"LIKE WATER AND OIL": RELIGIOUS THREAT AND PREJUDICE

IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

By

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Recent studies have highlighted the religious prejudices that plague communities across the United States and act as social, political, and economic barriers for many religious minority groups. These studies have noted the pervasive negative attitudes towards such American religious minorities as Muslims (Barkdull, Khaja, Queiro–Tajalli, Swart, Cunningham, & Dennis, 2011; Verkuyten & Slooter, 2007), atheists (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006), Mormons (Baker & Campbell, 2010), and Jews (Cohen, 2010; Imhoff & Banse, 2009). Such prejudices are further evinced in recent discussions surrounding the religiously biased behaviors of U.S. voters (Oppenheimer, 2011; Land, 2012) and the recent spate of U.S. land–use discrimination cases involving religious minority communities, and Muslim communities in particular (Toone, 2010; Vitello, 2010). Further, and germane to the present study, these prejudices appear to be more pronounced in the American South, a phenomenon that remains under–examined (Edgell & Tranby, 2010; Ellison & Musick, 1993; Froese, Bader, & Smith, 2008). Thus, the present study suggests the importance of, and takes aim at, uncovering and analyzing the social processes undergirding religious prejudices in the U.S., and of religious prejudices in the American South specifically. Importantly, given the present political and cultural climate in the U.S., discussions around religious threat and prejudice too frequently focus on the American and global Muslim communities. Accordingly, the bulk of the data and analysis in this study is concerned with understandings of the Muslim "other" as expressed by residents in a predominantly Christian American South.

My analysis represents a qualitative approach to the study of religious prejudice, with focus on the unique and varied ways in which individuals and faith communities in the American South understand the religious "Other" and subsequently express religious

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prejudices. More precisely, I am interested in the common stories, artifacts, and caricatures that are a part of the discursive lexicon mobilized by residents of the American South as they are confronted with an increasingly religiously diverse American society, and in how these discourses might aid in better understanding the deeply felt concerns at the root of religious prejudices. My contribution to the extant literature on religious prejudice is thus twofold. First, this study adds in–depth qualitative insight where experimental and quantitative methods predominate. Building from recent quantitative advancements relative to the social psychological mechanisms that help explain religious prejudice—with special attention paid to threat–based theories of prejudice and their relevance to religion and region—this analysis seeks to delve more deeply into the ways in which these mechanisms are uniquely framed and expressed by social actors within a specific socio–historical milieu. Second, I suggest that this analysis has important implications for dialogue and interventions surrounding religious difference and conflict. By paying attention to the contextual understandings and concerns animating religious prejudice, new avenues may be opened for engaging with and potentially defusing that prejudice.

Review of Threat and Prejudice Theory

Threat Theory

The historical and philosophical foundations of the U.S. are grounded in religious prejudices even as they are grounded in religious freedom and the disestablishment of church from state. Historical advancements toward religious freedom, while remarkable and significant, were often in practice extended only to certain, mostly Protestant, religious groups, often to the detriment of other non–Protestant religious groups

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(Stanwood, 2011). Anti–Catholicism, for example, was a ubiquitous feature of early American life, rooted in American nativism and centuries of antipathy between Catholics and Protestants. Catholics, with their assumed collective emphasis on celibacy and unquestioning loyalty to the Pope, were perceived as a threat to the American familial structure and to the nation's political stability (Griffin, 2004). Likewise, Masons and Mormons have served at various stages of American history as the "Great American Enemy" (Davis, 1963, p. 116)—threatening social out–groups against which American collective identity and values have been defined and asserted. I argue, then, that *perceived out–group threat* has historically been and continues to be a salient explanatory feature in episodes of American religious prejudice. I aim to cast the present discussion and analysis against this theme of threat and prejudice as it has developed over the history of the American religious landscape, focusing on notions of threat–based prejudice as put forth in Integrated Threat Theory and other related group threat–based theories.

Briefly, integrated and group threat theorists posit that an in–group's level of prejudice toward an out–group is predicted by the degree to which that out–group is perceived to be a threat, whether they are perceived as a "real" threat over material resources or a "symbolic" threat over more intangible resources such as values or culture (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Threat–based studies have subsequently found patterns of threat and prejudice between such groups as Whites and Blacks (Stults & Baumer, 2007; Stephan et al., 2002; Durrheim et al., 2011), men and women (Takabayashi, 2007; Stephan et al., 2000), and native and immigrant populations (Costello & Hodson, 2011; Pereira, Vala, & Costa–Lopes, 2010). As already indicated, perceived threat has also

been shown to predict prejudice towards religious out–groups such as Jews (Bergmann &

Bowman, 2008; King & Weiner, 2007; Pargament et al., 2007) and Muslims (van der

Noll, Poppe, & Verkuyten, 2010; Gonzalez, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008; Tausch,

Hewstone, & Roy, 2009).

