulted in two countervailing actions. Some people engaged in hate actions directed at Muslim people living in North America. The “we versus they” thinking was heightened, and polarities between those identifying with Christianity and Islam were widened. Some churches offered adult education classes to warn people of the dangers of Islam and to stress that only the followers of Christ are chosen for heavenly rewards.

However, another interesting response was also widely seen following 9/11. Aziz Khaki, a prominent leader in the Islamic community in Vancouver, reported to Reginald Bibby that he

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²Particularism is a form of ethnocentrism—a concept that may be more familiar to sociology students.
Religious Particularism and Prejudice in Europe

Prejudice has been an enduring problem in Europe for centuries, and is particularly powerful when ethnicity and religion align. The Holocaust is a clear example, but the civil war in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s is a more recent case of “ethnic cleansing.” In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Eastern Orthodox Serbs led by Slobodan Milošević sought to ethnically cleanse the territory of all Roman Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks. Within this broader Bosnian War, a Croat-Bosniak War erupted when Croatians turned on their former allies the Bosniaks (Toal and Dahlman 2011). In the end, the Muslim Bosniaks suffered the greatest losses: two thirds of the more than 100,000 total killed and over 80% of the civilians, including at least 8,000 massacred in July 1995 in the “Srebrenica genocide” (Sito-Sucic and Robinson 2013).

Although not all prejudice is taken to this extreme, studies of religion and prejudice in Europe have found that religious particularism—the belief that the respondent’s own religion is the one true religion—is associated with higher levels of prejudice (Eisinga, Felling, and Peters 1990; Scheepers et al. 2002). The ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, however, reminds us that racism and we–they categories are not just a characteristic of individuals. They also exist on a macro level as a result of intergroup conflict. When different groups in society perceive themselves as in competition, negative out-group attitudes can form, especially among dominant groups in society that may feel threatened by rising groups (Ekici and Yucel 2014).

The Srebrenica Genocide Memorial was dedicated in 2003 in remembrance of more than 8,000 victims of “ethnic cleansing” at the hands of Eastern Orthodox Bosnian Serbs. Most of the victims were Bosnian Muslims, also known as Bosniaks.

(Continued)
Tufan Ekici and Deniz Yucel tested this group threat theory by exploring data from 37 countries that participated in the 2008 European Values Study (www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu). Their measure of prejudice—aversive racism—involved responses to this question: “On this list are various groups of people. Could you please sort out any that you would not like to have as neighbors?” Among the possible responses was “other races.” Of the nearly 30,000 respondents, 16% were racially prejudiced. The extent of prejudice varied widely from country to country. Northern Cyprus (55%) and Turkey (42%) had the highest levels of racial aversion, while Hungary (1.1%) and Macedonia (3.4%) had the lowest levels (Ekici and Yucel 2014).

As in previous studies, Ekici and Yucel found that religious particularism is a significant predictor of racial animosity. The more individuals believe their religion is the “one true religion,” the less likely they are to want people of other races as their neighbors.

In terms of the macro-level predictors of racial prejudice, Ekici and Yucel have found less support for the group conflict theory. Country-level characteristics measuring group competition did not predict racial prejudice in the multivariate statistical models. This includes per capita gross domestic product, the unemployment rate, population density, and the ratio of immigrants in the population.

The flip side of group conflict in this study is “generalized trust”—how much people in society trust other members of the society. Higher levels of generalized trust in a society have been associated in many previous studies with benefits at both the individual level (e.g., well-being) and the national level (e.g., higher rates of economic growth) (Carl and Billari 2014). Ekici and Yucel found that the percentage of respondents in each country who say they “trust people in general” is related to racial prejudice: The more generalized trust, the less racial prejudice.

Consequently, in addition to the direct effect of religious particularism on racial prejudice in Europe, different aspects of religion and religiosity at the national level could affect racial relations indirectly by promoting or inhibiting generalized trust. Some research has suggested, for example, that Scandinavian countries like Denmark and Sweden with low levels of religiosity and liberal Protestant religious traditions also have higher levels of social trust (Delhey and Newton 2005). This continues to be a very active area of scholarship.
So the tragedy of 9/11 can be understood in ways that enhance tolerance or bigotry. In their role of explaining the meaning of events, religious communities have an extraordinary responsibility. Churches, mosques, and temples are capable of encouraging polarities between peoples, especially through particularism, or building bridges between people by downplaying differences.

