

Special Issue Reprint

The Functions of Religion for Human Society

Edited by
Ryan A. Smith

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The Functions of Religion for Human Society

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Guest Editor

Ryan A. Smith



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About the Editor

Ryan A. Smith

Ryan A. Smith is Professor and Chair at the Austin Marxe School of Public and International Affairs, Baruch College, City University of New York and Faculty Affiliate at the Graduate Center, Ph.D. Program in Sociology, City University of New York. His areas of research include the functional use of religion during times of existential crises, the relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction, social stratification, the causes and consequences of race, ethnic and gender inequality in workplace authority, and racial attitudes in America. His research has appeared in numerous peer-reviewed journals including, *American Sociological Review*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, *Social Forces*, *DuBois Review*, *Social Problems*, *Social Currents*, *Social Science Research*, *Sociological Quarterly*, *Review of Religious Research*, *Work and Occupations*, and *American Behavioral Scientist*. Dr. Smith is a former Scholar in Residence at the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University. He also served as the Lillie and Nathan Ackerman Chair of Social Justice at the Austin Marxe School of Public and International Affairs at Baruch College, City University of New York.

Preface

This Reprint of “The Functions of Religion for Human Society” deals with the social-psychological functions of religion and spirituality for identifiable groups. Two major themes are explored, emphasizing (1) the functions of religion for marginalized groups (Part I) and (2) the impact of religion and spirituality on organizational outcomes (Part II). The Reprint further raises the visibility of the articles featured in the Special Issue, which has already generated over 50,000 online views. In Part I, the first set of four articles focuses on racial differences in relation to the functions of religion in the United States (U.S.) context. The first of these articles, authored by Rubia Valente and Ryan A. Smith, examines the relationship between religiosity and misanthropy (a lack of trust in humanity) across racial and ethnic groups. Using data from the U.S.-based General Social Surveys (2000-2018), the authors ask, “Are there ethno-racial differences in the effect of social religiosity (the frequency of church attendance) and individual religiosity (the frequency of prayer) on misanthropy?” Among other things, they find that the effect of religiosity on misanthropy differs significantly by race and ethnicity, with white individuals exhibiting higher levels of church attendance (social religiosity), which is associated with their lower levels of misanthropy or greater trust in humanity. For Black and Latino communities, however, frequent church attendance is associated with higher levels of misanthropy (a lesser trust in humanity). The authors conclude that religion operates differently across racial and ethnic groups, with minorities (Black and Latino groups) remaining far more misanthropic than their white counterparts. The second article, authored by Sandra Barnes, explores the function of religion in the lives of Black members of the LGBTQIA community in the U.S. Amid the continued marginalization of this community in most churches, Barnes asks, “What makes continued congregational involvement viable for this group?” Drawing on survey data and in-depth interviews, Barnes finds that religion functions in three ways for this community: as a controlling mechanism, as a conflict mechanism, and as a cathartic mechanism. Instead of an exodus from the church, Barnes detects a shift *toward* spirituality for this group amid the countervailing experiences of homophobia and exclusion in Black churches, on the one hand, alongside experiences of emotional support, racial affirmation, and increased life satisfaction on the other hand. The third article, authored by Rebecca Kim and Rachel Murdock, focuses on how race and racialized campus environments shape religious engagement and sense of belonging among Gen Z Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) college students in the U.S. How is it, the authors ask, in the era of religious “nones”, that a portion of young adults in the United States not only identify as religious when they come into adulthood but also choose to spend their time in college actively involved with a campus ministry? The answer, based on data derived from in-depth interviews of students, ministry staff, and directors of evangelical campus ministries, is that campus ministries provide BIPOC Gen Z students with a church away from home that allows them to feel “safe” and “seen” in an otherwise predominantly white, alienating environment. Echoing this theme, the final paper in Part I, authored by Shaonta Allen, examines the contemporary relationship between the Black Church and Black, Christian millennials (Generation Y) amid the broader trends of religious decline in the U.S. context. Drawing on in-depth interviews, Allen conceptualizes the idea of “religious resilience” to explain how some functions of the Black Church remain intact (socio-cultural) while others have either waned (socioeconomic) or evolved (socio-political and socio-educational), alongside the emergence of new functions (socio-emotional). The Black Church, Allen concludes, remains a vital force in the life of Black millennials mainly because of its ability to adapt to new social realities. Part II of the Reprint features five final articles that examine the

impact of religion and spirituality on individual, organizational and group-level outcomes in China, with a final paper providing a comparative analysis of the religious ideology of political parties and their influence on clientelists in the Middle East and North Africa. In the first article of Part II, authors Jing Shao, Tianzi Zhang, Young-Chan Lee, and Yingbo Xu examine how regional religious atmosphere influences corporate social responsibility (CSR) in China. The authors assess whether Buddhist- and Taoist-dominated religious atmospheres differentially influence CSR in the form of corporate environmental investment and corporate charitable giving. The analysis of data from Chinese companies and religious sites in cities lead to the conclusion that firms in Taoist-dominated areas are more charitable and less environmentally friendly, whereas firms in Buddhist areas tend to be more ecologically engaged but less charitable. A second article by Yugang He and Wanting Tian looks at the relationship between religious participation and food consumption across eastern, central and western China. Data from the Chinese General Social Survey suggests that religious participation reduces food consumption, leading the authors to conclude that religion functions in a manner that influences everyday economic decisions. A third article, authored by Bin Hou, Shiyang Rao, Yuqi Huang, and Yuxin Wu, investigates the effects of folk beliefs on social trust among Chinese residents. Data from the China Family Panel Study reveal that folk beliefs (ancestral beliefs and feng shui) have a positive effect on social trust, in that people with folk beliefs tend to report higher levels of trust than others, with the effect being strongest among residents of eastern, northern, and rural areas of China. Folk beliefs, the authors conclude, reinforce social networks, emotional support, and feelings of belonging and identity. A fourth article, authored by Tao Xu and Kai Zheng, assesses how religion and social resources influence volunteer participation among international immigrants in the Chinese City of Yiwu. Survey data gathered from immigrants from Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Asia residing in China reveal a strong connection between religious beliefs and volunteer participation. Social networks, the authors find, have a particularly positive influence on volunteer behavior, and Protestants were more likely than Muslims and Catholics to participate in volunteer activities. The final article in the Reprint, authored by Shulei Hu, Jingyi Wang, and Xiaojin Zhang, explores how the religious ideology of political parties influences clientelist practices in the Middle East and North Africa. Cross-national data from the Variety Party Identity and Organization study reveal that political parties with strong religious ideologies are more likely than secular parties to use clientelist networks than secular parties. Religious political parties build strong relationships with religious organizations, business associations and social groups. Importantly, the authors note that the positive relationship between religious ideology and clientelism is present in both Islamic and non-Islamic countries. To conclude, as Guest Editor of this volume, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers whose comments and suggestions greatly enhanced the quality of the articles. I am also grateful to Bella Xu and the editorial staff at *Religions* who patiently and graciously shepherded the review and publishing process of the Special Issue and the production of this Reprint. Finally, I greatly appreciate the authors who answered the call and followed through with their commitments to make original contributions to the scientific study of the functions of religion in human society. Without their commitment and resilience throughout the peer review process, this volume would obviously not have been possible.

Ryan A. Smith

Guest Editor

Article

Religiosity and Misanthropy across the Racial and Ethnic Divide

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Abstract: The systematic study of misanthropy, the lack of trust in humanity, has proliferated over the last 30 years. One prominent line of research details racial and ethnic disparities in levels of misanthropy, but pays little attention to the role of religiosity, while another focuses attention on religiosity and its impact on levels of misanthropy, with only scant attention to the role of race and ethnicity. Little attempt has been made to synthesize these two strands of literature to address an important unanswered question: Does the association between religiosity and misanthropy vary by racial and ethnic group? To answer this question, we pooled data from the General Social Survey (GSS, 2000–2018). Among other things, we find stark racial differences between Blacks and Whites in terms of the effect of religiosity on misanthropy. Blacks and Latinos who attend religious services weekly (social religiosity) have significantly higher levels of misanthropy than others, while Whites who attend weekly services are less likely to be misanthropic. An important takeaway is that service attendance (a type of social capital) is associated with feelings of misanthropy for all groups (albeit in opposite directions for Blacks and Latinos versus Whites), rather than personal acts of prayer (individual religiosity). When it comes to misanthropy, we conclude that religion works differently for minorities compared with Whites. We discuss the implications of our findings for future research.

Keywords: misanthropy; trust; religion; race; ethnicity

Misanthropy develops when one puts complete trust in somebody, thinking the person to be absolutely true, sound, and reliable, only to later discover that the person is deceitful, untrustworthy and fake. And when this happens to someone often . . . they end up . . . hating everyone.

—Attributed to Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo*

1. Introduction

The systematic study of misanthropy, the lack of trust in humanity, has proliferated over the last three decades. Scholars generally agree that feelings of misanthropy have increased in recent years in the United States (Heimer 2001; Paxton 1999; Putnam 2000) and in other countries (Berggren and Bjørnskov 2011; Melgar et al. 2013; Smith 1997). Two prominent tracks of misanthropy research populate the literature.¹ One track features a debate on whether Blacks and Hispanics² are more misanthropic, that is, less trusting, than Whites. A convincing body of research suggests that Blacks are more misanthropic than Whites (Brehm and Rahn 1997; Coverdill et al. 2011; Hughes and Thomas 1998; Smith 1997, 2010; Stets and Fares 2019; Taylor et al. 2007; Wilkes 2011), but at least one study disagrees (Simpson et al. 2007). Far fewer examinations include Latinos, but those that do include them report that Latinos are less trusting than Whites (Stets and Fares 2019; Taylor et al. 2007). While important, these findings scarcely consider the role that religiosity might play in racial and ethnic differences in misanthropy.

A second track examines the effects of religiosity on trust. These studies have produced decidedly mixed results owing to the use of different datasets and the divergent

manner in which religiosity and trust are conceptualized and subsequently measured. Some studies reveal a negative relationship between religiosity and trust (Berggren and Bjørnskov 2011; Dilmaghani 2017; Helliwell and Putnam 2004; Schoenfeld 1978), others show a positive relationship between the two (Bègue 2002; Smidt 1999; Traunmüller 2009; Valente and Okulicz-Kozaryn 2021; Wilkes 2011), and still other studies reveal no statistical relationship at all between religiosity and trust (Alesina and La Ferrara 2002; Bjørnskov 2007; Welch et al. 2007). More nuanced studies report a positive relationship between social religiosity (church attendance) and trust (Smidt 1999; Traunmüller 2009; Valente and Okulicz-Kozaryn 2021), while individual religiosity (praying alone) appears to decrease trust in others (Helliwell and Putnam 2004).

As important as this research is, an exploration that seeks to address the extent to which the effects of religiosity on misanthropy (lack of trust) vary by race and ethnicity is long overdue. The chief purpose of this article is to provide such an analysis. We use data from the General Social Surveys (2000–2018), a nationally representative database replete with the most extensive measures of misanthropy, race, ethnicity, and religiosity in the United States, to address a previously unanswered question: Are there ethnoracial differences in the effect of social religiosity (frequency of church attendance) and individual religiosity (frequency of prayer) on misanthropy (lack of trust in humanity)? We find that the effect of religiosity on misanthropy is very prescribed in that Whites who attend church every week (social religiosity) are less misanthropic (more trusting) than others. In fact, the more frequently Whites attend church, the less misanthropic they become. The opposite is the case for Blacks and Latinos; those who attend church every week still have higher levels of misanthropy than others, and increases in church frequency do not significantly reduce misanthropy for these two groups. An important takeaway is that engaging in private prayer (individual religiosity), no matter the frequency, has very little effect on people's evaluation of human nature. Thus, social religiosity, in the form of service attendance (a type of social capital), is more important in shaping feelings of misanthropy (albeit in opposite directions for racial and ethnic groups) than individual acts of prayer.

We begin with a brief review of the race/ethnicity and misanthropy literature, followed by a discussion of the misanthropy and religiosity literature. Drawing on prior research and theory, we then develop testable hypotheses about race and ethnic variation in the effects of religiosity on misanthropy. A systematic test of our hypotheses is followed by a discussion of how our findings contribute to prior literature, the limitations of the study, and several suggestions for future research.

2. Background and Literature Review

2.1. Race, Ethnicity, and Misanthropy

While the last three decades have witnessed a flurry of empirical studies seeking to understand the relationship between ethnic diversity and social trust, widespread consensus regarding the nature of the relationship is still elusive. Two major questions remain unsettled: Does ethnic diversity erode social trust? And, are Blacks and Latinos less trusting than Whites?