Bergmann and Bowman (2008) in their study of Eastern and Western European

perceptions of Jews found, firstly, that Jews were not perceived to be a "real" threat in

any political or economic sense. This could be due in part to the diminishing number of

Jews living in many of these European countries, creating an "anti–Semitism without

Jews" (p. 351). The much more salient *symbolic* threat of the Jewish community, rather,

stemmed from the continued association of Jews with the Holocaust, and the negative

impact of Holocaustic remembrance on national identity construction in countries directly

or even indirectly responsible for the Holocaust. I wish to highlight here the suggestion

that social groups can represent a threat to national identity without representing an actual

threat to material, political, or economic resources. Moreover, the actual size and

collective power of the out–group need not be proportional to the degree to which they

are perceived to be a threat. The threat of these out–groups instead lies in the in–group's

collective memories and imaginations of what those other groups represent symbolically.

The American and global Muslim community—the primary focus of my

analysis—has been particularly singled out as a symbolic threat to various social groups

and dominant cultures, as their perceived collective values and behaviors appear to be

antithetical to those groups and cultures. Raiya et al. (2008) found that threatening value

assumptions about Muslims—e.g. Muslims oppose the fundamental teachings of Christ,

Muslims do not respect Christianity—significantly predicted anti–Muslim attitudes.

Similarly, Tausch, Hewstone, and Roy (2009), in a study on Hindu–Muslim relations in India, found that the perceived symbolic threat of Muslims significantly predicted anti–Muslim prejudice within the Hindu population. Interestingly, they further found that anti–Hindu prejudice within the Muslim population was significantly predicted by perceived *realistic*, rather than symbolic, threat. The explanation for this is a compelling one, namely that realistic threats are of less concern to dominant social groups that have a secure position in the community and of more concern to marginalized minority groups. Conversely, symbolic threats appear to be of more concern to dominant social groups.

Studies have also found personality–based antecedents to threat perception. Certain in–groups and individuals exhibit tendencies of Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), or the preference for social order and cohesion (Altemeyer, 1981), and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), or the preference for hierarchical social ordering and the superior positioning of the in–group over out–groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). These orientations can often converge to engender both threat– and competition–based perceptions of the out–group and strongly predict incidence of prejudice (Duckitt, 2006). As will be shown, this is often manifested in Christian American communities as the need to assert the predominance of Christianity as the founding and preserving force of American society over other competing religious systems. While the mechanisms underlying RWA and SDO are more complex than I can explore here—e.g. mediating effects of individual personality (Schnieders & Gore, 2011) and contextual variables (King & Weiner, 2007)—I suggest that the basic premises of RWA and SDO, as well as the above discussed threat–based theories of prejudice, remain compelling for framing

and interpreting the social processes occurring between American religious in–groups and out–groups.

Theology, Religion, and Region

Lastly, it is helpful to briefly consider the implications of theology, religious orientation, and geography for the present study, as these factors are often powerful mediators between perceived threat and prejudice. More precisely, I highlight these factors to suggest that Evangelical Protestantism—the dominant religion in this study's region of focus—is often uniquely suited within certain social climates to provoke feelings of religious prejudice, given its historically fundamentalist tendencies and the association of these religious tendencies with prejudice (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2005; Rothschild, Abdollahi, & Pyszczynksi, 2009).

Significant advancements have been made in examining individual theological belief systems and religious worldviews and their relationships to prejudice (Batson & Burris, 1994; Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999; Merino, 2010; Trinitapoli, 2007). Merino (2010) examined the relationships between theological exclusivism and views of religious diversity and willingness to include non–Christians in social life, finding theological exclusivity to be strongly and negatively associated with views of religious diversity generally and strongly associated with a decreased willingness to include non–Christians in the life of the community. Concerning religious orientation, social psychologists have extensively examined the associations between certain individual religious dispositions—namely intrinsic, extrinsic, quest, and fundamentalist dispositions—and feelings of prejudice towards various racially, ethnically, sexually, and religiously defined out–groups (Allport & Ross, 1967; Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999).

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While recent studies have problematized easy associations between these dispositions and prejudice (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005), extrinsic and fundamentalist dispositions in particular have consistently and strongly been associated with feelings of prejudice, and feelings of religious prejudice specifically.

Finally, geographic region is often a strong predictor of religious prejudice and of prejudice more generally. There are particularly negative associations between prejudice and the American South, as studies have shown that religious persons residing in the South are less tolerant of minority groups than religious persons residing in other regions of the U.S. (Edgell & Tranby, 2010; Ellison & Musick, 1993; Froese, Bader, & Smith, 2008; Merino, 2010; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Putnam and Campbell (2010) found, first, that the South is the most religious region in the U.S., with Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama being the most religious states in the country. They further demonstrated the combined effects of religion and region on racial prejudice, concluding, "Racism … is most pronounced among white evangelicals concentrated in the rural and small–town South" (p. 315). Related more directly to religious prejudice, Merino (2010) found that Southern American Christians are less likely to value religious diversity and less likely to welcome Hindus and Muslims into the social life of the community than persons living in other regions of the U.S. We may reasonably conclude, then, that the particular region and sites of my analysis offer a uniquely fruitful setting for examining religious prejudice.