Hence, particularism is a potential contributor to racial prejudice in certain circumstances, and it was definitely operative in the formation of racism in this country—especially before blacks were converted to Christianity (Jordan 1968). However, particularism does not currently seem to be a significant factor in negative sentiment toward African Americans.

Despite the fact that official Christianity manifestly opposes racism and encourages a sense of the brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind, certain beliefs may have the effect of increasing certain kinds of prejudice. The meaning function of religion can bring bigotry or can build bridges between people. This brings us to the second process by which religion may contribute to prejudice: reference group loyalties and we–they categories of thought.

Critical Thinking: How might religious particularism affect relations with minority groups other than African Americans, such as Asians, Native Americans, and Muslims?

Belonging Factors

Religion may contribute to prejudice through its sense of community and the feeling of belonging. As the religious community becomes a major reference group, people want to conform to the norms of the community in order to feel accepted. Furthermore, as they begin to identify closely with the group, they develop a sense of “us” and “them.” In fact, we discovered in Chapter 5 that the creation of strong group boundaries was one technique used to enhance commitment to a religious group (see the discussion of Kanter’s theory of commitment, especially affective commitment). Now we explore two factors that may mean the belonging dimension of religion relates to intolerance toward ethnic minorities.

Informal Group Norms

The informal community of believers that provides individuals with a sense of belonging is a very important part of religion. However, the community develops unwritten norms and expectations—some of which may conflict with official religious policy. In an attempt to conform, members may adhere to the informal norms of the community rather than to the official policy of the formal religious organization. It is noteworthy that Gerhard Lenski found that “communal” members (who are influenced through the belonging function) were much more likely to be racially prejudiced than were “associational” members (who were formal members). Informal norms and values of the community may be contrary to the official ones, but they may be vigorously enforced through informal sanctions (Lenski 1963). A group of Lutheran laity at a Sunday afternoon picnic may tell ethnic jokes or may subtly reinforce negative images of blacks, regardless of the minister’s sermon that morning to the contrary. The reference group norms are often more powerful in influencing behavior than are the idealized norms in the ideology. The friendship networks and unofficial norms may be more significant than official statements of religious bodies or messages from the pulpit.

Group Boundaries and Identification With the In-Group

Another major theory of racial and ethnic prejudice is based on the tendency of people to
accept those who are similar to them and to be suspicious of anyone who is defined as “different.” This view of the cause of prejudice is sometimes called the we–they theory, perhaps best illustrated by an empirical study conducted by Eugene Hartley (1946). Hartley used a variation of the Bogardus Social Distance Scale, an instrument designed to measure prejudice toward various ethnic groups. A list of ethnic groups is provided, and respondents are asked to rate the closest relationship that they would be willing to have with a member of that group. Seven categories are provided, ranging from “would marry a person who is a member of this group” and “would be willing to have a member of this group as a best friend” to “would allow only as visitors to my country” and “would exclude from my country entirely.”

Hartley adapted the Bogardus instrument by adding three fictitious groups: (1) Danireans, (2) Pireneans, and (3) Wallonians. Using a random sample of college students at eight northeastern universities, he attempted to measure ethnic prejudice, including prejudice toward these fictitious groups. Hartley found a high level of prejudice toward these three nonexistent groups: More than half of the respondents expressed a desire to avoid contact with these people, and some respondents wanted them expelled from the country. Moreover, nearly three fourths of those who were prejudiced against blacks and Jews were also prejudiced against Pireneans, Wallonians, and Danireans. He used these data as evidence that prejudice is not caused by stereotypes (stereotypes are rigid and exaggerated images of a particular group or category of people). After all, no one has a negative stereotype of a group that does not exist. The negative feelings of respondents toward Danireans, Pireneans, and Wallonians were based on the fact that these groups sounded unlike the respondents. In other words, their negative reaction was based simply on whether the people sounded similar to or different from the respondents; the name Pireneans sounded more like one of “them” than one of “us.” Empirical studies by social psychologists have supported this we–they theory of the causes of prejudice (Farley 2010).