2.2. Does Ethnic Diversity Erode Social Trust?

In one of the most comprehensive examinations to date of the relationship between ethnic diversity and trust, Dinesen et al. (2020, p. 441) ask, "Does ethnic diversity erode social trust?" They conclude, after a thorough "narrative review and meta-analysis of 1001 estimates across 87 studies", that it does. In particular, the authors find that social trust tends to be lower in more ethnically diverse social contexts. The authors review several theories that purport to account for the negative relationship between ethnicity and social trust. Chief among them is their own "exposure theory", which asserts that "the mere exposure to people of different ethnic backgrounds erodes social trust" (Dinesen et al. 2020, p. 444). They also point to classic theories of group threat and realistic group conflict to explain the negative relationship between ethnicity and social trust. Both theories feature group

competition for material and symbolic resources (Blumer 1958; Blalock 1967) as sources of majority/minority group conflict. More controversial is Putnam's (2007) "constrict theory", which Dinesen et al. qualify as "the most daring and wide-ranging" (p. 444) of the bunch. Putnam asserts that regardless of the targeted ethnic group, ethnic diversity erodes social trust because it leads to social isolation. Beyond a comprehensive review of the dominant literature, Dinesen et al.'s (2020) major contribution is their empirical test of Putnam's theory. The authors compare the effects of diversity on multiple types of trust (e.g., trust in neighbors, in-group trust, generalized trust, out-group trust), and find a negative relationship for all four types; however, the strength of the relationship varies across trust types. For example, the relationship is strongest when trust is examined at the level of neighborhoods, weakens to intermediate levels when examining in-group trust and generalized social trust, and is weakest when observing out-group trust (p. 461). Despite the strong evidence their study reveals about the negative relationship between ethnic diversity and trust—a finding that, on the face of it, appears consistent with Putnam's theory—Dinesen et al. caution against the "apocalyptic claims" often extrapolated from Putnam's work "regarding the severe threat of ethnic diversity for social trust in contemporary societies" (p. 461).³

Wilkes's (2011) analysis of General Social Survey data (1972–2008) found a decline in trust among Whites over the 36-year period examined, but the trend for Blacks was more ambiguous. The reason for the decline in trust among Whites, Wilkes notes, is that older, more trusting generations are being replaced by younger, more cynical generations. Arneil (2010) argues that the decline in trust is not related to increases in demographic diversity per se, but rather to the "politics of diversity" in the form of White reaction to civil rights gains, which led to the neutering of social policies that were designed to facilitate equal opportunity policies in the areas of education and employment (e.g., affirmative action).

Changes in the national political landscape can also affect social trust. The 2008 election of Barack Obama as the first Black president and his reelection in 2012 disturbed a hornet's nest of White resentment in the United States. Some would argue that the manifestation of these patterns corresponded with the 2016 election of Donald Trump, who was widely seen as the antidote to Barack Obama (Inwood 2019). Donald Trump will be remembered for running on an explicitly anti-immigrant platform fueled by a vocal religious right and nationalist agenda that was decidedly antiminority and explicitly pro-White. According to *Newsweek's* analysis of FBI data (Villarreal 2020), hate crimes increased by 20% during Trump's presidency. In the 6 January 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol following Joe Biden's electoral victory, we see what can happen when large swaths of people lose trust in American institutions and, by extension, their fellow human beings.

2.3. Are Blacks and Latinos Less Trusting (More Misanthropic) Than Whites?

If there is relative consensus at all in the literature regarding the relationship between race/ethnicity and trust, it has to be the finding that Blacks are more misanthropic (less trusting) than Whites. This finding dominates some of the earlier investigations into the matter (Alesina and La Ferrara 2000; Brehm and Rahn 1997; Hughes and Thomas 1998; Patterson 1999; Putnam 2000; Smith 1997; Uslaner 2002), but also more recent treatments (Coverdill et al. 2011; Evangelist 2022; Smith 2010; Stets and Fares 2019; Taylor et al. 2007; Wilkes 2011).⁴ To be sure, research on the differences in misanthropy between Latinos and Whites is quite scarce. What little we know supports a Latino/White gap in misanthropy, but the effect may very well be a function of group differences in social class. In a study based on a single year (2000) of data from the National Election Study, Kiecolt et al. (2006) found that Latino/White differences in generalized trust disappear once controls for education are taken into account.

Other studies based on multiple measures of trust (generalized trust, trust in neighbors, and trust in police) support the conclusion that both Blacks and Latinos have lower levels of trust than Whites. For example, in a study by Evangelist (2022) based on data from Chicago,

the Latino/White gap in generalized trust (e.g., trust of most people) narrowed from 33% (without controls) to 8.2% once controls for key indicators were taken into account. By contrast, the Black/White gap in generalized trust reduced from 40% to 26% with controls (p. 1120). Further, the Latino/White gap in trust in neighbors reduced to zero after controls, while the Latino/White gap in trust in police narrowed from 9% without controls to 6% with controls. By contrast, Black/White gaps in particularized trust (neighbors) and institutional trust (police) remained in the double digits, despite controls for numerous confounders. In sum, the net Black/White gap in trust remains wide across different measures of trust, but the Latino/White gap narrows or disappears once social class and other key measures are statistically controlled (Kiecolt et al. 2006).

As important as this research is, it tends to be limited due to a focus on earlier time periods, or because the data does not include sufficient samples of Latinos, or because the research is based on a single year of data. One of our contributions centers on the fact that we use recent data that stretches across an 18-year time period (2000–2018), with a sizable enough sample of Latinos to sustain meaningful statistical comparisons with Blacks and Whites.

2.4. Explanations for Why Blacks and Latinos Are Less Trusting (More Misanthropic) Than Whites

Theories that seek to explain why ethnoracial minorities may be more misanthropic than Whites abound. Smith's (2010) comprehensive review of the matter features discrimination, neighborhood location, and ethnoracial socialization as potential causes. The proposition that discrimination, both historical and contemporary forms, causes Blacks and Latinos to be more misanthropic than Whites has resonated recently (Douds and Wu 2018; Evangelist 2022; Nunnally 2012; Wilkes and Wu 2019). The discrimination explanation argues that Blacks have experienced discrimination stretching back to over 400 years of slavery and another 100 years of Jim Crow segregation, as well as contemporary forms of discriminatory treatment, as documented in studies of labor markets, housing, education, and the legal system, to name just a few social domains (Charles 2003; Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Moss and Tilly 2001; Pager and Shepherd 2008; Pager et al. 2009; Western 2006). In one of the few empirical tests of the discrimination hypothesis, Evangelist (2022) found that discrimination "contributed only modestly to Black/White and Hispanic/White differences in trust" (p. 1110). Interestingly, Evangelist also reported that the perception of unfair treatment among Whites was most damaging to their levels of generalized trust when compared to perceptions of unfair treatment among Blacks and Latinos.

Another theory that may explain Black/White and Latino/White differences in misanthropy include ethnoracial disparities in neighborhood location. This argument contends that minorities who are concentrated in densely populated areas of poverty and crime are likely to be more misanthropic than their counterparts in other residential locations (Smith 2010). Buttressing the importance of neighborhood context as an explanation for racial differences in misanthropy, Ross et al. (2001) showed how Black/White disparities in trust evaporate once indicators of neighborhood quality are controlled.

Ethnoracial socialization may also account for comparatively higher levels of misanthropy among ethnoracial minorities. This argument suggests that minority parents who convey messages to their children about how to conduct themselves in public, especially in predominantly White institutional settings and when encountering order maintenance agents of the state, such as police officers assigned to protect and maintain White institutional dominance, may engender heightened distrust in their offspring (Brunson and Weitzer 2011; Evangelist 2022; Hughes 2003; Nunnally 2012; Smith 2010).

Thus, when considering both the empirical research and theoretical propositions discussed above, it is reasonable to expect Blacks to exhibit higher levels of misanthropy than Whites, and Hispanics to exhibit higher levels of misanthropy than Whites.

2.5. Religion and Misanthropy

What is the association between religion and misanthropy? The answer to this question is complex mainly because it depends on multiple factors, including how religiosity is measured (the distinction between social and individual religiosity), and whether religiosity is defined by religious denomination (e.g., Catholic, Protestant) or religious affiliation (e.g., Christian, Muslim, Jewish). The nature of the association also depends on how trust or lack of trust is conceptualized and measured (e.g., generalized trust, particularized trust, misanthropy, etc.). Given these multiple contingencies, it comes as no surprise to learn that the extant literature has produced mixed results both across and within studies. While such complexity makes it difficult to organize the literature, there is some logic to grouping studies based on whether the association between religion and misanthropy (or lack of trust) is positive, negative, or statistically unrelated (see Berggren and Bjørnskov 2011).

2.5.1. Positive Association

On the one hand, there are theoretical and empirical reasons to expect that religion may have a positive effect on trust. As a general principle, most major religions encourage adherents to treat others as they themselves would like to be treated. Berggren and Bjørnskov (2011, pp. 461–62) observe that the “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” dictum is present in one form or another in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Smith (1997) theorized that given its social nature, church attendance should reduce misanthropy. Whether this or other principles that inform how adherents ought to treat their fellow human beings actually translate into trusting others is an unsettled question.

However, there are some empirical findings that are consistent with the idea that religion has a positive effect on trust. Dilmaghani (2017) found that a high level of religious commitment positively correlates with trust among Protestants in Canada. Brañas-Garza et al. (2009) discovered the same correlation among Catholics in Latin America, while other research reports that Protestantism has a positive effect in cross-sectional studies (Uslaner 2002) and studies based on individual-level data (Traunmüller 2009). Other studies note that affiliation with more liberal Christian denominations is associated with more trust (Daniels and Von Der Ruhr 2010), as does belonging to a mainline denomination (Berggren and Bjørnskov 2009; Orbell et al. 1992; Smidt 1999; Traunmüller 2009; Welch et al. 2004, 2007; Veenstra 2002). When it comes to the distinction between social and individual religiosity, there is substantial evidence that social religiosity in the form of service attendance and church membership increases trust (Bègue 2002; Smidt 1999; Traunmüller 2009; Veenstra 2002; Welch et al. 2004). Finally, the positive association between religion and some constructs of trust also extends to Hinduism and Buddhism (Bjørnskov 2007).

2.5.2. Negative Association

On the other hand, there are theoretical and empirical reasons to expect religion to have a negative effect on trust. Scholars have employed social psychological theories to explain the relationship. Chief among them are theories that distinguish in-group favoritism from out-group derogation (Byrne 1971; McPherson et al. 2001; Tajfel and Turner 1982; Tajfel et al. 1971). Simply put, religious organizations and the people who adhere to their tenets are members of the in-group, while nonmembers comprise the out-group. Thus, it is conceivable that in-group members would have more trust in people who subscribe to their religious beliefs than out-group members who do not (Sosis 2005).

Another factor that could account for a negative relationship between religion and trust is the content of the religious messaging that adherents are exposed to on a weekly basis. In this context, Smith (1997) theorized that “fundamentalist beliefs, which emphasize the sinful nature of humans and a stern and authoritarian God” (p. 183) should increase misanthropy. Similarly, religious sermons and programs that have a social justice orientation, such as that born out of the American Civil Rights Movement, could increase misanthropy toward institutions, systems, or people deemed antagonistic to the cause of freedom, justice, and equality.⁵

Finally, beyond the messaging found in sermons and programs, basic religious teachings emanating from religious texts could also increase misanthropy. To explore this idea, we conducted a mixed-methods content analysis of the online Bible website Biblegateway.com. Using the New King James Version of the Bible, we inserted the keyword “trust” in the search field. Two questions guided our inquiry: (1) How often does the word “trust” (or some version of the word) appear in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, and more to the point, (2) What is the literary context that surrounds each appearance of the word “trust” in the Bible? For the latter question, our goal was to search for major themes that represent the context in which trust appears in the Bible.⁶ Our search revealed that the term “trust” appears in the New King James Version of the Bible 186 times. Specifically, “trust” appears in the Old Testament 159 times—much more frequently than in the New Testament, where it appears 27 times. We unearthed several major themes that are consistent with the theory that for the most part, adherents are instructed to put their trust in God and less so in humankind, material things, or other people.

For example, the majority of the 186 instances of the word “trust” in the New King James Version of the Bible refer to trusting in God or Christ/Jesus (55%). Noteworthy examples of this major theme, include: “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him” (Job 13:15) and “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding (Proverbs 3:5). Other themes were far less frequent and mainly framed in the context of the folly of trusting in things (17%), such as idols or riches (e.g., “They shall be turned back, they shall be greatly ashamed, who trust in carved images, who say to the molded images, ‘You are our gods’” [Isaiah 42:17] and “Here is the man *who* did not make God his strength, but trusted in the abundance of his riches, *and* strengthened himself in his wickedness” [Psalm 52:7]). A final theme that registered in the double digits (15%) pertained to the perils of trusting in other people: “Thus says the LORD: Cursed *is* the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the LORD” (Jeremiah 17:5) or “Do not trust in a friend; do not put your confidence in a companion” (Micah 7:5). The upshot of this exercise is straightforward; when it comes to trust, the primary text of the Christian Bible largely errs on the side of imploring adherents to mainly trust in God and not people and things. Thus, if anything, Biblical teaching is not inconsistent with misanthropy.⁷

Beyond this exercise, the broader empirical literature lends further credence to the notion that religion influences trust negatively. In a cross-national study of 109 countries, Berggren and Bjørnskov (2011) discovered a robust negative relationship between religiosity and trust. Similarly, Dilmaghani (2017) found that a high level of religious commitment negatively correlated with trust in a sample of Catholics in Canada, and Berggren and Jordahl (2006) reported that religiosity and religious fractionalization lower trust. Belonging to a hierarchical religious institution likewise appears to have a negative impact on trust (Bjørnskov 2007; La Porta et al. 1996; Zak and Knack 2001). Moreover, differences in denominational affiliation also matter as membership in more conservative Christian denominations is associated with lower trust (Daniels and Von Der Ruhr 2010; Smidt 1999). In fact, Hempel et al. (2012) used a comprehensive approach to model theological conservatism (e.g., personal convictions towards the Bible, beliefs in the existence of hell, the need for a born-again experience to be saved) as opposed to using a single-item measurement or denominational affiliation. They found robust support that conservative affiliation and theology bear negative associations with generalized trust. Moreover, contrary to Smith’s (1997) assertion, Schoenfeld (1978) also found that adherents who had a high level of church attendance (social religiosity) were less likely to trust others (see also Hoffman 2013), as were adherents who belonged to more fundamentalist churches. Similarly, Helliwell and Putnam (2004) showed that individual religiosity, as defined by one’s belief in a higher being, decreases trust. Finally, a few studies found either no statistically significant effect of religious affiliation on trust (Alesina and La Ferrara 2002; Bjørnskov 2007; Welch et al. 2007), or a faint curvilinear relationship net of controls (Smidt 1999).⁸

2.6. Race, Ethnicity, Religiosity, and Misanthropy

Religiosity is seldom treated as a focal predictor in studies seeking to account for ethnoracial differences in misanthropy. Instead, when considered at all, religiosity is offered as a control variable (Stets and Fares 2019; Wilkes 2011), with little or no attempt to explore how multiple dimensions of religiosity (e.g., social versus individual religiosity) might shed additional light on the association between race/ethnicity and misanthropy. Wilkes (2011), controlling for “religious attendance (days per year)” in models predicting generalized trust, found small but positive main effects for both Whites and Blacks, but when predicting people’s trust in others and whether they perceive others as helpful and fair, the coefficients for both groups were zero. Stets and Fares (2019) reported that Blacks had higher mean levels (4.53) of religious attendance than Whites (3.14) and Hispanics (4.14), but religious attendance did not register as a statistically significant main effect in models predicting trust. Stets and Fares’s structural equation models, which control for possible group differences in several factors, provided the strongest evidence that relative to Whites, Blacks and Hispanics “report less trust” (p. 9). However, neither Wilkes (2011) nor Stets and Fares (2019) treat religiosity as a focal predictor of generalized trust or, for that matter, its constituent items: trust, helpful, and fair. Thus, in an effort to fill these gaps, we expect: the greater the level of religiosity among Blacks, the higher the level of misanthropy they will exhibit, *and* the greater the level of religiosity among Hispanics, the higher the level of misanthropy they will exhibit.