In sum, this review of the literature briefly details the theoretical framework and interpretive lens through which I have approached my analysis, namely that perceived threat from certain religious out–groups is a salient feature of religious prejudice, and that

such religious prejudice is often strongly associated with particular religious orientations (e.g. fundamentalist evangelicalism) within the American South. What this review of the literature leaves uncovered, and what the present study aims to examine, are the varied ways in which these perceived threats and prejudices are understood and expressed within social actors' day–to–day lived experiences. To this end, I aim in my analysis to build from this literature and address the following questions:

1. What stories and myths help residents of the American South make sense out of their own identity and the identity of the religious "other"?

2. What texts and other cultural and historical artifacts do residents of the American South utilize in justification of these perceptions?

3. What images or caricatures do residents of the American South mobilize to frame their understanding of the religious "other"?

Answers to these questions will provide an enriched portrait of religious prejudice in the American South, and ultimately help us to understand the dominant discourses of religious prejudice and the felt concerns underlying these discourses. Further, such questions highlight the added value wrought through the ethnographic imagination and the contribution of this project and analysis to the literature. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, such questions are paramount for understanding and engaging with religious prejudice and, I suggest, particularly in the closing section of the paper, that efforts to defuse prejudice and conflict must not proceed without first listening to and understanding the particular ways in which religious prejudice is framed and expressed.

Methods

Data Collection

This study analyzes qualitative data gathered through a three–year, multi–site ethnographic project conducted in eight communities across the Southern state of

Tennessee. The "Religion & Politics" project, funded through the Vanderbilt University Center for the Study of Religion and Culture, sought to examine the ways in which religion influences political commitments and actions and, conversely, the ways in which political commitments and actions influence religion. The project was implemented over the summers of 2006, 2007, and 2008, and employed teams of Vanderbilt graduate students who were sent to live in each of the communities for no less than three months over each summer. The researchers observed various aspects of community social, political, and religious life and engaged in in–depth conversations with a range of community residents. Specifically, researcher activities included attending city council meetings, conversing with community members at popular gathering spots and events (e.g., restaurants, salons, community picnics), attending worship services and other events at local congregations, and interviewing various religious and political community leaders. Each researcher was trained to utilize the ethnographic tools of fieldwork, participant observation, and interviewing, and was expected to take extensive field notes. Guided by both "emic" and "etic" approaches to ethnography, researchers immersed themselves in the culture of their community to gain a richer understanding of that community's unique stories while also maintaining, to the best of their ability, a culturally–neutral position in recording their observations. Cultural neutrality, it should be noted, is a difficult if not impossible position to maintain in field research and requires purposeful reflexivity on the part of the researchers. Accordingly, each of the researchers maintained a journal for monitoring their own personal reactions and lessons learned through their experiences.

While field observations and interviews were largely exploratory and open–ended, researchers were instructed to bear in mind "guiding themes" as they encountered their communities, including such themes as "community social distress," "racial segregation," and "marginalized community members." By the third year of data collection, religious themes such as "other religions" and "religious tolerance" emerged as significant for each of the communities. One could critique this open–ended approach as unbalanced, as researchers did not necessarily give equal weight or attention to the same issues or questions, suggesting the utility in future research of more structured interviews and observations for greater consistency in recording behaviors and perceptions. However, that discussions about the religious "Other" frequently emerged in each of the communities suggests the significance of this topic to a wide range of community leaders and members. Moreover, that these discussions emerged in "natural" community settings—in a local bar, in a Sunday morning sermon, in line at a grocery store—further suggests that these frames for public discourse are at a minimum socially permissible.

Settings

This project isolated the state of Tennessee as the research setting, identifying the following eight communities: (1) North Nashville/Madison; (2) Brentwood in Williamson County; (3) Clarksville in Montgomery County; (4) Smithville in Dekalb County; (5) Morristown in Hablen County; (6) Clearfork Valley in Fentress County; (7) Brownsville in Haywood County; and (8) Dyersburg in Dyer County. As Table 1 illustrates, these eight communities were selected for their diversity in socioeconomic,

Table 1. Community Demographics

Community	Population	Age 65% and over	Black %	Hispanic %	Foreign born %	HS grad %	percapita income
Madison*	569,891 (county)	11.1	25.9	4.6	6.9	81.5	$23,069
Brentwood	37,060	11	3	2.1	6.7	98.4	$55,002
Clarksville	132,929	7.3	23.2	9.3	5.3	91	$21,079
Smithville	4,530	18.7	2.4	11.7	10.7	66.1	$15,916
Morristown	29,137	16	6.7	19.7	13.1	73.5	$18,666
Clearfork Valley*	16,625	16	0.1	0.5	0.4	57.3	$12,999
Brownsville	10,292	12.6	64.7	4.7	1.3	76.6	$17,148
Dyersburg	17,145	15	25.9	3	1	76.8	$19,232

