

On the Link Between Religious Groups and Racial Prejudice

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

A study published three years ago in the February 2010 issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, found that many members of religious congregations are prejudiced against people of other races. Of course, this is nothing new. There have been major studies in the field of racism and religion for several years.

According to the story posted at <http://news.usc.edu/#!/article/26776/Study-Links-Religious-Groups-and-Racial-Bias>

“A meta-analysis of 55 independent studies carried out in the United States with more than 20,000 mostly Christian participants has found that members of religious congregations tend to harbor prejudiced views of other races.”

The study found that, generally, the more religious the community, the more likely they were to be racist. “Religious groups distinguish between believers and non-believers and moral people and immoral ones,” said the study’s lead author, Wendy Wood, Provost Professor of Psychology and Business at USC College and the USC Marshall School. “So perhaps it’s no surprise that the strongly religious people in our research, who were mostly white Christians, discriminated against others who were different from them - blacks and minorities.

Indeed. It only seems natural that religious bigotry against non-Christians would bleed over into racial bigotry. A bigoted mindset knows no boundaries. It can even bleed over into hatred for members of one’s own race. For example, the hatred that many members of the Nation of Islam (NOI) felt for Whites, Jews, homosexuals and women ultimately bled over into deadly hatred for Malcolm X and other alleged Black Muslim “hypocrites.”

The analysis found far less racism among people that did not harbor strong religious beliefs. Of course, this is the kind of study that is likely to be rejected by religionists of all backgrounds. Conversely, if it were a study trumpeting the claim that religionists are more generous than atheists, most religionists would happily embrace it without even a hint of skepticism.

What about the fact that religionists have courageously fought against racism, segregation, and apartheid, giving their lives in many cases? This only demonstrates the great paradox that is religion. Religion can make good people better and bad people worse. After all, in the beginning, there were far more Black and White Christians opposing the civil rights movement than supporting it.

The authors of the study maintain that right-wing authoritarianism rather than religious belief is responsible for racial bigotry among reactionary Christians. However, might not the teachings of religious texts also be to blame? (After all, religious belief gets the *credit* when believers like Martin Luther King and Mother Teresa help their fellow human beings.) For example, in I Thessalonians 2:15-16, Paul says that the Jews “...both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men: Forbidding

us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins always: for the wrath to come upon them to the uttermost.”

Some of the most influential Jew haters of all time, including Martin Luther and Hitler, came under the sway of such biblical teachings. However, why might a liberal Christian that believes the Bible is the inerrant Word of God not also come under the sway of such biblical ideas? After all, there must be many otherwise progressive Christians that denounce homosexuals and homosexuality and promote female submission simply because the Bible - a book filled with right-wing authoritarian ideas - does so. Indeed, it seems downright delusional to suppose that the negative teachings of religious texts in no way negatively influence religious believers from all backgrounds at some point in their lives.

Wood said that “The effect is strongest in the seminary.” Now *there's* a terrifying thought! The religious leaders are among those most likely to be racist! Wood also found that “People who were religious because of their respect for tradition and social convention were especially likely to be racist.”

Regular readers of this column and of my other writings know very well that I have long been a critic of tradition. After all, tradition has been used to justify the same kinds of crimes justified by religion: sexism, bigotry, homophobia, xenophobia, etc. A blind belief in tradition and social convention buttressed by religious belief could only lead to unbearable sorrows and grief.

Among many Blacks, tradition, social convention and religion all conspire to foster homophobia. Afrocentrists, preachers and others are constantly talking about the supposed importance of traditions and religion as they denounce homosexuality. On the other hand, Black humanists and religious progressives are fighting for the rights of LGBT people. However, as long as religious texts contain teachings that promote homophobia, the struggle against it will probably never end. We will continue to have our work cut out for us.