In contrast, Whites continue to dominate Blacks and Hispanics along major indicators of social status related to feelings of trust, including but not limited to educational attainment, occupational status, income, wealth acquisition, political power, and health outcomes. Thus, although Christian Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics share the same Biblical text and God, we theorize that the relatively higher social, political, and economic status of Whites likely mitigates their feelings of misanthropy. Moreover, sermon message content and social context may also matter. For example, it is reasonable to assume that some of the content and emphases of sermons in predominantly White churches likely differs from that of Black and Latino churches. In predominantly Black or Latino churches, both implicit and explicit messages of social justice may drive feelings of misanthropy. Such themes are likely to be absent in predominantly White churches. Thus, due to Whites’ relatively higher social, economic, and political status, coupled with the absence of social justice themes tied to their religious experiences, it is reasonable to expect that: the greater the level of religiosity among Whites, the lower the level of misanthropy they will exhibit.

Finally, while prior research suggests that the effect of religiosity on misanthropy should vary by race and ethnicity, we are unaware of any attempts to test this proposition empirically. Thus, our final set of hypotheses are framed around the expectation that: the effects of religiosity on misanthropy will vary between Blacks and Whites, net of controls, *and* the effects of religiosity on misanthropy will vary between Latinos and Whites, net of controls.

To summarize, we make several contributions to the literature. First, we marry the race and misanthropy literature with that of the religiosity and misanthropy literature by examining racial and ethnic variation in the association between religion and misanthropy. Second, while prior research shows that social and individual religiosity are not only positively correlated, but also produce opposite effects on trust and misanthropy (Helliwell and Putnam 2004; Smith 1997; Valente and Okulicz-Kozaryn 2021), whether these relationships hold across racial and ethnic groups is an empirical question that has yet to be answered. Third, to our knowledge, prior research that examines racial and ethnic differences in misanthropy pay either scant attention to the role of religiosity or no attention at all. We feature two measures of religiosity as focal predictors of misanthropy: frequency of service attendance and frequency of prayer. Finally, most of what we know about racial and ethnic differences in misanthropy feature Black/White comparisons and exclude Latinos, a major oversight given that Latinos now constitute the largest minority group in the United States

and their experiences may or may not differ from other groups. Thus, we include Latinos in our analyses in an attempt to fill this gap in the literature.

The empirical research and theoretical propositions discussed above lead us to the following formal hypotheses. We expect:

H_{1a}. Blacks will exhibit higher levels of misanthropy than Whites.

H_{1b}. Hispanics will exhibit higher levels of misanthropy than Whites.

H_{2a}. The greater the level of religiosity among Blacks, the higher the level of misanthropy they will exhibit.

H_{2b}. The greater the level of religiosity among Hispanics, the higher the level of misanthropy they will exhibit.

H_{2c}. The greater the level of religiosity among Whites, the lower the level of misanthropy they will exhibit.

H_{3a}. The effects of religiosity on misanthropy will vary between Blacks and Whites, net of controls.

H_{3b}. The effects of religiosity on misanthropy will vary between Latinos and Whites, net of controls.

3. Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we use data from the U.S. General Social Survey (GSS) with a focus on the years 2000–2018. The GSS is a biennial, cross-sectional, nationally representative survey. The unit of analysis is at the individual level and data are collected in face-to-face, in-person interviews (Davis et al. 2007). The full dataset contains 30,730 observations pooled over 2000–2018, but the sample size varies depending on the variables used and missing data. All variables were recoded in such a way that a higher value means more.

3.1. Dependent Variable

Misanthropy and Its Constituent Parts

Misanthropy is our main outcome of interest. Following Smith (1997), we measured misanthropy by creating an index of three measures drawn from the GSS: *trust*, *fair*, and *helpful*. The question to measure trust asked, “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?”⁹ Possible responses were 1 = “cannot trust”, 2 = “depends”, and 3 = “can trust”. The question to measure fair asked, “Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance, or would they try to be fair?” Possible responses were 1 = “take advantage”, 2 = “depends”, and 3 = “fair”. The question to measure helpful asked, “Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?” Possible responses were 1 = “look out for self”, 2 = “depends”, and 3 = “helpful”. We used factor analysis with varimax rotation to produce an index, and we reversed it so that it measures misanthropy. Cronbach’s alpha is 0.67.

3.2. Focal Predictors

3.2.1. Race/Ethnicity

We use the variable *race* from the GSS, which is drawn from the question, “What race do you consider yourself?”, together with the variable for *Hispanic or Latino* to create dummy variables indicating respondents who claimed to be White or Black, but not Hispanic.¹⁰ Most studies that investigate racial and ethnic differences in misanthropy are restricted to samples of Blacks and Whites only, excluding analyses of Latinos. This is problematic given that Latinos now constitute the largest minority group in the United States. We fill this gap in the literature by including Latinos alongside our analysis of Black and White disparities in the effects of religiosity on levels of misanthropy.

In 2000, a new variable was introduced in the GSS based on responses to the question, “Are you Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino/Latina?” Prior to 2000, data limitations forced researchers to rely on the GSS variable *ethnic* to create a sample of Hispanics by com-

binning respondents who self-designated their origin status as Mexico, Spain, Puerto Rico, and/or “other” Spanish—a composite containing persons from Central and South America (Greeley 1994; Hunt 1999). However, the GSS variable *ethnic* is more representative of the countries where respondents’ ancestors originated from and included only respondents who identified with a single ethnic origin. Thus, we rely on the more recent and accurate measurement of Latino in the GSS by using the variable *Hispanic* instead of *ethnic*.¹¹ Using *Hispanic*, we recoded the variable *race* in the GSS and created a *Latino* variable which includes only respondents who claimed to be Hispanic (N = 3549), irrespective of race (e.g., Whites, Blacks, and others).¹² All descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, GSS 2000–2018.

	Obs	Total Mean	Black	White	Latino	Min.	Max.
Dependent variables							
Misanthropy index	14,142	2.065 (0.749)	2.385 (0.646)	1.950 (0.752)	2.345 (0.657)	1	3.041
Trust	14,765	1.712 (0.929)	1.363 (0.741)	1.839 (0.958)	1.395 (0.766)	1	3
Helpful	14,266	1.623 (0.639)	1.746 (0.623)	1.572 (0.642)	1.768 (0.600)	1	3
Fair	14,221	2.109 (0.951)	1.737 (0.919)	2.23 (0.932)	1.876 (0.942)	1	3
Focal predictors							
Frequency of service attendance	25,442	3.517 (2.78)	4.37 (2.67)	3.324 (2.79)	3.61 (2.68)	0	8
Frequency of prayer	19,845	3.236 (1.729)	4.0 (1.313)	3.061 (1.782)	3.313 (1.609)	0	5
Control variables							
Real income in \$1986, millions	22,743	0.034 (0.034)	0.022 (0.023)	0.038 (0.036)	0.025 (0.027)	0.0002	0.1551
Marital status	25,615	0.461 (0.498)	0.273 (0.446)	0.502 (0.500)	0.446 (0.497)	0	1
Age	25,546	47.77 (17.44)	44.49 (16.23)	49.73 (17.65)	40.19 (14.79)	18	89
Age ²	25,546	2586.47 (1794.8)	2242.96 (1596.56)	2785.04 (1850.37)	1833.66 (1381.42)	324	7921
Education	25,577	13.464 (3.025)	12.95 (2.75)	13.85 (2.827)	11.80 (3.74)	0	20
Gender (male)	25,633	0.445 (0.497)	0.385 (0.487)	0.457 (0.498)	0.450 (0.498)	0	1
U.S. nativity	24,136	0.899 (0.302)	0.919 (0.273)	0.955 (0.207)	0.535 (0.499)	0	1
Urbanicity	25,633	0.890 (0.312)	0.922 (0.268)	0.870 (0.336)	0.969 (0.173)	0	1
Conservative	21,948	0.342 (0.474)	0.242 (0.429)	0.371 (0.483)	0.289 (0.453)	0	1
Liberal	21,948	0.273 (0.445)	0.316 (0.465)	0.261 (0.439)	0.292 (0.455)	0	1
Unemployed	25,617	0.040 (0.195)	0.064 (0.244)	0.032 (0.177)	0.053 (0.224)	0	1
Occupation prestige	24,470	43.63 (13.16)	40.46 (12.39)	44.94 (13.20)	39.45 (12.22)	16	80
Region (South)	25,633	0.381 (0.486)	0.589 (0.492)	0.341 (0.474)	0.360 (0.480)	0	1
Year of survey	25,633	2008.502 (5.76)	2008.78 (5.87)	2008.23 (5.73)	2009.74 (5.57)	2000	2018

Table 1. Cont.

	Obs	Total Mean	Black	White	Latino	Min.	Max.
Religious Tradition							
Mainline Protestant	25,633	0.146 (0.353)	0.078 (0.268)	0.182 (0.385)	0.021 (0.143)	0	1
Black Protestant	25,633	0.197 (0.398)	0.506 (0.500)	0.159 (0.366)	0.041 (0.199)	0	1
Evangelical Protestant	25,633	0.251 (0.433)	0.469 (0.499)	0.229 (0.420)	0.109 (0.311)	0	1
Catholic	25,493	0.237 (0.425)	0.061 (0.240)	0.216 (0.411)	0.584 (0.493)	0	1
Theological Conservatism							
Fundamentalist	24,641	2.031 (0.774)	1.639 (0.7972)	2.11 (0.779)	2.04 (0.553)	1	3
Bible	20,553	2.125 (0.722)	2.440 (0.683)	2.044 (0.710)	2.21 (0.725)	1	3

3.2.2. Focal Predictors: Two Dimensions of Religiosity

Religiosity is a latent variable that cannot be directly observed. Thus, scholars have measured religiosity in numerous ways. While some researchers focus on denominational membership (Addai et al. 2013; Alesina and La Ferrara 2000), others have measured the importance of religion in a respondent's daily life (Berggren and Bjørnskov 2011). For our purposes, we use two indicators drawn from the GSS: frequency of service attendance (social religiosity) and frequency of prayer (individual religiosity) (Schwadel 2011; Valente and Okulicz-Kozaryn 2021; Wilkes 2011).¹³ Social religiosity (belonging) is measured in this study with the variable *attend* via the question, "How often do you attend religious services?" Responses ranged from 0 = "never" to 8 = "more than once a week".¹⁴ Individual religiosity (believing) is measured with the variable *pray* via the question, "About how often do you pray?" Responses ranged from 0 = "never" to 5 = "several times a day".

3.2.3. Controls

Drawing on prior research (Welch et al. 2007), we control for indicators of social class such as education, income, and occupational prestige, based on the premise that social class lowers misanthropy (Melgar et al. 2013) and may account for Latino/White differences in misanthropy (Kiecolt et al. 2006). We also control for age and age-squared because research shows that age has a positive effect on multiple measures of religiosity, including service attendance (Schwadel 2010) and prayer (Schwadel 2011). Marital status and gender are controlled because married people exhibit less misanthropy than their nonmarried counterparts, while men tend to be more misanthropic than women (Melgar et al. 2013). U.S. nativity and political affiliation are also considered mainly because of their potential impact on misanthropy. To ensure that the effects we uncover are not due to specific denominations or religious traditions, we include controls for religious tradition,¹⁵ as well as feelings towards the Bible¹⁶ (Steensland et al. 2000; Hempel et al. 2012), and we conduct robustness checks for individual denominations. We also control for employment status, given its role in contributing to feelings of misanthropy (Melgar et al. 2013). Since data were pooled across an 18-year period, we include dummy variables for year. Because of the regional heterogeneity of the United States, the relationship between religiosity and misanthropy is likely to vary by ethnoracial identity depending on where respondents reside. Thus, we control for both urban status and region.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics: Mean Racial and Ethnic Differences in Key Variables

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for all variables. Blacks (2.385) and Latinos (2.345) have higher mean levels of misanthropy than their White (1.950) counterparts.

When the question turns to whether “most people can be trusted”, Whites (1.839) register higher levels of trust than both Blacks (1.363) and Latinos (1.395). Moreover, while Whites (2.230) are more likely than Blacks (1.737) and Latinos (1.876) to report that most people would try to be fair “if they got the chance”, our data show that Blacks (1.746) and Latinos (1.768) are more likely than Whites (1.572) to endorse the belief that “most of the time, people try to be helpful”. The latter finding contrasts with that of Wilkes (2011), who reported, based on earlier years of GSS data (1972–2008), that White respondents (52%) were more likely than Black respondents (32%) to agree that most people try to be helpful (see p. 1600).