U.S. Census Bureau 2010 Data
* 2000 Data

ethnic, and other population measures, allowing our community sample to effectively

represent a comprehensive picture of Tennessee community life. Further, these

communities span the entire length of the state—from Dyersburg and Brownsville in the

western region of the state; to Clarksville, Brentwood, Madison, and Smithville in the

middle region of the state; to Clearfork Valley and Morristown in the eastern region of

the state—providing a representative diversity of geographic settings.

While our sample exhibits community diversity by the above measures, these

communities were largely religiously homogeneous. As already indicated, Christians are

in the majority for both the state of Tennessee and each of the eight communities, with

Evangelical Protestantism most strongly represented (Association of Statisticians of

American Religion Bodies, 2000). Specifically, the Southern Baptist Convention is the

largest denomination in the state of Tennessee as well as in each of the eight

communities, with 1,414,199 members and 2,972 congregations reported statewide. The

next largest denomination, the United Methodist Church, has a reported 393,994

members and 1,577 congregations statewide. These numbers highlight the numerical

dominance of Christianity, and of Evangelical Protestantism, over other religious groups

in the American South, a critical observation for the present study.

Analysis

The coding process, which incorporated field notes collected from all three years

of data collection, followed three distinct phases of coding of increasing focus and

theoretical depth, as outlined by Charmaz (2006). Once field notes were transcribed and

imported into the NVivo data analysis program, I, along with two other members of the

research team, conducted initial *line–by–line coding* in order to establish codes for the

most salient and frequent themes that emerged from within the data. Regular team

meetings were held to compare findings, negotiate coding categories, and establish

agreement on an initial coding structure that could be mapped across all three years of

data collection. Building from this initial stage of coding, I engaged in a process of

focused coding through which I selectively pulled out those segments of data that

addressed specifically targeted questions and theoretical cues, namely those sections that

reflected clear expressions or episodes of religious dominance and/or prejudice. Finally, a

third phase of *theoretical coding* allowed me to thread together the coding categories

established through the first two phases into a coherent analytic "story." As Charmaz

(2006) suggested, "These codes not only conceptualize how your substantive codes are

related, but also move your analytic story in a theoretical direction" (p. 63). Thus, I wish

to show in my analysis below how my "analytic story," woven together through three

phases of coding, moves specifically in the theoretical direction of religious threat and

subsequent prejudice as mobilized by residents in our targeted communities.

It is important to note more specifically that in my analytic approach to these texts I sought to utilize critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a means of describing and interpreting the ways in which discourse constitutes and reproduces social relations and deeply embedded systems of belief and social practice (Fairclough, 1992; Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). More precisely, I was interested in the ways in which discourse constituted and was constituted by *structures of power* relative to the diverse religious communities in the American South. I suggest here that a CDA approach is uniquely attuned to such notions of power in discourse, as Fairclough (1992) noted:

> [CDA] is concerned not only with power relations in discourse … but also with how power relations and power struggle shape and transform the discourse practices of a society or institution. (p. 36)

My focus in analyzing these texts, then, was largely on discursive mobilizations and reproductions of power struggle between a Christian majority and Muslim minority.

Expressions of Religious Prejudice

Christian Dominance and Stability

Consistent with the RWA and SDO literature, my analysis began with collective cultural assumptions about Christian dominance and stability in American society, out of which flow consequent notions of threat and prejudice. Debates in the media and among scholars and religious leaders relative to the Christian foundations of the U.S. and the extent to which one may label the U.S. a "Christian nation" (e.g. Meacham, 2006) serve as an important backdrop for this segment of my analysis. I argue that collectively held myths and stories—and the meanings derived from those myths and stories—surrounding both the Christian foundations of the nation and present social realities potentially serve as "tools" by which residents might assert the dominance of their religious group over

others and justify oppressive attitudes and behaviors directed towards those other groups (Rappaport, 1995; Speer, 2008).

Historical Interpretation

Many of the residents in the sample communities take it for granted that the U.S. is historically and philosophically a "Christian nation." When asked by researchers if they thought the U.S. was a Christian nation, a large proportion of community members, pastors, and political leaders responded in the affirmative. There was discovered, then, a tacit connection between American and Christian identity. Some residents asserted the Christian identity of the U.S. through claims of numerical dominance (i.e. most people in the U.S. are Christian). More commonly, claims for the Christian identity of the U.S. focused on the historical and philosophical roots of the nation, with appeals to the Christian identity of the nation's founders and founding documents as evidence of the explicitly Christian intentions underlying the nation's founding. Interestingly, what often emerged in this discourse was a sort of *proof–texting*, a sifting through foundational documents and speeches for artifacts that supported the "Christian nation" position. Founding figures from George Washington to Patrick Henry, for example, were appropriated for their supposed voicing of Christian preferences in shaping the character of the American nation.