The fact that a number of Christian groups place a strong emphasis on particularism adds to the in-group sense of superiority and to the distinction between “us” and “them.” The belonging function of religion, then, is capable of contributing to antipathy. The development of religiously based we–they prejudice is especially likely in situations where racial boundaries and religious boundaries are coextensive (see Figure 10.2). The importance of its influences is illustrated by several empirical studies that show high levels of prejudice against people with differing beliefs (e.g., atheists or Jews), often surpassing prejudice against those of another race (Byrne and McGraw 1964; Jackson and Hunsberger 1999; Rokeach 1968; Smith, Williams, and Willis 1967). Moreover, if “they” practice a different religion and also look different, the exclusionary tendencies are reinforced even further.

The white Christians who encountered blacks from the 15th to the 18th centuries were meeting people who were different on several counts. In fact, in the 18th century, the words white, Christian, and civilized were used by many European writers as synonyms for “we,” while the terms black, heathen, and savage were used interchangeably with “they” (Jordan 1968). At that point, much of the denigration of blacks was because they were not Christians. We–they religious distinctions, then, may have contributed to the formation of racial prejudice, even if these factors are not a primary cause of racial prejudice today. Nonetheless, one can see the application of religio-racial we–they categories in contemporary KKK literature and in various types of anti-Semitic materials.

To summarize, the belonging functions of a particular religion may enhance antipathy toward others in at least two ways. First, the informal community may develop norms that encourage discrimination, despite the official position of the larger religious organization. Second, the development of high boundaries between groups
can reinforce we–they categories of thought, and at least historically in North America, “we,” among those in power included only whites who were also Christians. Currently, black–white distinctions in North America are not related to difference in religion. Still, persons of Arab background are often stigmatized, and this polarization is especially strong when those Arabs are also Muslim, as we saw in the essay on anti-Muslim sentiments in the United States in Chapter 3. Religion can be related to hostility toward certain groups insofar as it creates and/or sanctifies we–they thinking.

**Institutional Factors**

Religion as an institutional structure can affect social behavior somewhat independently from the meaning (belief) system or the reference group factors. This is perhaps best illustrated by a study of the clergy of Little Rock, Arkansas, in the midst of a major racial crisis.

Ernest Campbell and Thomas Pettigrew studied the role of Protestant ministers in the school desegregation controversy. They found that ministers of small working-class sects were supportive of segregation and that most of the clergy of mainline denominations were sympathetic to integration (Campbell and Pettigrew 1959). However, very few of the ministers of mainline denominations spoke out or got actively involved in the conflict. The official positions of their denominations, their professional reference system (other mainline clergy), and their own personal convictions all supported integration. Still, they did not take an ethical or prophetic stance as one might expect.

When they did speak out, it was often in generalities, with references to “deeper issues” or with other techniques that would prevent anyone from taking offense (or from taking their statements too seriously). A controversial ethical view can be moderated and made more palatable when a minister begins by saying something...
such as this: “Everyone has to make up his or her own mind on moral questions. My opinion is simply the opinion of one person, and there is certainly room for other views.” Such statements allowed ministers in Little Rock to speak briefly to the issue of segregation without raising too much opposition or offending people too deeply. Members of the congregation were, in effect, invited to ignore the comment or to view it as one opinion among many. This technique allowed ministers to feel that the issue had been addressed. Hence, they could avoid feeling guilty for having ignored the issue. They felt they had not compromised their principles.

One reason that the clergy avoided discussing segregation very forcefully was because their congregations overwhelmingly supported it. Because their congregations were important reference groups to the pastors, they were caught between reference groups (professional colleagues on the one hand and the congregation on the other). Such factors were no doubt part of the reluctance of clergy to take a strong stand, but the most important factors were institutional in character.

Although the official statements of most Christian denominations condemn segregation, the working propositions of the church bureaucracies are such that rewards come to those who do not “rock the boat.” Concepts of success in the ministry are related to improvements in membership and in financial prosperity. The addition of a new educational wing or the need to build a new and much larger sanctuary are often viewed as signs that the pastor must be doing something right. Moreover, ministers often view harmonious, satisfied congregations as evidence of success. The minister whose church is racked with conflict and is declining in membership is certainly not a prime candidate for promotion to a larger congregation. Whether the minister is part of an episcopal system (where a bishop appoints clergy to a congregation) or of a congregational system (where a pulpit committee from the local congregation seeks out a pastor to hire), a reputation for controversy and uncompromising conscience is not usually an asset. The minister who wants to advance in his or her career keeps the congregation united, the funds flowing, and the membership stable and/or increasing.