Regarding religiosity, our focal predictors for later multivariate models reveal that Blacks (4.370) are more likely to attend religious services (social religiosity) than Latinos (3.61) and Whites (3.324). In addition, Blacks (4.0) are more likely than their Latino (3.313) and White (3.061) counterparts to report that they pray (individual religiosity). Table 1 shows racial and ethnic differences in the distribution of the control variables used in our multivariate models below.

4.2. Ethnoracial Trends in Misanthropy

We begin by looking at the change over time in misanthropy levels by ethnoracial group. As illustrated in Figure 1, in the United States, Whites have the lowest levels of misanthropy while Black and Latino respondents have the highest levels. The figure shows that around 2010, the misanthropy levels of Blacks and Latinos converged, and since then, negligible differences between the two groups remain. Interestingly, for Blacks and Latinos, the levels of misanthropy appear to vary in accordance with an economic downturn and three presidential election cycles. For example, Blacks and Latinos registered the highest levels of misanthropy in 2008, a year marked by an economic recession and the election of Barack Obama to the presidency. Immediately following Obama’s election, there was a precipitous decline in misanthropy among Blacks and Latinos, suggesting that both groups became more trusting of humanity during Obama’s first term (2008–2012).

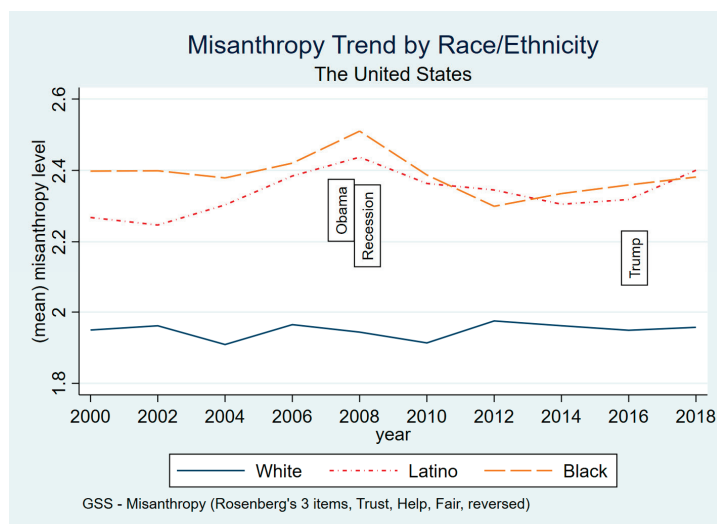


Figure 1. Misanthropy by ethnoracial identity in the United States, 2000–2018.

However, misanthropy levels of Blacks and Latinos steadily crept up once again following Obama’s re-election in 2012, and the pattern continued to trend upward leading up to and following the 2016 election of Donald Trump. By contrast, there is little evidence in Figure 1 to suggest that misanthropy levels among Whites are associated with economic forces or presidential elections.

Figure 2 presents misanthropy levels by frequency of service attendance for each racial and ethnic group. Misanthropy levels are noticeably lower for Whites, regardless of their

frequency of service attendance, and much higher for Blacks and Latinos. Importantly, there is a sharp decline in misanthropy levels among Whites as their frequency of service attendance increases.

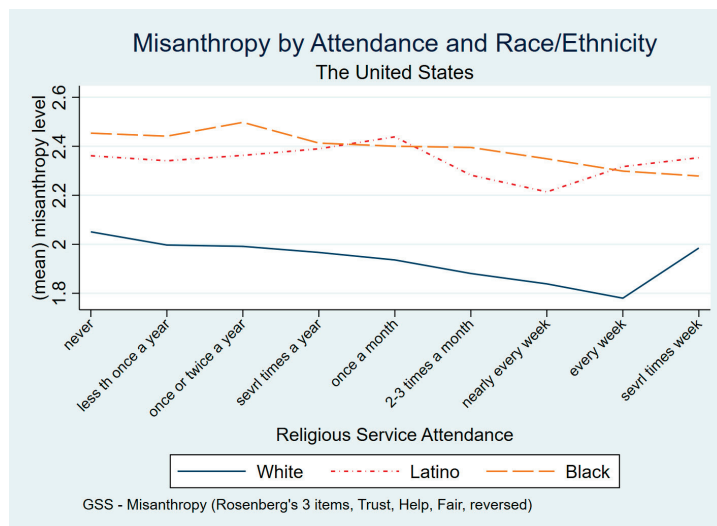


Figure 2. Misanthropy by frequency of religious service attendance and race/ethnicity.

In particular, Whites who attend religious services every week have negligible levels of misanthropy, particularly in comparison to Whites who attend services several times per week. Figure 2 also shows that relative to Whites, Blacks and Latinos continue to exhibit higher levels of misanthropy. While there is a slight decline in misanthropy levels among Blacks as service attendance increases, the opposite pattern is evident for Latinos in that their misanthropy levels rise as service attendance increases from nearly every week to every week and several times a week.

Our second measure of religiosity, prayer, also reveals striking racial and ethnic gaps in levels of misanthropy. However, as shown in Figure 3, in comparison to service attendance, the relatively flat curves for each racial and ethnic group suggest that prayer is much less related to misanthropy.

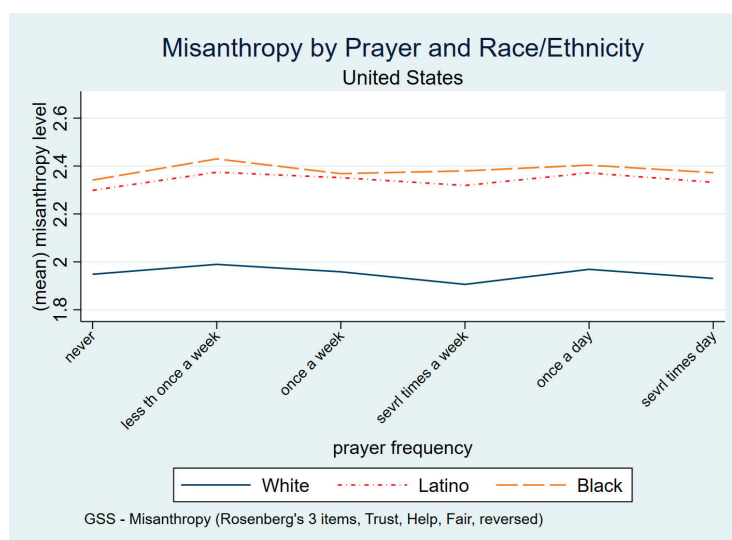


Figure 3. Misanthropy by frequency of prayer and race/ethnicity.

4.3. Multivariate Analysis: Net of Controls

The comparatively higher levels of misanthropy for Blacks and Latinos remain firmly intact even when we control for a host of factors that prior research suggests might account for ethnoracial differences in misanthropy. In Table 2, we begin with Model b1 as a baseline that includes our dummy variables for race and ethnicity, with Whites as the reference group and service attendance as our first focal predictor of religiosity. Model b1 confirms that both Blacks and Latinos have higher levels of misanthropy than Whites, net of social religiosity, as defined by frequency of service attendance.

Table 2. OLS Regression: Determinants of Misanthropy, Net of Controls. Beta (fully standardized) coefficients reported.

VARIABLES	b1	b2	b3
Ref: White			
Black	0.219 ***	0.214 ***	0.094 ***
Latino	0.178 ***	0.180 ***	0.067 ***
Attend	−0.095 ***	−0.116 ***	−0.082 ***
Pray		0.051 ***	0.011
Real income			−0.082 ***
Catholic			−0.008
Mainline Protestant			−0.044 ***
Black Protestant			0.054 ***
Evangelical Protestant			−0.025
Fundamentalist			−0.033
Bible			0.052 ***
Conservative			−0.005
Liberal			−0.044 ***
Married			−0.043 ***
Unemployed			0.010
Occ Prestige			−0.057 ***
Age			−0.185 ***
Age ²			−0.007
Education			−0.169 ***
Male			0.013
Born US			−0.006
Urban			−0.010
South			0.064 ***
Constant	***	***	***
R-Squared	0.0712	0.0733	0.1948
N	14,004	13,049	10,443

Note: Control measures are the same as those reported in Table 1. Robust aster in parentheses *** $p < 0.001$.

The main effect for service attendance (beta = −0.095, $p < 0.001$) is negative and statistically significant, suggesting that church attendance is associated with lower levels of misanthropy. A similar pattern is observed in Model b2, where we add controls for individual religiosity (frequency of prayer), except that the coefficient is notably positive (beta = 0.051, $p < 0.001$) and statistically significant, indicating that an increase in the frequency of prayer is associated with higher levels of misanthropy. Thus, as reported in prior research, social religiosity and individual religiosity have opposite effects on misanthropy (Valente and Okulicz-Kozaryn 2021). Model b3 in Table 2 presents our formal tests of Hypothesis 1a (Blacks exhibit higher levels of misanthropy than Whites) and Hypothesis 2a (Latinos exhibit higher levels of misanthropy than Whites), given that the model takes into account the full array of statistical controls. Both hypotheses are confirmed. Relative to Whites, Blacks (beta = 0.094, $p < 0.001$) and Latinos (beta = 0.067, $p < 0.001$) have higher levels of misanthropy, net of all control measures. Although attending church (social religiosity) has a negative and statistically significant relationship to misanthropy, praying (individual religiosity) is not significant. Table 2 also reveals that misanthropy is

negatively associated with income, religious denomination, political views, marital status, occupational prestige, and education. However, misanthropy is positively associated with living in the U.S. South.

4.3.1. Trust, Helpful, and Fair

The individual factors that comprise our measure of misanthropy (trust, helpful, and fair), may provide more nuanced insight into racial and ethnic disparities (Wilkes 2011). Thus, for comparison purposes (without offering formal hypotheses), in Table 3, we replicate the analysis found in Table 2 (maintaining controls) by testing the expectations that relative to their White counterparts, Blacks and Latinos will exhibit lower levels of trust, and both groups will perceive people as less fair and less helpful, net of all statistical controls.

Table 3. OLS Regression: Effects of Service Attendance on Trust, Fair, and Helpful. (Whites as reference category). Beta (fully standardized) coefficients reported.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
VARIABLES	Trust	Fair	Helpful
Attend (ref: never)			
Less than once a year	0.023 *	0.012	−0.008
About once or twice a year	0.018	0.029 *	0.014
Several times a year	0.021	0.030 *	0.027 *
About once a month	0.024	0.046 ***	0.009
2–3 times a month	0.038 **	0.048 ***	0.037 **
Nearly every week	0.020	0.047 ***	0.029 *
Every week	0.101 ***	0.105 ***	0.061 ***
Several times a week	0.035 **	0.027	0.023
Race (ref: White)			
Black	−0.067 **	−0.058 *	−0.023
Latino	−0.011	−0.036	−0.047 *
Less than once a year*Black	0.001	−0.001	0.013
Less than once a year*Latino	−0.029 **	0.001	0.023 *
About once or twice a year*Black	−0.012	−0.012	−0.008
About once or twice a year*Latino	−0.020	−0.001	0.005
Several times a year*Black	0.002	−0.020	−0.002
Several times a year*Latino	−0.022 *	−0.007	−0.017
About once a month*Black	−0.002	−0.018	0.007
About once a month*Latino	−0.025 *	−0.016	0.004
2–3 times a month*Black	−0.018	−0.006	−0.015
2–3 times a month*Latino	−0.024 *	0.002	0.005
Nearly every week*Black	−0.003	−0.010	−0.012
Nearly every week*Latino	−0.005	0.006	0.012
Every week*Black	−0.037 **	−0.031	−0.028
Every week*Latino	−0.042 ***	−0.022	−0.014
Several times a week*Black	−0.004	0.004	0.006
Several times a week*Latino	−0.018	0.016	0.006
Observations	10,876	10,478	10,489
R-squared	0.164	0.134	0.085
Constant	***	***	***
Year dummies and controls	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: Control measures are the same as those reported in Table 1. Robust aster in parentheses *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

While the results of this exercise confirm what we might expect, such evidence is limited to the measure of trust (Model 1), which is the opposite of misanthropy, and mainly for Hypothesis 2b. Model 1 in Table 3, which features, among other things, Latino/White comparisons related to service attendance, show significance for Latinos who attend religious service “less than once a year” (−0.029, $p < 0.01$), “several times a year” (−0.022, $p < 0.05$), “about once a month” (−0.025, $p < 0.05$), “2–3 times a month” (−0.024, $p < 0.05$), and “every week” (−0.042, $p < 0.001$). Model 3 shows that Latinos who attend service less

than once a year are more likely than their White counterparts to support the notion that “most of the time people try to be helpful” (0.023, $p < 0.05$).

Furthermore, in Model 1, there is some support for the notion that Blacks who attend church every week are less likely than Whites who attend church every week to endorse the idea that people can be trusted (-0.037 , $p < 0.01$).

4.3.2. Race, Ethnicity, Religiosity, and Misanthropy

Next, we examine whether the effects of two measures of religiosity on misanthropy vary by racial and ethnic group. Extrapolating from the prior literature, we hypothesized that the greater the levels of religiosity among Blacks (Hypothesis 2a) and Latinos (Hypothesis 2b), the higher the levels of misanthropy they will exhibit. Conversely, we expected greater levels of religiosity among Whites (Hypothesis 2c) to be associated with lower levels of misanthropy.¹⁷

To test these hypotheses, we generated additional models and tested for interaction effects between religiosity and ethnoracial identity. All hypotheses are confirmed, but only with our indicator of social religiosity (service attendance). These results, displayed in Table 4, reveal striking racial and ethnic differences and similarities not observed in prior research. With regard to similarities, most of the effect occurs among racial and ethnic groups who attend church every week, but concerning differences, the effect of the frequency of service attendance on misanthropy varies importantly between Blacks and Latinos relative to their White counterparts.