The pastor of a local congregation illustrated this point. By drawing on a quote from Patrick Henry, he mobilized an interpretation of a particular text to fortify his position that Christianity was explicitly at the root of the founding of the U.S.:

> *Pastor*: Patrick Henry's quote is the one I was looking for. He says here, "it cannot be emphasized too strongly or too often that this great nation was founded not with religion but by Christians, and not on religions, but on the gospel of Jesus Christ." I believe it was the will of our founding fathers … I understand the

church in America has been able to become the greatest church, the most influential church, as far as resources goes.

Other residents demonstrated a more generalized interpretive process, projecting onto the founding fathers as a collective (rather than onto one or two specific historical figures) both a staunchly Christian identity and explicitly Christian intentions in framing the nation. One resident claimed through the Christian identity of the founders, for example, an implied Christian essence to the nation's founding documents:

> *Resident*: The intent of the constitution and our nation's founding would have been clear if we had said "Christian" in constitutional statements of religious freedom. It was implied. It was what our founders meant, but it was not stated.

These residents, I would suggest, were engaging in social processes of historical construction (Friedman, 1992), buttressing with historical artifacts their present understanding of a collective U.S. identity and perhaps even the desire to preserve Christian predominance. The founding of the U.S., the documents that comprise that founding, and the individuals who were instrumental in that founding are interpreted through the lens of present–day Christian American concerns. Interestingly, individuals who conceded that certain details about the founding fathers' religious identities were problematic (e.g. the infamous account of Thomas Jefferson cutting up the Bible), or readily admitted that concerns of religious freedom and disestablishment were instrumental in the nation's founding, still circled back around to the larger point that the circumstances surrounding the nation's founding point overwhelmingly to explicitly Christian philosophies and intentions.

Christian Precariousness

Even as community residents argued for the Christian foundations of the U.S., they expressed concerns that the Christian identity of the U.S. is presently at risk of eroding, either through a natural disintegration of national values or through direct challenges by competing ideologies. While the U.S. was at its founding an explicitly "Christian nation," for various reasons it can hardly be called so in the present day. This was attributed by many residents to the declining number of "young people" attending church, the gradual exclusion of Christianity (or "religion" more broadly) from the public and political spheres, or overt hostilities toward Christianity from other social groups. The perceived diminishing influence of religion on public and political life was exemplified by the following resident's comment:

> *Resident*: The country was founded by Christian men. And when they wrote the Constitution and Bill of Rights they guaranteed freedom of religion, not freedom from religion. This meant that there would be no state church, but now people in government and with influence over government don't want any religion in the country.

The assertion that people in positions of power in the U.S. government "don't want any religion in the country" speaks to the perceived diminishing influence of religion on political life, while also hinting at perceptions of hostility toward Christianity.

Indeed, resident discourses frequently mobilized the image of a "beleaguered Christianity," and these images were often of a theological or biblical nature. During a sermon, to illustrate, one pastor likened Christianity in America to early Christianity in Rome—a group on the "fringes" of culture, temporary residents of the world excluded from the "center" of public life for "putting God over Caesar, or Christ over Caesar." Important to note here is the pastor's use of "exilic" biblical literature, or the image of both the early Christian community and Israel as exiled people of God, as an analogue for

Christian exile in the U.S. (Vertovec, 2004). Elsewhere, community members and pastors variously drew upon imagery of the nation of Israel and its identity as the longsuffering nation of God and the link between these images and American nationhood. For some, the American nation plays a critical role in the divine story of Israel as friends and defenders of the nation of Israel, with the ultimate fate of the U.S. bound up in the effective carrying out of this role. One resident's comment illustrated this point:

> *Resident*: Anyone who loves Israel will prosper … God is in control. God protects Israel, and as a result protects us because we have been grafted onto the tree of Israel. God protects us because we have stood with Israel. What happens to them affects us.

The U.S. and the nation of Israel thus have linked fates and, for some residents, the felt concern over present U.S. foreign policies and positioning relative to Israel is a critical feature of the narrative of the U.S.'s impending decline as a Christian nation. For others, finally, the understanding of Israel was as more of a cautionary tale of the failure of a nation to faithfully follow God, serving as a warning for the U.S. in continuing to preserve its Christian heritage and its commitment to being a Christian nation. That the Jews were not allowed by God to "keep a strong country" was a direct result of their failure to remain faithful to God and keep God's commandments. Here such scriptural passages as Psalm 33—"Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he chose for his inheritance" (NIV)—were directly applied by residents to the Christian American socio–historical experience, and served as reminders for how a nation of God should be governed.