This process provides an excellent illustration of Thomas O’Dea’s “dilemma of mixed motivation.” Clergy were torn between two motivations: (1) being faithful to the prophetic ethical teachings of the denomination on the one hand and (2) enhancing their careers by doing that which was necessary to be “successful” on the other. Many felt that they would work on one of the goals first (building their careers) and would later take on the hard task of speaking their consciences forthrightly. Yet some observers have been skeptical of such a strategy. One Little Rock minister who did speak out had this to report:

I talk to the young ministers and I ask them why they aren’t saying anything. They say no one will listen to them, they aren’t known and their churches are small. But wait, they say, until we get big churches and are widely known. We won’t be silent then. Then I turn to the ministers in the big churches and I listen to them trying to explain why they have done so little. Their answer is a simple one; they say they have too much to lose. Only recently, one such man said to a group I was in, “I’ve spent seventeen years of my life building up that church, and I’m not going to see it torn down in a day.” (Campbell and Pettigrew, 1959:120–121)

A complex set of factors plays on a minister and affects decision making. Some of these factors may create pressure that calls for contradictory behavior. Just understanding the belief system of a religion is by no means sufficient to understanding the behavior of religious persons. In the case of racial bigotry in Little Rock, the official position of most denominations called for prophetic forthrightness by the clergy, but at the same time they provided concrete rewards (promotions to bigger congregations) for taking the road of least resistance. In effect, the institutional procedures operated to reward those who
were restrained in their comments or even complacent about the entire matter. The silence by the clergy, in turn, created an environment in which it seemed that everyone shared the same view. Conformity to norms of prejudice was easy, for few people were saying anything to challenge the norm. In such a case, religion is not a factor in causing prejudice, but in failing to oppose prejudice forthrightly, religious communities contributed to the persistence of racism.

A study by Harold Quinley found similar patterns among Protestant clergy in California. He explored variables affecting the willingness of ministers to take prophetic stands on controversial social issues. The issues in California were civil rights legislation, support for a war or advocacy of peace, and organization of farmworkers (Quinley 1974). Quinley found that support for progressive prophetic ministry depended on at least three variables: (1) the relative liberalism or conservatism of the congregation, (2) the liberalism or conservatism of the denominational leaders, and (3) the organizational structure of the denomination (congregational, presbyterian, or episcopal). He did find, however, that regardless of denominational structure, congregational members have more control over most of the minister’s actions than do the denominational hierarchy. While the hierarchy may control appointments and removals from office in episcopal systems (with a bishop), the local congregation controls salary in virtually all Protestant denominations. So support from a powerful and like-minded denominational hierarchy could enhance the tendency to have a progressive prophetic ministry, but in this study local congregations frequently had a moderating effect on the activism of clergy. Most parish ministers believed that their careers would suffer if they engaged controversial public issues. Ethical convictions regarding civil rights and other matters are often mated by institutional-maintenance concerns. These same forces were also found to be at work among clergy during conflicts in Rochester, New York (Martin 1972), and in Boston (Thomas 1985).

Of course, religious institutions are also very capable of using their influence to combat racism. For example, the Roman Catholic Church was instrumental in starting a program known as Project Equality. This involved churches using their buying power to reduce racial discrimination by requiring all their suppliers to adopt affirmative action policies. Many national Protestant denominational offices supported

When the controversy about desegregation of this high school in Little Rock, Arkansas, arose, all major denominations had endorsed the position that racism is contrary to Christianity. Still, ministers in Little Rock were disinclined to speak out because they thought it would reduce membership in their congregations, damage the financial health of the church, and adversely affect their own careers. So despite official positions of the national denomination, pastors remained silent. The second statue on the right, above the front doors of Central High School, is named “Opportunity”—precisely the thing that was being denied African Americans.
Religion and Social Inequality

Project Equality. A few local congregations did as well, but it was mostly national denominational hierarchies that supported the program for nearly 50 years. This suggests only one of many ways in which religious groups have used their corporate influence to bring change, particularly at the level of the national denominational office. In fact, several studies have indicated that the more insulated the official hierarchy is from the local congregation, the more likely it is to emphasize egalitarian stances. Southern Catholics, for example, have historically been less likely to discriminate than members of congregationally based Protestant churches in the South. This has been largely because bishops, who are not directly responsible to the local congregation, have been willing to uphold the official position of the denomination (Beck 1978; Wood 1970, 1981).