Table 4. OLS Regression: Effects of Service Attendance on Misanthropy by Race and Ethnicity. Beta (fully standardized) coefficients reported.

VARIABLES	White	Black	Latino
Attend (ref: never)			
Less than once a year	−0.015	−0.011	−0.013
About once or twice a year	0.005	−0.024 *	−0.021
Several times a year	0.006	−0.025 *	−0.027 *
About once a month	−0.007	−0.026 *	−0.029 **
2–3 times a month	−0.025	−0.049 ***	−0.038 ***
Nearly every week	−0.032	−0.043 ***	−0.033 **
Every week	−0.016	−0.100 ***	−0.093 ***
Several times a week	−0.039 *	−0.035 **	−0.035 **
White = 1	−0.067 **		
Less than once a year*White	0.003		
About once or twice a year*White	−0.028		
Several times a year*White	−0.033		
About once a month*White	−0.023		
2–3 times a month*White	−0.023		
Nearly every week*White	−0.008		
Every week*White	−0.086 ***		
Several times a week*White	0.002		
Black = 1		0.057 **	
Less than once a year*Black		−0.005	
About once or twice a year*Black		0.014	
Several times a year*Black		0.007	
About once a month*Black		0.002	
2–3 times a month*Black		0.014	
Nearly every week*Black		0.011	
Every week*Black		0.035 *	
Several times a week*Black		−0.003	
Latino = 1			0.032
Less than once a year*Latino			0.002
About once or twice a year*Latino			0.005
Several times a year*Latino			0.016

Table 4. Cont.

VARIABLES	White	Black	Latino
About once a month*Latino			0.013
2–3 times a month*Latino			0.000
Nearly every week*Latino			−0.010
Every week*Latino			0.026 *
Several times a week*Latino			−0.005
Observations	10,455	10,455	10,443
R-squared	0.197	0.193	0.190
Constant	***	***	***
Year dummies and controls	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: Control measures are the same as those reported in Table 1. Robust aster in parentheses, *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Two findings loom large. First, in support of Hypotheses 2a and 2b, the interaction terms in Table 4 show that Blacks (0.035, $p < 0.05$) and Latinos (0.026, $p < 0.05$) who attend church every week are more misanthropic than Whites who attend church every week. Second, and in direct contrast, there is strong support for Hypothesis 2c, as the interaction term in Table 4 suggests that Whites (−0.086, $p < 0.001$) who attend church every week are less misanthropic than others. To reiterate a key finding, social religiosity, in the form of church attendance, influences racial and ethnic groups who attend religious services every week in opposing ways.

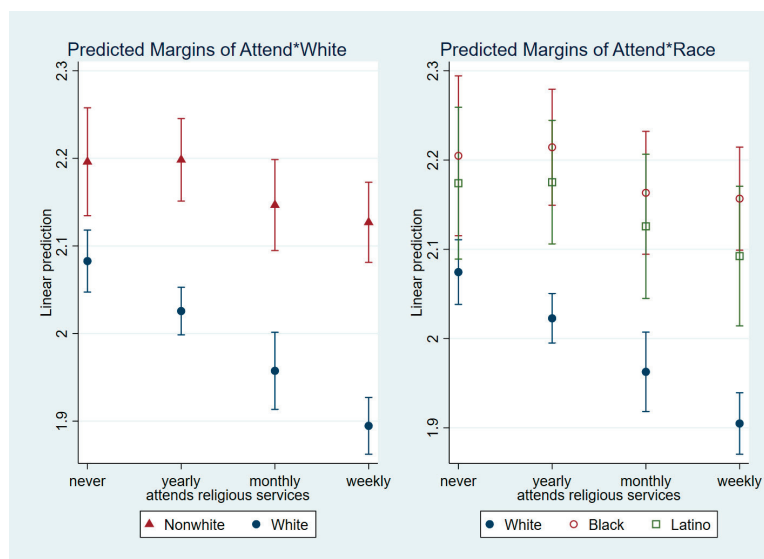
Thus, even though racial and ethnic groups may share similar levels of religious commitment in the form of weekly service attendance, our results suggest that the experience has a profoundly different effect on their misanthropy levels; it is associated with less misanthropy among Whites and more misanthropy among Blacks and Latinos. We speculate as to why these patterns make sense in our discussion section below.

As a final test, we wanted to know whether the effect of service attendance on misanthropy varied by race and ethnic group. That is, we assess whether Whites and Blacks, and Whites and Latinos differ significantly in the effects of religiosity on misanthropy—a question that has not been addressed in the prior literature. We hypothesized that the relationship between religiosity and misanthropy should vary between Whites and Blacks (Hypothesis 3a) and Whites and Latinos (Hypothesis 3b), net of all statistical controls. Table 5 presents the results of our tests. We introduce interaction terms between “Black” and service attendance and “Latino” and service attendance. The interaction terms represent for Whites (the comparison group) the number that should be added to or subtracted from the main effect. The interactions in Table 5 demonstrate that race and ethnicity intersect with service attendance in a way that shapes levels of misanthropy in a manner consistent with Hypotheses 3a and 3b. In particular, the coefficients for the interaction of “every week” and “Black” is significant (coefficient: 0.179, $p < 0.01$), as is the coefficient for the interaction of “every week” and “Latinos” (coefficient: 0.186, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that the effect of attending service every week on misanthropy is −0.048 (coefficient: −0.227 + 0.179) for the Black/White comparison and −0.041 (coefficient: −0.227 + 0.186) for the Latino/White comparison. Thus, Blacks and Latinos who attend religious service every week still have higher levels of misanthropy than Whites who attend religious service every week. This is further illustrated in Figure 4, where we graph the interaction results. As the frequency of church attendance increases for Whites, we see a significant reduction in misanthropy levels, but not as much for Blacks and Latinos.

Table 5. OLS Regression: Racial and Ethnic Differences in the Effects of Service Attendance on Misanthropy, with Whites as Reference Group Coefficients and Beta (fully standardized) coefficients reported.

Variables	OLS Coefficients (Misanthropy)	Beta (Misanthropy)
Attend (ref: never)		
Less than once a year	−0.033	−0.011
About once or twice a year	−0.057 *	−0.026 *
Several times a year	−0.076 *	−0.032 *
About once a month	−0.106 **	−0.035 **
2–3 times a month	−0.143 ***	−0.054 ***
Nearly every week	−0.146 ***	−0.041 ***
Every week	−0.227 ***	−0.115 ***
Several times a week	−0.107 **	−0.036 **
Race (ref: white)		
Black	0.139 **	0.064 **
Latino	0.097 *	0.042 *
Less than once a year*Black	−0.046	−0.005
Less than once a year*Latino	0.009	0.001
About once or twice a year*Black	0.085	0.014
About once or twice a year*Latino	0.039	0.007
Several times a year*Black	0.058	0.009
Several times a year*Latino	0.108	0.017
About once a month*Black	0.040	0.005
About once a month*Latino	0.110	0.015
2–3 times a month*Black	0.082	0.016
2–3 times a month*Latino	0.042	0.007
Nearly every week*Black	0.078	0.010
Nearly every week*Latino	−0.066	−0.007
Every week*Black	0.179 **	0.040 **
Every week*Latino	0.186 **	0.034 **
Several times a week*Black	−0.019	−0.003
Several times a week*Latino	−0.023	−0.003
Observations	10,443	10,443
R-squared	0.197	0.197
Constant	3.201 ***	***
Year dummies and controls	Yes	Yes

Note: Control measures are the same as those reported in Table 1. Robust aster in parentheses, *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

**Figure 4.** Predicted Margins of Interaction terms from full models: Misanthropy, 95% CI.

To confirm our results, we conducted several robustness tests, including treating service attendance as a continuous variable and collapsing service attendance into fewer categories. The results remained largely the same. We also ran additional models looking at the separate items (trust, helpful, fair) that comprise the misanthropy index, and the results largely confirm our hypotheses, but only with the indicator “trust”. Furthermore, we examined the association between individual religiosity (prayer frequency) and misanthropy to see if the results would vary by race and ethnicity. We did not find any significant interactions (results not shown).¹⁸

5. Discussion

Despite a surge in interest over the last 30 years in the systematic study of misanthropy, there has been surprisingly little attempt to empirically examine the extent to which the effects of religiosity on misanthropy vary by race and ethnicity. What little we know is limited due to a focus on earlier time periods, or because analyses focused on Black/White comparisons and excluded Latinos—the largest minority group in the United States—or because the research is based on a single year of data. Beyond the novel findings we report, our major contribution is that this study begins to fill these gaps by employing recent data that stretches across an 18-year time period (2000–2018), with sufficient samples sizes to sustain meaningful statistical comparisons between Blacks and Whites, and Latinos and Whites. Our findings both corroborate and significantly extend prior research in several ways.

First, beginning with our descriptive findings, our trend analysis shows that fluctuations in Black and Latino misanthropy levels appear to coincide with two social forces: the economic downturn of 2008 and changes in presidential administrations (Figure 1). While more research is needed to uncover how and why these factors are related, these findings provide additional insight into the relationship between race, partisanship, and political trust (see Wilkes’s 2011). Second, as with Valente and Okulicz-Kozaryn (2021), we find that service attendance (social religiosity) is more strongly associated with misanthropy than prayer (individual religiosity); however, we contribute to this literature by showing that the dominance of social religiosity over individual religiosity is inconsistent across racial and ethnic groups (Figures 2 and 3). Third, our multivariate analyses revealed strong support for the expectation that Blacks and Latinos exhibit higher levels of misanthropy than their White counterparts, net of important background factors. This finding is consistent with prior research (Alesina and La Ferrara 2000; Brehm and Rahn 1997; Coverdill et al. 2011; Evangelist 2022; Hughes and Thomas 1998; Patterson 1999; Putnam 2000; Smith 1997; Stets and Fares 2019; Taylor et al. 2007; Uslaner 2002; Wilkes 2011). Fourth, we disaggregated our composite measure of misanthropy to explore Wilkes’s (2011) contention that individualized measures (i.e., trust, helpful, and fair) may reveal what is obscured when generalized measures are used to uncover Black/White disparities. In this regard, we compared the results of our composite measure with that of our individual measures and found that most of the action is associated with the indicator “trust”, which yields essentially the mirror opposite of results relative to our measure of misanthropy. Fifth, we found important ethnoracial differences that highlighted the important role of weekly service attendance in that Blacks and Latinos who attended service every week tended to be more misanthropic than Whites who attended service every week.

Further analysis uncovered an even deeper ethnoracial contrast not observed in prior research: Blacks and Latinos who attended church every week were found to be *more* misanthropic than others, while Whites who attended service every week were *less* misanthropic than others. Recall that Schoenfeld’s (1978) research conducted over three decades ago also found that service attendance was associated with higher levels of misanthropy; however, the added nuance of including race and ethnicity in the inquiry significantly updates this important body of research. Additional analysis showed that increased church attendance does not diminish misanthropy levels among Blacks and Latinos as it does for Whites. While we leave it to future researchers to explain why the

effects for Blacks and Latinos differ from those of Whites on this matter, we can only speculate that rather than service attendance per se, the context and content of religious service attendance likely varies by the ethnoracial composition of predominantly Black, White, and Latino congregations. For example, religious services laced with social justice themes, such as might be found in Black and Latino churches, may increase levels of misanthropy relative to religious services where no such themes are present, such as in White churches. In this context, it stands to reason that sermons and church activities that emphasize the marginal social, economic, and political plight of many Black and Latino adherents may also foster an “us versus them” sentiment or, at the very least, a fundamental distrust of those outside the group—as misanthropy suggests. Although the social organization and religious-meaning system of predominantly Black churches are similar to White evangelical denominations, African Americans underscore distinct aspects and nuances of Christian doctrine, especially themes focused on freedom and the quest for justice (Steensland et al. 2000).¹⁹ Therefore, this could potentially offset any reduction in the misanthropy levels that frequent church attendance would have otherwise produced among Blacks and Latinos.

Our speculation on this point is rooted in our understanding of the historical record on the pivotal role of Black and Latino churches in their respective communities in the U.S. context. Scholars have described the Black church as a critical force in the freedom struggle and a bulwark against White oppression (McAdam 1999; Morris 1984). Even W.E.B. Du Bois, the father of Black religious history, often likened the Black condition to that of the Israelites under Pharaoh, a practice that, according to Blum (2007, p. 100), “invoked a tradition in black culture that linked disadvantaged blacks with God’s chosen people”.²⁰ More recently, Reverend Raphael Warnock, Senator from Georgia and Senior Pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, (former church of Martin Luther King, Jr.), also describes the Black church as an “oppositional witness in defense of freedom” and an “instrument of liberation” that separates it distinctly from the White church (Warnock 2020).

As with the Black church, Latino churches have been a place of refuge and sites of public action and advocacy for Latino congregants (Mulder et al. 2017). Djupe and Neiheisel (2012) argue that attachment to a church in a Latino community helps the member to tap into community networks (p. 349). This form of social capital provides an important resource that includes, among other things, access to information about how to deal with the trauma of immigration (Conde-Frazier and Lee 2015). Some studies show that Latinos who attend church regularly, regardless of their religious affiliation, are more likely to learn civic skills and actively engage in politics (Jones-Correa and Leal 2001; Lee et al. 2002). Valenzuela (2014), found that regular church attendance substantially moderates relationships between theoretical channels of religious influence and political and social identity among Latinos. As with Black churches, Latino churchgoers routinely receive socially relevant information via informal social ties, organized small groups, adult education classes, and personal testimonials—all of which can serve as fuel for political mobilization (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Lee et al. 2002; Leighley 1996; McKenzie 2004; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Schwadel 2005; Warren 2001). During personal testimonials, for example, an undocumented congregant may “testify” as to how God delivered them from the police or immigration officers. These powerful narratives can offer solace and hope to others in similar circumstances while reinforcing a strong sense of community.