We are here presented with an imagining of American society in which Christianity is the unquestionable source of U.S. values and identity even as it presently

exists as a beleaguered religion pushed to the margins of public life by hostile forces. This creates the perception for many residents that the U.S. is dangerously close to falling off a precipice into disfavor with God. I argue that this intersection of historical dominance and present precariousness and hostility sets the stage, in many ways, for widespread renderings of the religious "Other" as a competing religious system and as an embodiment of this threat to the Christian American way of life. The religious "Other," in this scenario, is depicted as wholly opposed to American (and Christian, by extension) democratic life and values. The remaining analysis examines the ways in which community residents commonly depicted the religious "Other" and expressed their opposition to that "Other."

The Threat of the Religious "Other"

My discussion of the religious "Other" here deals almost exclusively with the American and global Muslim communities. This is not necessarily surprising, given recent trends in Christian American prejudice toward Muslims (Merino, 2010; Edgell & Tranby, 2010), and given that this prejudice was perhaps brought into sharper focus during the years in which the data were collected. The association of Arabs (and, by extension, Muslims) with the Iraq War and rumors of then–presidential candidate Barack Obama's Muslim identity, to cite two of the more important contextual factors, variously brought the national and global Muslim community to the fore for many community residents, and mostly in a negative light. These contextual factors deeply colored our interactions with community members, pastors, and political leaders in our discussions about the religious "Other." Rather than view these expressed prejudices as strictly anti– Muslim, however, I cast them as illustrative of more general social processes surrounding

the encounter of the religious "Other" in the public sphere, processes that have historically impacted and continue to impact other religious groups beyond the Muslim community.

Residents, first, shared concerns that Muslims hate the U.S., hate Christians, and are actively seeking to subvert American society. This general positioning in relation to the Muslim community establishes a perceived fundamental antipathy between Christian Americans and Muslims, both nationally and globally. Assumptions about the actions and intentions of Muslims are often of a subversive, conspiratorial nature, placing them in direct opposition to the dominant American culture and to the long–standing American values of democracy and freedom. Muslims are "all terrorists" and "all hate us," as one resident suggested. Consider the following two resident comments in further support of this assertion:

> *Resident #1*: The government ought to let Mexicans come over, and build the wall across the Canadian border. That's where our enemies, the Muslims, are coming from. The Mexicans just want to work, but these Muslims ought to be our priority.

> *Resident #2*: Why are [Muslims] fighting with us? … They hate America… They think we are very immoral, so they are opposed to us.

If there is in these discourses an assumed antipathy between American Christians and Muslims—Muslims are our "enemies," an opposing force that "hates" the U.S.—it is further assumed that this antipathy is the natural outgrowth of important cultural and value differences between the two groups. This is largely consistent with notions of Orientalism, or Western perceptions of the Orient (which often implicates Muslims) as being homogeneously savage, wholly different from Western culture and beliefs, and a

force to be feared and tamed (Richardson, 2009; Saeed, 2007; Sardar, 1999). One resident's comment that "Muslims and Christians are like water and oil" is an apt summation of this oppositional stance, suggesting that the two groups possess qualities that simply make them socially incompatible. I will highlight here two of the perceived Muslim qualities most frequently mobilized by community residents—Muslim *violence* and *autocracy*—and the particular ways in which these qualities were understood and framed by residents.

Muslim Violence

Residents frequently mobilized as justification for their oppositional stance toward the Muslim community depictions of Muslims as a generally violent people. One resident's suggestion that "you see dead people" whenever you examine a predominantly Muslim nation evidences this assumed association between Islam and violence and death. It is important to note that the root of Muslim violence was viewed as being not only a symptom of a barbaric Muslim nature or cultural difference, for example, but rather as existing in the very religious system that frames Muslim identities and supposedly guides their attitudes and behaviors. Muslims, in other words, were perceived not simply as violent people, but as a people passionately, unwaveringly following an inherently violent religion that goes so far as commanding the murder of non–adherents, as one resident asserted, "It is a fact that Muslims are commanded by the Sura to kill non-Muslims." Another resident's comment was a particularly striking illustration of this perception, speculating about central Muslim beliefs and even going so far as to equate Muslim belief and practice with the quintessentially violent Hitler:

> *Resident*: Muslims believe that if you're not a Muslim, you're an infidel, and that Allah wants them to kill all infidels as part of their Jihad. Those of us who know

about Muslims realize that they're the most evil people in the world. There's never been anything worse other than Hitler.

Thus, Muslims are portrayed as violent and, perhaps more importantly to community residents, Muslims' religious texts and even their god (Allah) are also themselves violent and demand violent obedience from adherents. Beyond the murder of non–Muslims, the depictions of Muslim violence were further broadened by community residents to include concerns surrounding Muslim *domestic* violence, a widely mobilized criticism of Muslims (Muslim men in particular), focusing on the abuse and oppression of Muslim women. One local pastor related a story about his encounter with a local Muslim woman who was reportedly abused by her husband, to illustrate this mode of discourse:

> *Pastor*: I had a lady sit here in my office … that went to the Mosque here in Nashville and married a man who beat her when he caught her reading. I went down and told the Imam down there and he held her until her husband came, and he beat her again for dishonoring her husband … They believe in spanking and beating their wives … I said [to the Imam], "Do you not understand that's wrong?" He said, "It can't be wrong, they're women. What difference does it make what you do to women?"