Our point is that institutional factors may work to enhance racial prejudice and discrimination or to combat it. Simply knowing the official position of the denomination does not give the whole picture. Just as the religious meaning system may have countervailing influences within it, so also may the religious institution provide motivations and influences that run counter to the official doctrine. It is simplistic to say that religion contributes to bigotry or that it contributes to tolerance. First, it is necessary to know what interpretation of Christianity one is talking about: pietist, fundamentalist, orthodox, liberal, and so on. Second, any given religious group may be contributing to tolerance in some respects while contributing to exclusivity and bigotry in other ways. The meaning, belonging, and institutional subsystems that comprise religion may work at cross-purposes.

Our focus on ways that religion sometimes contributes to bigotry is only part of the picture. Religious prejudice is frequently an expression of other conflicts within the society at large. On the one hand, bigotry within religious communities may be due to their being open social systems rather than the religion being the cause of bigotry (see Figure 10.3). In addition, some scholars argue that religious prejudice is frequently a consequence of other social forces (such as conflict over resources) rather than the cause of bigotry. This is a contribution of the conflict theory.

Critical Thinking: In this chapter, the investigation has focused on racism directed by white Christians against African Americans. How might the causes of religious prejudice against Jews be different? Which theories might become more relevant for understanding this bigotry? Why? Which might be less relevant? Why?

Social Conflict and Religious Expression: The Conflict Perspective

It often happens that religious prejudice is actually a reflection of larger social conflicts rather than their cause. In this case, religion may be acting purely as a justification for discriminatory behavior; the out-group is defined as spiritually inferior so that members of the in-group do not feel guilty about their blatantly unjust behavior. This perspective is an important contribution of the Marxian theory of social conflict. Marxian analysts look to nonreligious causes of prejudice, although they recognize the role of religion in maintaining social inequities.

Perhaps the most important theory of racial and ethnic discrimination is that which insists that prejudice and discrimination are caused by conflict over scarce resources. Some items in any society are scarce and nondivisible or non-sharable (or at least are viewed as such). The best jobs, the best housing, the best educational opportunities (admittance into a professional school), and social status are examples of items that are viewed as scarce and over which there may be conflict.

Three variables are central in discrimination and prejudice (Farley 2010; Noel 1968). First,
when the two groups are visually distinctive either physically (skin color, facial features) or culturally (dress, language, beliefs), prejudice may occur, but it is not inevitable. Symbolic distinctions between groups may foster feelings of “we” and “they,” but there is not necessarily hostility between the groups. Second, if those two groups are in conflict over some scarce resource, the likelihood of prejudice is very high. It is interesting to note that the contemporary high levels of anti-Arab sentiment in the United States began after the energy crisis came to awareness in the 1970s (with Arabs controlling oil resources). Likewise, anti-Asian sentiment is highest in industries where extremely qualified Japanese or Chinese Americans are hired over whites in competitive high-tech jobs. Third, where one of the groups has more power to control access to scarce and valued resources, discrimination and prejudice are nearly universal. The more powerful group uses its power to control the resources. It then develops stereotypes of the out-group in order to justify discriminatory behavior and to make its own behavior seem morally right. Religion is frequently a part of this moral justification.

An important point here is that prejudice and discrimination are enhanced if the groups in question differ not only in their economic interests but also in their physical appearance, their language, their culture, and their religion. In cases where two groups differ in all of these ways, it is common for the conflict to be justified and highlighted in religious terms. Native Americans were freely exploited and their lands taken from them because they were “heathens”
who supposedly needed to be “civilized” (which usually meant “Christianized”). Likewise, many southern states had laws that forbade conversion of slaves during the early period of the slave trade. The slave owners were afraid that, if blacks held the same religious beliefs as whites, owners would be forced to free their chattel. Eventually, justification for discrimination came to be based more intensely on color than on religious affiliation.