Thus, through these communal lessons about historical and contemporary forms of oppression and collective struggle—lessons that highlight the ongoing legacy of maltreatment at the hands of the majority (and the institutions controlled by the majority), it stands to reason that, relative to their White counterparts, members of minority groups might find it more difficult to discern the good will and positive intentions of the population at large. Thus, this could very well be one of the reasons why religious attendance is positively associated with misanthropy for minorities, but not for Whites.

An important limitation of our study helps to frame future research directions. Our use of cross-sectional data prevents us from drawing any strong causal inferences when

it comes to making sense of the underlying mechanisms that are generating the findings we have uncovered here. Suffice it to say that our findings point to the need for multiple types of analyses, including but not limited to in-depth interviews of congregants and ethnographic representations of the context of predominantly Black, Latino, and White churches, the services they provide to congregants, and the surrounding communities they serve. Additional light could also be shed on these issues via deep content/textual analyses of pastoral sermons that are heard weekly at predominantly Black, Latino, and White churches. Finally, our supplemental analyses (not shown) provide some evidence that at least among Whites, the oldest and youngest generations are driving the significant results we found. However, the sample sizes for Blacks and Latinos were not large enough to disaggregate samples into separate age groups. Once data are available, future studies could shed additional light on this promising line of inquiry.

6. Conclusions

Misanthropy is a natural reaction to persistent social, economic, and political marginalization. This study showed that the effect of religiosity on misanthropy varies by race and ethnicity in ways not previously known. When it comes to misanthropy, we conclude that religion works differently for minorities compared with Whites. Weekly service attendance is associated with enhanced feelings of misanthropy among Blacks and Latinos, but it may very well diminish misanthropic feelings among Whites. The prominence of service attendance (social religiosity) over individual religiosity (prayer) in association with ethnoracial differences in misanthropy (and its opposite, trust), is instructive for students of social capital and its relationship to the life chances of racial and ethnic groups. Outside of family networks, religious organizations have long constituted an important venue wherein social capital is nurtured and sustained. Such nurturance is likely to manifest in different ways (social justice orientation or not) depending on the social, economic, and political position of the group in question. Future researchers should endeavor to shed additional light on these issues. Going forward, any study that seeks a better understanding of the relationship between religiosity and misanthropy should take a deeper look at the ethnoracial identity of the subjects under study, and any future inquiries into the association between race, ethnicity, and misanthropy would do well to consider the role of religiosity.

Beyond the particulars we have discussed here, an aerial view of what we have uncovered leads us to an unpleasant conclusion: despite the successes of the Civil Rights Movement and the policies and laws it produced (e.g., affirmative action, Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act), and notwithstanding the past quarter century of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and programs, our data show that Blacks and Latinos remain far more misanthropic than their White counterparts. Perhaps, even more disconcerting, is that instead of narrowing, both the Black–White gap and the Latino–White gap in misanthropy appear to have widened in recent years, largely because of slight increases in misanthropy among Blacks and Latinos.

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Notes

- ¹ Another important track addresses why trust levels vary across countries and states (Berggren and Bjørnskov 2011; Delhey and Newton 2005; Uslaner and Brown 2005).
- ² Although some Latinos might not be Hispanics (e.g., Brazilians), we use these terms interchangeably throughout this paper.
- ³ For critiques of Putnam’s core thesis, see works by Arneil (2010) and Kilson (2009).
- ⁴ There is, however, some dissent on this issue. Simpson et al. (2007) argue that prior studies employ a “standard trust measure” that is ill-equipped to properly capture racial variation in trust. Using an experimental design with university students as participants (98 Whites, 49 Blacks), the authors found evidence in support of their hypothesis that “trusting behavior will be higher within race categories than between race categories” (p. 531). However, their results, based on students from a single university, is not representative of the U.S. population.
- ⁵ In this context, it is important to recall that the American Civil Rights Movement grew out of and was sustained by the Black church. Indeed, many of the Civil Rights Movement’s high-profile leaders were pastors and preachers, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesse Jackson, and later, Al Sharpton, to name a few. In addition, the foot soldiers of the movement were largely comprised of rank-and-file church congregants, but also students who came from religious households (see Dickerson 2005; Morris 2014; Harvey 2016).
- ⁶ We are aware that this procedure is a rudimentary approach to understanding the role of trust in the Bible, given that trust can be conveyed without actually using the word itself. However, the exercise does give us some insight into how Christians encounter the idea of trust in a biblical context.
- ⁷ It is important to highlight though that a central Christian tenet “to love others as we love ourselves,” is incongruent with misanthropy.
- ⁸ In Welch et al. (2007), religiosity was measured by activity in religious congregations, belief in absolute morality, frequency of prayer, and belief in the sinfulness of human nature.
- ⁹ This generalized measure has been widely used in social science research in the U.S. and cross-nationally, but it is not without its limitations (Delhey et al. 2011). Chief among them relates to how broad a circle survey respondents imagine when responding to the prompt “most people.” This is the so-called “radius of trust problem” (Delhey et al. 2011; Welch et al. 2007). Like others, we are assuming that our measure of misanthropy conjures a wide radius of people in the minds of respondents mainly because, according to (Delhey et al. 2011), “the radius of most people” in rich countries like the United States and non-Asian countries, tend to be wider than that found in poorer countries and countries with a Confucian background.
- ¹⁰ The “other” category was not included in the analysis given its small sample size and the fact that it is impossible to know what racial categories comprise the variable (e.g., Asian, Native American, Middle Eastern). The final sample only included respondents who were White, Black, or Latino.
- ¹¹ For comparison purposes, we also conducted an analysis using the ethnic variable, and the results (not shown) were comparable.
- ¹² Even though “Hispanic” is an ethnicity and not a race, given the small number of respondents who claimed to be Hispanic and Black (N = 153), we decided to look at all Hispanics irrespective of whether they self-classified as White, Black, or other. Out of 3549 Hispanic, 50.92% claimed to be White, 4.31% to be Black, and 44.35% to be “other” (the majority of which are likely to be “mixed” or “brown”).
- ¹³ Additional robustness tests examined belonging to a Christian denomination and found significant interactions for Blacks who are Lutherans, Hispanics who are Presbyterian, and other races who are Methodist and other denominations. However, the cell counts were too small to sustain meaningful analyses (e.g., fewer than 30 people who were Black and Lutheran). We also ran additional tests looking at religious organizations and belief in God, but the results failed to reach conventional levels of statistical significance.
- ¹⁴ Robustness tests were run treating attend as a continuous variable and the results were essentially the same.
- ¹⁵ Using Steensland et al. (2000) RELTRAD scheme, a set of dummy variables was created for Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, and Catholic. Other robustness tests using just RELIG to create Protestant and Catholic dummy variables was also conducted and yield similar results.
- ¹⁶ Robustness tests were also run controlling for perceived religious affiliation strength (RELITEN) and the results were essentially the same.
- ¹⁷ As part of our supplemental analyses, we considered the individual elements that make up our composite measure of misanthropy, and tested the expectation that greater levels of religiosity among Blacks and Latinos will be associated with lower levels of trust in others, and a lower likelihood of viewing others as fair and helpful; and greater levels of religiosity among Whites will be associated with higher levels of trust in others and a greater likelihood of viewing others as fair and helpful.
- ¹⁸ Available upon request.
- ¹⁹ Belonging to a predominantly Black or predominantly Latino church could provide emotional and spiritual support for adherents amid daily struggles while simultaneously increasing misanthropy (aimed at the outside world) as a by-product. Unfortunately,

the current dataset doesn't allow us to explore this question directly, but we hope our research will inspire further inquiries into this important matter in the future.

- 20 As historian, sociologist, and commentator, Du Bois wrote extensively on the promise and perils of the black church. See *The Souls of Black Folk*, *The Negro Church*, *Dusk of Dawn*, and *The Philadelphia Negro* to name just a few sources. He is generally acknowledged to have been both supporter of the black church as a site for the social, political and economic elevation of blacks, but also a critic of the black church for not fully embracing its full potential as a force for social change (See Blum 2007; Savage 2000).

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Article

“Maybe I Need Christ or Maybe I Just Need Me”: Functions of Religion among Young Black Members of the LGBTQIA Community in the United States

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Abstract: This qualitative study examines the functions of religion for a group of 76 young Black members of the LGBTQIA community ages 18–30 years old based on the question: What are some of the functions of religion that make continued congregational involvement viable for members of this community? Emerging adulthood theory suggests that late adolescence is a period of self-discovery and societal critique. To my knowledge, this theory has not been used to study the religious experiences of young Black sexual minorities. Content analysis shows the functions of religion as a controlling mechanism during childhood, a conflict mechanism during teen years, and religion/spirituality as a cathartic mechanism during late adolescence.

Keywords: functions of religion; Black young people; sexual identity; religious coping; Black Church; spirituality

1. Introduction

A legacy of heteronormativity and homophobia has meant that many Black churches in the United States (U.S.) do not welcome and/or affirm Black members of the LGBTQIA community (Balaji et al. 2012; Barnes 2013; Dangerfield et al. 2019; Douglas 1999; Foster et al. 2011; Fullilove and Fullilove 1999; Griffin 2006; Hill and McNeely 2013; Lefevor et al. 2020; Quinn et al. 2015; Young 2023). Despite such negative treatment, certain Black sexual minorities continue to participate in religion and the Black Church (Pitt 2010; Quinn et al. 2015; Sorett 2022). What are some of the functions of religion and the Black Church in the U.S., both negative and positive, for members of this community? The current study informs existing research by considering this query to illumine some of the functions of religion, in general, and the Black Church in the U.S., in particular, for a cadre of 76 young Black persons ages 18–30 years old who self-identify as gay, straight, bisexual, and transgender. Emerging Adulthood theory and content analysis are used to answer the above question. This study is important for several reasons. First, the findings will help document some of the religious experiences for members of this community as well as help illumine whether and how they endeavor to understand and reconcile these experiences. Second, Emerging Adulthood theory has generally been used to examine how young straight White people understand worldviews, love, and/or work. To my knowledge, this is the first study that examines religion as a worldview for young Black sexual minorities based on this theory. Readers should note that, in this study, the term “the Black Church” reflects the institution as a collective and “Black church” when specific congregations are referenced. Use of the former term should not suggest to readers the lack of diversity among Black congregations based on factors such as denomination, theological focus, worship style, programmatic efforts, and community involvement. Moreover, although definitions can vary, in this study, the acronym “LGBTQIA” stands for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual.” The “A” can also represent “allies, aromantic, and/or agender”.

2. Religion and Spirituality: A Summary

Religion is largely understood to be a multidimensional construct that includes beliefs, affiliations, and practices that manifest differentially based on dynamics such as culture, history, ecology, socioeconomics, and demographics (Huss 2014; Saroglou 2011; Wulff 2019). Broadly defined, religion often refers to a formal set of beliefs, values, and rituals under the authority of a non-corporal being (i.e., God among Christians). Common Christian practices include involvement in corporate worship, praying, and following the Bible (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Spirituality is not generally associated with organized, communal, and institutionalized practices, but tends to reflect a less value-laden system focused on human beings' connections to one another and the universe; openness; and seeking (Daniel 2011; Nouwen 1986). In contrast to religion's tendency toward the formal, spirituality often celebrates informality as well as dynamics such as holistic wellness, belief in a Higher Power, self-discovery, nature, self-reflection, and personal empowerment (Thurman 1999, 2007; Wulff 2019). Other studies provide insights about religion and spirituality that emphasize their interrelatedness rather than their distinctiveness (Park 2005).

Huss (2014) challenges binaries between religion and secularism, phrases such as "spiritual, but not religious" as well as the existence of distinct categories between religion and spirituality (also see Daniel 2011). He posits that spirituality reflects a new cultural construct that calls into question such dichotomies. This same author chronicles historical tendencies to use the concept "spirituality" to describe appropriate Christian conduct and religious piety. In other instances, religion and spirituality have been used interchangeably. He notes, "the term 'spirituality' as used in the late nineteenth and twentieth century retained its reference to the metaphysical, un-corporeal, and immaterial but also came to refer to the core or quintessence of universal religiosity" (Huss 2014, p. 49). In addition to New Age, spirituality has been associated with consumerism, yoga, martial arts, health, and gardening. Like the next scholar, Huss (2014, p. 51) posits, "most scholars see religion and spirituality as universal phenomena, which exist, in different forms, in all human cultures".

The seminal cross-cultural analysis by Saroglou (2011) presents four psychological dimensions of religion—believing (an external transcendence and its relationship with humanity), bonding (connectedness between oneself, other people, and the deity), behaving (identifying and following moral mandates), and belonging (the need to be in relationship and establish group identity)—purported to be universally present across religious contexts, but in culturally nuanced ways. In addition to documenting the cognitive, moral, emotional, and social aspects of religion, this same study links religion and spirituality in several ways. For example, "a preferential emphasis on believing in and bonding with transcendence is at the heart of *spirituality* [emphasis is the author's], be it within or outside religious traditions and institutions" (Saroglou 2011, p. 1331). Moreover, collective forms of belonging also link religion to spirituality; "religious groups vary greatly on a continuum going from exclusive identity (e.g., sects, ethnic religions) to inclusive identity (modern spirituality)" (Saroglou 2011, p. 1333).