This story seemed to encapsulate for the pastor not only his perceptions of Muslims' treatment toward women, but of the Muslim community more broadly speaking. This behavior, he suggested, is an outgrowth of the Muslim essential nature and is clear evidence for suspicion of the Muslim community.

Important to note in these depictions of Muslim violence is that residents frequently made *claims to knowledge* of central Islamic teachings and practices— residents presumed to "know" about Islam. Resident claims about Muslims were commonly preceded by such statements, seen above, as, "It is a fact," or "Those of us who know about Muslims." Indeed, the above–quoted pastor positioned himself as an

"authority" on Islam, claiming to have led a study on the topic of Islam at his church and even appearing as a guest on Fox News' "Hannity & Colmes" to discuss the "Muslim tradition" and the threat of Islam to American society. Thus, there is a pervasive sense of "knowing" about Muslims, though such claims were rarely, if ever, substantiated by textual or otherwise authoritative sources of knowledge. Further, this "knowing" most commonly centered around perceptions of the violent nature of Muslims.

Muslim Autocracy

Finally, residents depicted Muslims as being staunchly *autocratic* in their political disposition. This was perhaps most commonly expressed through conjecture surrounding the political practices of Islamic or Muslim–majority nations, with the Muslim political disposition viewed as diametrically opposed to American values of democracy and freedom. Residents frequently discussed foreign affairs or relayed accounts of life in foreign countries as windows into the Muslim essential nature and as cause for suspicion of the Muslim community. Further, these perceptions served for many as a warning for what American political life might someday become should Muslims effectively subvert presently dominant Christian American political and moral values. In other words, Muslim autocracy is the undesired yet inevitable future of the U.S. should the Christian American values of democracy and freedom lose their foothold in American society. The following residents exemplified these concerns:

> *Resident #1*: Christianity promotes democracy and freedom. Look at us and Britain and compare to China and Russia, and Muslims. The Muslims still keep women in subservience where as we have allowed them to be as free as they ought to be. China and Russia are not Christian and they don't care about the freedom of their people. US and Britain were Christian, and developed freedom, but also have grown and developed the most.

> *Resident #2*: We were standing in line to vote for an hour this last time, and I made the comment "We may have to stand around for an hour to vote, but at least we are not fearing for our lives." In some of those Muslim countries you run the risk of being killed if you don't vote for the leaders they want you to vote for.

Thus, residents associated foreign, Muslim–led countries and Muslim rule more generally with oppression and violence and death, as in the above comments respectively. To be under the rule of Muslims is to be denied freedom and democracy—a political life clearly antithetical to the American social and political ways of life.

In sum, to be Muslim is, in the view of many of the study's residents, to be violent and autocratic and, therefore, un–American. More than just un–American, however, to be Muslim is to be directly opposed to the subsistence of the U.S. and to the beliefs and values that ultimately undergird American society. Another way of putting it, to draw on the earlier discussion of real and symbolic threats, we can surmise that the Muslim community for many residents represented primarily a symbolic threat to the prevailing American politico–philosophical and religious structures. There were no voiced concerns that Muslims might steal American jobs, for example, or otherwise compete for limited financial or material resources. Rather, for these residents who yearn for the predominance of Christianity in the U.S. and simultaneously foresee the eventual loss of that predominance at the hands of competing ideologies or religious systems, the Muslim community as religious "Other" stands as an increasingly visible and logical threat to cherished American values and beliefs, a threat to be feared and hated.

Conclusions and Implications

The above analysis highlights and enriches several key features of threat–prejudice theory. First, it is evident that residents in these communities engage in

discursive processes of asserting their own religious dominance both philosophically and historically, largely consistent with the extant social dominance literature (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). These assertions of dominance are further augmented by concerns over social cohesion and order—expressed through resident concerns over the potential slipping away of Christian dominance and the Christian "way of life"—lending greater credence to notions of complementarity between social dominance and right wing authoritarianism. Finally, as discussed above, we can see clear linkages between theories of threat perception and the ways in which residents understand and express their understanding of the religious other. Specifically, expressions of symbolic threat were clearly present in resident discourse, as perceived moral and value differences between American Christians and Muslims frequently emerged. Interestingly, the diminutive size of the Muslim population in the state of Tennessee and in the U.S.—Muslims comprise only 0.8% of the total U.S. population (Pew Research Center, 2009)—highlights the disproportionality of perceived threat relative to actual physical presence and capacity.