The central point is this: When lines of differentiation between people in racial characteristics, cultural backgrounds, language, religious orientations, and economic self-interests are coextensive and mutually exclusive, antipathy is likely to occur (Farley 2010). Although religion is one cause, it is not necessarily the primary cause. However, religion may be used as the primary justification for hostility. After all, if “they” are immoral infidels or heretics, treating them with something less than respect seems quite reasonable and moral. Thus, what seems on the surface to be religious prejudice may, in fact, be caused by conflicts between groups that seek control over the same scarce resources. The source of the conflict is primarily economic.

The conflict in Northern Ireland represents a situation in which economic, religious, and ethnic boundaries have been coextensive or parallel. The Protestants are the landowners and are of Scottish descent. The Catholics tend to be poor laborers who have long been fiercely loyal to the concept of an independent and united Ireland. The conflict is referred to as one between Protestants and Catholics, but religion is not the sole or even the primary cause of the conflict. The medieval crusades of Christians against the Moors were also justified on religious grounds, but the conflict was rooted in economic and ethnic interests as well.

The contrary situation is where lines of demarcation are crosscutting. In social circumstances, where members of an ethnic group are not necessarily of the same social class or the same religious group, the likelihood of religiously based prejudice is reduced (revisit Figure 10.2). Likewise, where members of a particular religious group do not share the same ethnic background or economic interests, the likelihood of prejudice is somewhat diminished, and religious justifications for discriminatory behavior are also reduced. Hence, religion often acts to reflect larger social conflicts. The student of religion must be wary of overgeneralizing about religion as a cause of social conflict. In any given situation, religion may well be a cause of conflict, but each case must be evaluated in terms of the specific social setting and the specific worldview of the religious group.

Critical Thinking: What, in your opinion, are the four most important factors in the existence of racism among Christians? Explain how these factors work and provide your rationale for why you think these are the most important variables. Do you think any of these variables are necessary or sufficient, or are they all just contributing factors? Why?

Summary

Michael Emerson, William Mirola, and Susanne Monahan summarized their findings this way: “Forget the color line. When it comes to religion in the United States, we have a color wall” (Emerson et al. 2011:161). There is a strong correlation between racial identity and religious preference, and that translates at the local level to extremely high levels of racial segregation in congregations. There are many explanations for this racial homogeneity, but given the history of race in American society, we cannot overlook the importance of racial prejudice in driving religious racial segregation.

Christianity may contribute in subtle ways to the development and persistence of racism and other ethnic prejudice, even if its official posture
mitigates against such intergroup hostility. Although there are differences between members of different denominations and between theological liberals and conservatives, for the most part, the most religiously committed people tend to rank lower on scales of racism than less active members or than those disaffiliated with religion. Further, the logic of Christian theology is such that racism is really incompatible with Christianity; racism is, in fact, a theology with its own internal logic and value structure. Despite all of this, Christianity has sometimes contributed, even unwittingly, to the formation and continued existence of racism.

First, aversive discrimination may have been unconsciously fostered through a meaning system that linked concern with purity to color symbolism (with blackness associated with evil). Other beliefs emphasizing individual autonomy and free will may also have contributed to the persistence of racism because of a failure of Christians to recognize the realities of systemic or institutional racism.

Second, prejudice may be passed on through the we–they boundaries and through informal norms of the community. The belonging function of religion can be a source of exclusivity and hostility.

Finally, formal institutional structures may contribute to the persistence of prejudice by rewarding behaviors other than adherence to the official teachings of the faith. Ministerial or organizational definitions of success may reward (with promotions and professional advancements) those whose style is noncontroversial and unobtrusive.

In short, the three subsystems of religion may sometimes work at cross-purposes, contributing simultaneously to tolerance of others and to bigotry.

Not only is Christianity capable of contributing to racial prejudice, but religious prejudice is also often a reflection of larger conflict in the society. This is especially true if color lines, socioeconomic stratification, political parties, and religious boundaries are coextensive and mutually exclusive. In any case, our discussion points to the interactive relationship between religious values and the social conditions at large. We have also found that religions are themselves complex entities that can have many countervailing forces within them.