Although not the emphasis of Saroglou's (2011) study, each of his religious dimensions, particularly bonding, behaving, and belonging, is especially salient in the U.S. Black community given the history of racism and discrimination, linked fate mentality, and self-help tradition (Billingsley 1992; DuBois 2003; Frazier 1964; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). However, moral beliefs about homosexuality inform unwelcoming religious spaces (Quinn et al. 2015). Black churches have a legacy of offering valuable religious and non-religious benefits and support to the U.S. Black community (Billingsley 1992; Diamant and Mohamed 2018; DuBois 2003; Frazier 1964; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Barnes 2013, forthcoming). Embracing spirituality can also provide positive outcomes in general (Carrico et al. 2017; Nouwen 1986; Thurman 1999, 2007; Barnes Forthcoming). For Black sexual minorities, spirituality can have beneficial social, psychological, and academic effects (Dangerfield et al. 2019; Drumhiller et al. 2018). Spirituality has also been positively linked to stress relief; positive self-images; validating the inherent value in humanity; and, promoting peace and overall wellness (Foster et al. 2011; James and Moore 2005). Reduced drug use

and condomless anal intercourse (Dacus et al. 2018; Lassiter 2016; Watkins et al. 2016); increased self-esteem and self-respect; and positive decision-making are other possible benefits (Carrico et al. 2017; Drumhiller et al. 2018). Research suggests that religion and spirituality have been considered as blurred concepts; conflated; distinct belief systems; reflective of a continuum of beliefs and practices; related dimensions of typologies; and/or a stance where the former is a manifestation of the latter (Daniel 2011; Huss 2014; Saroglou 2011; Wulff 2019). Ultimately, religion and spirituality are both considered “forms of the sacred” (Huss 2014, p. 55). This study considers the functions of religion and the Black Church for young Black people in the U.S. who embrace diverse sexual identities.

3. The Black Church and the Black LGBTQIA Community in the U.S.

A large body of literature documents how Black Church sexual politics in the U.S. have fueled heteronormativity and, ultimately, negative religious experiences, including church estrangement, for many Black members of the LGBTQIA community. This section provides a summary of these tenuous factors. Dynamics such as Victorian sexual mores; biblical authority linked to conservative theology; racialized representations of Black bodies and Black sexuality; stereotypes; a focus on procreation, natural law, and Black masculine tropes; and, depictions of homosexuality as a White perversion have resulted in trauma and estrangement from Black churches by many Black members of the LGBTQIA community (Fullilove and Fullilove 1999; Griffin 2006; Lefevor et al. 2020; Quinn et al. 2015; Sorett 2022). In addition to fostering trauma, these dynamics often mean that Black sexual minorities are unable to avail themselves of the religious and non-religious resources and support available in such congregations (Billingsley 1992; DuBois 2003; Frazier 1964; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Quinn et al. 2015). Negative religious experiences among Black sexual minorities often resulted. White racism, stereotypes, customs, myths, and laws meant African Americans were often historically portrayed as sexually promiscuous to justify their exploitation, oppression, and manipulation as well as to maintain White supremacy (Griffin 2006; Sorett 2022). Douglas (1999, p. 29) summarizes this past: “White society’s preoccupation with Black women’s and men’s sexuality is about more than fascination and fear. It has to do with maintaining the status quo of White power in American society”.

Some members of the Black community accepted the White devaluation of African American bodies. Black churches that capitulated often embraced a conservative theology around sexuality, gender, and respectability politics that fostered heterosexism and homophobia as informed by biblical passages such as Genesis 19:1–29, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, I Corinthians 6:9–10, and 1 Timothy 1:8–10 (Griffin 2006; Sorett 2022; Barnes Forthcoming). In the seminal text, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians & Gays in Black Churches*, Griffin (2006, p. 59) notes; “In order to gain respectability and simply to survive, Black people adopted a sexual conservatism, if not sexual prudishness. . . such a reaction has led a Black majority to adopt harsh attitudes toward lesbian and gay people, their relationships and equality.” As a symptom of the larger struggles in the United States around race, gender, and sexuality in general (West 1993), homosexuality is too often framed in Black congregations as a danger to the Black community and the Black family (Griffin 2006; Sorett 2022).

Anti-gay messages undermine the benefits associated with Black Church participation in the U.S., such as racial affirmation; a sense of belonging; the ability to develop friendships, relationships, and networks; opportunities to share one’s abilities and talents; increased life satisfaction; coping skills; and other forms of well-being (Dangerfield et al. 2019; Lefevor et al. 2020; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Quinn et al. 2015; Sorett 2022; Barnes 2013). Germane to the present analysis, these benefits may be considered important functions of religion and/or Christianity for individuals in this study. According to Greenway et al. (2022, p. 131), “many Black gay men and lesbians feel that if they publicly affirm their homosexuality, they risk exclusion from the nurturing resources of the church. For many of them, estrangement from the church may be a cost that is too much to bear, leaving many Black gay individuals to attend nonetheless.” Yet negative religious rhetoric and

ill-treatment can cause internalized homonegativity, alienation, shame, guilt, gossip, discomfort, loneliness, self-loathing, and rejection that can fuel risky sexual behavior and drug use (Balaji et al. 2012; Carrico et al. 2017; Garrett-Walker and Torres 2017; Quinn et al. 2015; Watkins et al. 2016; Woodyard et al. 2000). In such instances, religion often functions as a deterrent to self-affirmation and positivity.

Yet for some Black members of the LGBTQIA community, the benefits of organized religion and Black Church involvement outweigh the costs (Pitt 2010). Studies show that God is often presented as a motivation to remain HIV-free and fulfill one's God-given mission to maintain good health (Watkins et al. 2016). Moreover, religion can be a psychological and emotional barrier against depression and risky behavior when persons initiate conversations about condom use and HIV status with potential partners (Smallwood et al. 2015). Additionally, welcoming Black churches can encourage inclusivity, foster advocacy, reduce heterosexism, and provide health-related resources (Barnes 2013; Foster et al. 2011; Hill and McNeely 2013; Sorett 2022). More recent studies document growing numbers of welcoming and affirming churches and denominations in the U.S. such as the Metropolitan Community Church and the United Church of Christ; question past research that tends to overgeneralize Black people and the Black Church in the U.S. as universally homonegative (Lefevor et al. 2020; Quinn et al. 2015; Young 2023); and document the increasing numbers of Black churches in America that promote the civil liberties of the LGBTQIA community (Battle et al. 2017). Based on the above summary of the possible benefits and challenges associated with religion and Black Church involvement for young Black people with diverse sexual identities in the U.S., it is important to examine some of the functions of religion for this populace.

4. Emerging Adulthood Theory and the Young Black LGBTQIA Experience in the U.S.

This study is informed by the Emerging Adulthood theory advanced by Jensen Arnett (1998, 2000, 2011, 2012, 2014) that documents developmental changes that can take place among individuals aged approximately 18–25 years old that are distinct from those of both adolescence and young adulthood. The theory examines specific demographic, cultural, and subjective dynamics of residents in highly industrialized countries like the U.S. This time of self-discovery enables persons to be largely independent of normative expectations and social roles as they explore dynamics such as love, worldviews, and work. Although varied experiences and personal change are expected during this period, several key characteristics reflect emerging adulthood. Persons in this age range are less confined by role expectations; residentially unstable and often move back and forth between college and parental residences; semi-autonomous but still dependent on parental support; and typically unmarried. This in-between phase also means many individuals do not “feel” like adults because they do not make completely independent personal or financial decisions. Yet they are often afforded great latitude to pursue their possible personal identities (i.e., who they are and plan to be), careers (i.e., preparation for adult work roles), love relationships (i.e., intimate and life partners), and worldviews as they are exposed to different people, cultures, and beliefs. Many persons are pessimistic about what the future may hold but continue to remain optimistic and confident in reaching their goals.

The majority of studies based on this theory focus on the White experience. Yet some studies consider the minority experience and constraints that prevent certain minority groups from participating in emerging adulthood due to factors such as structural forces, ethnicity, and economic problems that require them to transition into adult responsibilities and roles (Arnett 2000, 2014; Bynner 2005; Cote 2000, 2014). This means that for young Black persons who embrace diverse sexual identities, dynamics linked to racism, homophobia, classism, and sexism in the U.S. may affect their ability to participate in this period of exploration and self-reflection. Also important and understudied for sexual minorities, emerging adulthood can be a period of increased risk for behavior such as binge drinking, substance use, and unsafe sex (Arnett 1994, 2014; Salvatore and Daftary-Kapur 2020). Self-discipline

that fuels reflection, intentional decision-making, role accountability, and cautiousness beyond parental supervision reflects a healthy transition from emerging adulthood into young adulthood (Arnett 2014). It will be important to consider how individuals in this study consider their religious experiences in the context of daily challenges with which Black sexual minorities often contend. Social support, education, and mentoring can enable persons to successfully transition through this development phase and foster the requisite capacities and knowledge to become productive young adults (Arnett 2012, 2014; Choi et al. 2021; Mortimer et al. 2016; Nelson 2020). Although some scholars critique this theory's validity and its lack of focus on socioeconomic constraints and diversity (Bynner 2005; Cote 2000, 2014), research overall suggests its merits for broad application. Moreover, because studies about this model have focused on White heterosexuals in America (Bynner 2005; Cote 2000, 2014; Salvatore and Daftary-Kapur 2020), it is valuable to examine its robustness in assessing the religious experiences and choices of young Black sexual minorities in the same country. I consider whether and how features of emerging adulthood manifest around religion as a worldview for them, including religious identity exploration, decision-making, and self-reflection.

5. Developmental Dynamics among Young Black Members of the LGBTQIA Population in the U.S.: A Summary

During late adolescence, individuals are often considered “adult” in terms of certain societal parameters (for example, purchasing cigarettes and alcohol at 21 years old, and entering the military without parental approval at 18 years old) (Berk 2018). Yet other arenas in their lives such as family, school, employment, income, and future expectations are unstable (Arnett 2014; The State Adolescent Health Resource Center 2021). This period of reflection and self-discovery can be both exciting and challenging for persons with intersecting, multiply marginalized identities due to racism, heterosexism, classism, and *ageism* (Barnes Forthcoming; Blockett 2017; Nelson 2020). Early research on adolescent development rarely included the LGBTQIA population (Berk 2018). The complex emotional, psychological, and biological changes common during this period can result in the exploration of sexual behavior as “quick fixes” for problems such as awkwardness, loneliness, or family problems (White and DeBlassie 1992). The American Academy of Pediatrics’ official acknowledgment of adolescent homosexuality in 1983 prompted recognition of this group’s needs over previous views that considered their identity a “passing phase” (Bolton and MacEachron 1988).

Developmental challenges are often exacerbated for late adolescents who feel misunderstood, isolated, and/or different based on racial and/or sexual identity (Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly 2013). Regardless of one’s sexual orientation, institutions like schools and, germane here, churches and families have been shown to affect sexual decision-making among late adolescents (Barnes Forthcoming; Brooks-Gunn and Fustenberg 1989; Nelson 2020; Smallwood et al. 2015; Barnes and Streaty-Wimberly 2016). Paralleling an Emerging Adulthood framework, research suggests that identity development, worldview development, and relationship dynamics are particularly salient for young Black persons in America who embrace diverse sexual identities even when they face incongruent experiences individually and collectively (Cook et al. 2018). Ultimately, subjective feelings of self-efficacy and autonomy from parental control position emerging adults to embrace the responsibilities of adulthood (Mortimer et al. 2016). Overall, capacity-building experiences and programs can help enhance aspirations, quality of life, and life chances in this group. Given the importance of religion and the Black Church in the Black community in the U.S., it is important to examine their salience in influencing sentiments, religious decisions that can impact their futures, and less affirming functions of religion that can undermine quality of life.

6. Materials and Methods

6.1. Data Collection and Participants

This study is based on a sample of 76 young Black members of the LGBTQIA community who participated in an intensive prevention program to combat Hepatitis C and HIV in a medium-sized metropolitan southern city in the U.S. The prevention program was designed to promote positive decision-making among young persons aged 18–24 years old¹ to foster healthier sexual, racial, and religious identities. Issues of spirituality were an unanticipated program outcome. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the grant-receiving university; all participants signed consent forms to participate. Recruitment took place using snowball sampling via flyers, social media, word of mouth, and community partners. Based on grant requirements, participants represented the pre-determined selection criteria of race (Black or African American), self-identified sexual behavior (men who have sex with men or MSM), age (initially 18–24 years old), and self-identified negative HIV status. Individuals were screened for eligibility. Persons were not required to be sexual minorities or provide specifics about their sexual identities beyond the broad BMSM designation for program participation (refer to the next section for details on this topic). Demographic data were captured, such as sexual identity, gender, age, education level, and race/ethnicity. Most persons were Black/African American (97.2%) and 66.2% self-identified as Latinx/Hispanic. Also, 7.0% were transgender (Table 1). Most self-identified as male ($n = 61$). When sexual identity was assessed, about 46.5% ($n = 33$) self-identified as gay, 29.6% ($n = 21$) self-identified as straight/heterosexual, 16.9% ($n = 12$) considered themselves bisexual, and 7.0% ($n = 5$) identified as Other. In addition, 39.4% earned a bachelor's degree or greater. Additionally, slightly over half of participants were unemployed; most were single. The mean age was 22 years old.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Research Partners ($N = 71$).

	Heterosexual	Bisexual	Gay or Lesbian	Other ¹	Total (%)
N (%)	21 (29.6)	12 (16.9)	33 (46.5)	5 (7.0)	71 (100)
Race/Ethnicity ²					
Hispanic/Latinx	13	7	23	4	47 (66.2)
White	3	2	1	1	7 (9.9)
Black/African American	21	12	31	5	69 (97.2)
American Indian or Alaska Native	3	1	1	0	5 (7.0)
Age					
18–21 years	14	7	15	1	37 (54.4)
22–25 years	3	1	12	4	20 (29.4)
26 years and up	3	4	4	0	11 (16.2)
Total	20	12	31	5	68
Gender					
Male	17	10	32	2	61 (85.9)
Female	1	0	0	0	1 (1.4)
Transgender	3	1	1	0	5 (7.0)
Non-binary	0	1	0	3	4 (5.6)
Total	21	12	33	5	71

Table 1. Cont.