I further suggest that the above analysis enriches the extant literature in that it points to several potentially fruitful channels for exploring more in–depth the social framing and expressing of religious prejudices. Perceptions of Christian dominance in American society were commonly grounded in particular interpretations of historical figures, events, and texts. George Washington, Patrick Henry, the American Revolution, the U.S. Constitution—these and other historical "artifacts" were mobilized to fortify arguments for the explicitly Christian roots and character of American society. Further, notions of the American people as a modern–day Israel, or an exiled people of God yearning as a nation to return to favor with God, figured prominently in many of the

discussions and were often buttressed by scriptural references and imagery. These insights beg for further examination of the ways in which historical, scriptural and other such texts and resources are mobilized to support prejudice, and perhaps even begs consideration of the potential contribution of historical (and even theological and biblical) disciplines to such discussions among social scientists. Finally, I was struck by the confidence with which residents made claims to knowledge about the religious "Other"—residents claimed to "know" what Muslims believe, and to "know" about the philosophical and political dispositions of the Muslim community writ large. This perhaps warrants further inquiry into resident consumption patterns relative to various sources of knowledge about the religious "Other"—books, media, religious and political authorities—and how these sources of knowledge might fruitfully be engaged and disputed.

While the above analysis adds a needed layer of qualitative depth to current research on religious prejudice and suggests several channels for future research, I argue that the ultimate value of such an analysis is in its potential practical implications. I would like to consider here whether in–depth examinations of understandings and expressions of religious prejudice might be critical for ameliorating interfaith conflict and further advancing interfaith dialogue. Though recent research has suggested promising frameworks for community interfaith initiatives (Patel, 2006; Mackenzie, Falcon, & Rahman, 2009; McCormack, 2012), this research is often predicated on the false assumption that interfaith initiatives always necessarily bring into contact individuals or groups who are struggling directly with one another on issues of religious prejudice and conflict. As McCarthy (2007) suggested, interfaith groups and initiatives are most

frequently comprised of persons *already* in philosophical agreement and already primed

and open to engaging in some level of interfaith collaboration. There is, in other words, a

tendency toward like-mindedness within the interfaith movement.

I thus argue that groups and individuals concerned with religious prejudice and

interfaith relations should strive toward what Cowan and Lee (1997) refer to as *dialogic*

community as a means of counteracting these like–minded tendencies. The dialogic

community, as Cowan and Lee present it, is a community built not on like–mindedness

and "shared convictions" but rather on "communal processes" of open dialogue and

mutual understanding. This form of community, they further suggest, is born out of

necessity, as pluralism is now a normative feature of present–day American society and

broad public consensus is therefore becoming less and less feasible. With this in mind,

they offer compelling guidelines for true conversation in a pluralistic dialogic

community. Among these is the following commitment of the dialogic community

member:

> When I listen my sole intention is to hear you in order to understand you. I will
> have to let your words mean what they mean to you, not what they perhaps mean
> to me. I will not listen in order to refute, but to understand. (p. 32)

I wish to highlight here the stress on *understanding* in the dialogic community, with the

above qualitative analysis framed as a step toward such understanding. Specifically, it is

a step toward understanding the religious prejudices of those that may potentially be

invited into a dialogic community of interfaith encounter, individuals that may otherwise

be excluded from more like–minded, consensus–based interfaith initiatives. The true

challenge for these interfaith groups thus becomes that they somehow desire to

understand and seek to engage with persons espousing the above–analyzed perspectives

and concerns (Mackenzie, Falcon, & Rahman, 2009, offer promising insights to this end). These perspectives and concerns are, after all, at the root of religious prejudice and are the stated interests of interfaith groups that then paradoxically exclude those perspectives and concerns.

It is important to add, in closing, that my analysis does not nearly represent the American South in all its entirety and diversity. It is not my intent to paint the American South as a region teeming with prejudice and to suggest that individuals who hold the above views are in the majority in the American South. My intent, rather, is to examine threat–based religious prejudice by presenting and interpreting contextualized understandings and expressions of this prejudice. Indeed, for every community resident who expressed religious prejudice, there was another resident who expressed a more tolerant perspective. Note the following resident comment, contrasted to the above analysis:

> *Resident*: I have had Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim friends. Some good things are part of all religions. I see nothing wrong with people practicing their religion and nothing wrong with people not practicing religion at all.

Further research should thus consider not only the perspectives of the prejudiced, but also the perspectives of those less prejudiced and yet nonetheless part of the same social milieu. How do these individuals arrive at more tolerant perspectives? How do they make sense out of the religious "Other," and what stories, artifacts, and images do these persons themselves mobilize in support of these perspectives? Such questions, in many ways, may be just as fruitful as the questions we pose relative to the religiously prejudiced. Further, such questions speak again to the value added by the ethnographic

imagination in exploring the unique and particular ways in which individuals and groups

understand their religious neighbors.

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