	Heterosexual	Bisexual	Gay or Lesbian	Other ¹	Total (%)
Education Level					
High school	11	6	15	4	36 (54.5)
2-year or technical college	0	1	3	0	4 (6.1)
Four-year college or more	8	5	12	1	26 (39.4)
Total	19	12	30	5	66
Employment Status					
Full-time (35+ h)	2	3	14	1	20 (28.6)
Part-time (less than 35 h)	4	3	6	1	14 (20.0)
Unemployed	14	5	13	3	36 (51.4)
Total	21	11	33	5	70
Relationship Status					
Single	18	9	26	5	58 (86.6)
In a relationship	2	1	5	0	8 (11.9)
Separated, divorced	0	1	0	0	1 (1.5)
Total	20	11	31	5	67

Key: Demographic data overall are missing for 4 participants. Missing data for each variable are Race [whether Black/African American] (n = 2), Age (n = 3), Education level (n = 5), Employment status (n = 1), and Relationship status (n = 4). ¹ The Other category includes persons who indicated they prefer not to say, are unsure, or other. ² Participants could indicate more than one racial identity. When identifying multiple races, all persons still identified as Black or African American.

This study was informed by two cross-sectional data sources, a survey provided by the grantor and completed no more than 30 days after the program's end between 2016 and 2019 (the survey response rate was 47.3%) and in-depth, follow-up interviews with this same group between 2018 and 2019 (75% face-to-face and 25% via telephone). Data collection was required as part of the prevention grant and to document participant experiences for research purposes. The survey was comprised of closed-ended and several open-ended questions completed via hard copy or online. A total of twenty-seven open-ended questions were created by this writer based on existing research on the Black LGBTQIA experience and less studied topics for the populace (i.e., self-care and religiosity). Questions focused on demographics, religion, self-care, overall life and identities, and support. Only these open-ended questions were asked during the 45 minute to 2 hour interviews that were audiotaped by this author. Interviews were transcribed by a program member who is a trained transcriber. Data reliability was checked and vetted by this writer (the lead investigator) and the program evaluator. Study participants received USD 50 gift cards at the end of the program and upon survey completion and received a USD 25 gift card after the follow-up interviews. Generalizability was not the objective here. However, the results may be broadly applicable to segments of this population in the U.S.

6.2. Describing Diverse Sexual Identities in This Study

The use of designations such as MSM are common in epidemiological circles. In medical research, Black male members of the LGBTQIA community are often referred to as Black men who have sex with men or BMSM. Scholars such as Kaplan et al. (2016) and Young and Meyer (2005) critiqued reductionist categorizations and binaries. Research partners in this study did not seem opposed to the concept BMSM (i.e., Black men who have sex with men) as described in the prevention program grant because they had opportunities to self-identify. The majority did so using terms such as African American, Black, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, transgender, male, female, gay, queer, bisexual, straight, gender non-conforming, and, in several cases, human. Their self-definitions, when provided, are

included in thumbnail descriptions with representative quotes. Readers will also note the varied terms used to describe the research partners (i.e., Black members of the LGBTQIA community, Black sexual minorities, sexually fluid, sexually diverse, individuals, and persons). Just as some scholars find the use of concepts like MSM troubling, others reject categories and labels altogether. The goal here is not to mis-identify, mis-gender, erase, or essentialize persons, but to document the constellation of concepts they employ to describe themselves and their experiences (Kaplan et al. 2016; Young and Meyer 2005).

6.3. Analysis and Research Questions

The study seeks to identify some of the functions of religion, in general, and the Black Church, in particular, for a cadre of young Black persons with diverse sexual identities. The following question undergirds this analysis: What are some of the functions of religion and the Black Church, both negative and positive, for young Black members of the LGBTQIA community in the U.S.? Content analysis was used during the primary analysis to identify emergent themes and patterns in responses (Mayring 2021; Neuendorf 2016). The data were systematically examined by hand by the author using two processes: open-coding, in which concepts were categorized and labeled, and axial coding, in which linkages between these concepts were assessed to create possible phrases. First, line-by-line coding was used to identify common verbiage and frequently occurring concepts (i.e., words) that guided the subsequent primary analysis. This first stage was important to uncover whether individuals used specific terminology that could be associated with the utility of religion, Christianity, and/or the Black Church in literature (for example, racial affirmation or a sense of belonging as well as dynamics such as to foster homophobia or heterosexism). These concepts became part of the codebook used during the next analysis phase.

In addition to documenting specific ways individuals discussed functions of religion, this process allowed for the identification of frequently used phrases about the topic. I also took brief handwritten notes during and after each interview to inform interview content (i.e., facial expressions, gestures, laughing, etc.). Lastly, phrases were grouped together to create broad themes. Representative quotes were identified during this phase. In several instances, I identified and confirmed the biblical “address” of certain passages that were paraphrased by individuals. The multiple data analyses used during this process provide confidence in the frequently occurring concepts, phrases, and themes. This study benefits from detailed narratives and thick descriptions that may include whether persons embrace God or a Higher Power or religion and/or spirituality. Results, including themes and representative quotes, are provided below. Pseudonyms are used; self-defined sexual identities are included when provided by individuals.

7. Results

The young Black members of the LGBTQIA community who shared their stories suggest that religion has or does function in at least three ways for them. The three themes are not mutually exclusive; some persons made cross-thematic connections. Themes differ in the concepts and processes they *emphasize*. Theme 1: Religion as a Controlling Mechanism examines the role of religion and the Black Church as experienced during childhood in the U.S., including examples of socialization, and in some instances, indoctrination. Theme 2: Religion as a Conflict Mechanism considers experiences as individuals aged (often early adolescence) and began to recognize negative functions of religion as their sexual identities emerged. Theme 3: Religion/Spirituality as a Cathartic Mechanism chronicles present-day processes by which individuals began to concertedly reject aspects of organized religion and the Black Church and embrace spirituality as young adults. In addition to documenting how functions of religion change over time, the reflections below illustrate how Emerging Adulthood theory broadly manifests when considering the religious experiences of individuals with intersecting, multiply marginalized social identities as well as how these same persons are adaptive and resilient. Chronology is tacitly implied in most of the narratives. Overall, comments represent transitions across

time indicative of maturation-informed changes in attitudes and behavior (Arnett 1998, 2000, 2011, 2012, 2014; Bynner 2005; Cote 2014; Nelson 2020). Unless otherwise noted, experiences refer to Black churches in the U.S. Also, in most narratives, individuals reflect back on their religious past and comment on their present-day beliefs and behavior. Thus, comparisons and contrasts can be assessed based on the chosen theoretical lens. Each theme and the representative quotes are provided below.

7.1. Theme 1: Religion as a Controlling Mechanism

Theme 1 centers on childhood religious socialization and how, upon reflection, some individuals believe they were often being indoctrinated. For several persons, initial church enjoyment changed upon the realization that religion functioned to directly or indirectly control or attempt to control their attitudes and actions about sexuality. The voices of Tina, Benji, Brad, and Tommy illustrate how religion, embedded in religiosity and enforced by families, functioned to shape their early lives—and provide initial exposure to heteronormativity (Balaji et al. 2012; Dangerfield et al. 2019; Griffin 2006; Lefevor et al. 2020; Quinn et al. 2015; Sorett 2022).

In the remark below, 25-year-old Tina, a transgender teacher's aide, details the diverse church traditions in which they were reared. They describe enjoyable religious experiences in church as a child and continuing to embrace traditional Christian tenets (i.e., the Trinity):

I believe in God. I believe in the whole Higher Power aspect too, but if somebody comes to me about a Higher Power, his name is God and He had a son named Jesus Christ who died for our sins. I just stand on that, but I respect other people's beliefs too. I was raised in a church—been in church as long as I can remember. I would say I'm religious 'cause I still abide by religious protocol. I'm Christian of course . . . and then also I'm spiritual.

Tina seems to prioritize religion and its formalities (i.e., “protocols”) over spirituality, yet easily embraces the latter belief system, albeit unclearly. Family guidance, particularly from their grandparents, means Tina continues to adhere to church practices such as belief in God, reading the Bible, and prayer. They continue:

My mom was raised Pentecostal, but she went to a Catholic school . . . she raised me with those strict tendencies, reading the Bible, going to church, and then growing up, we were in the Church of God and Christ Church, so I've always been around it . . . When my mom wasn't going, I was still going. My grandparents picked me up every Sunday to take me to church with them. If I wasn't going to church, I was mad. I've always loved God. I've always like talked to Him 24/7 [pray].

Albeit positive, Tina's diverse childhood religious experiences still reflect religious control in light of their prior continued involvement (i.e., “I was still going” and “every Sunday”) and their continued support despite their diverse views now. Tina's story illustrates some of the positive utilities of religion for sexual minorities (Dangerfield et al. 2019; Lefevor et al. 2020; Quinn et al. 2015). Findings related to this theme document the consistent functions of religion in socializing persons about the importance of both God and a consistent prayer life (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Park 2005; Saroglou 2011).

The following comment from Benji, a 28-year-old bisexual factory worker, parallels Tina's about familial influence on youth religious socialization. Yet his religious experiences, particularly church involvement, during childhood were largely semi-involuntary (Ellison and Sherkat 1995); his present views are also less favorable than Tina's. Benji is comfortable referencing the Bible (i.e., “the Word”) for guidance and navigating church control by questioning past parental and pastoral regulation:

A lot of African Americans and Latinos, so I'll just say people of color, come from strong religious backgrounds. You come from being told right from wrong and . . . [but] it's not always what momma say, what daddy say, what pastor say—it's what does *the Word* say or what do I interpret from my experiences. So, I

think it's just their respect for their own mind and embracing individuality that allows people to break away from religion . . . sometimes it takes having your own experiences to say, "Well maybe I need Christ." Or, "Maybe I just need me." I don't really miss church. *It's something I can get anywhere. You can commune and fellowship anywhere* [emphasis throughout is his] without it being directed toward any religion.

For Benji, maturation means "embracing individuality" and "to break away from religion" such that young people can make their own decisions about religion (Nelson 2020). Benji's suggestion to follow one's own wisdom rather than the model of Christ represents a means to overcome religion's control, but it means rejecting emulating Jesus Christ—a foundational Christian principle found in biblical passages such as Ephesians 5:1–2,² 1 John 3:16,³ and 1 Peter 2:21⁴ (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). For Benji, being irreligious means being open to Christian and non-religious beliefs and behavior, including alternatives to church attendance (James and Moore 2005).

Like Tina and Benji, 18-year-old Brad details the role of family in shaping his childhood Christian experiences in the U.S. A college freshman who self-identifies as gay, like Benji, his church involvement was semi-involuntary (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). An initial lack of interest was compounded by a growing realization of the homophobia embedded in that space:

Due to how I grew up, even though me being gay, I used to go to church all the time, but not because I was heavily invested in religion . . . I pulled myself back from that because it's kind of awkward. They constantly say if you do this, you're going to hell. There are plenty of sins that can make you go to hell, so why are y'all singling out this one [homosexuality]? It's a very judgmental space. Religion is too judgmental for me. So, I want to step out of that because I don't want to deal with it. I felt unwelcomed.

Central to this theme are the processes by which individuals began to recognize the controlling mechanisms in organized religion, in general, and in churches and families, in particular, that were often linked to conservative theological interpretations of homosexuality (Griffin 2006; Sorett 2022). For Brad, control was reflected in totalizing views (i.e., "singling out") that prioritized a particular "sin" (i.e., homosexuality) over others. Religion's function as a means of control is apparent in his frequent exposure to homophobic religious rhetoric (i.e., "constantly say . . . going to hell") that resulted in judgment and exclusion paralleled in Quinn et al. (2015, p. 5) below:

The Black Church is more than a religious institution and extends into many individuals' social, familial, and cultural lives, making it difficult to separate the Church from other aspects of one's life . . . In addition to explicit messages of homonegativity, non-heterosexual churchgoers may encounter casual microaggressions and community gossip that reinforce homonegativity.

Brad ultimately chose to distance himself (i.e., "pulled myself back" and "step out") from religion. Yet its controlling influence appears to linger, given his inclusion of homosexuality as a sin rather than an innate, positive part of one's identity (James and Moore 2005).

In contrast to Tina, Benji, and Brad, Tommy's child-rearing differed from the majority of individuals here. He was not consistently exposed to religion until his teen years, but rather influenced by parents who encouraged him toward open-mindedness. Like Benji, Tommy is irreligious. Unlike Benji, the lack of childhood exposure to heteronormativity in church means Tommy appears to appreciate certain dimensions of religion (Billingsley 1992; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990):

No, not really. I think I haven't found an occasion to believe that there's a Higher Power. I wasn't raised very religious. I was raised with some sense of a Higher Power out there, but never in a church. My parents were conscious of letting me come to a sense of God on my own, and I just haven't found one. I do admire people who believe in a Higher Power, who believe in them as a guiding force

in their life, who have that level of faith in something that is intangible . . . Some would say I'm an atheist, agnostic. But I'm fine with where I am in my process of spirituality.

Per the above comment, the 25-year-old graduate student history major, who self-identifies as gay, is comfortable being irreligious. His stance provides an example of the effects when both religious exposure and the family as religious socializing conduits are absent. The foci here illustrate both religious mechanisms that controlled aspects of the lives of Tina, Benji, Brad, and Tommy as well as how these same constraints ultimately functioned to foster queries and self-reflection.

Conclusions

As anticipated during this period of emerging adulthood, Theme 1 focuses on reflections on childhood religious socialization, largely via Black congregations in the U.S. (Arnett 2000; Nelson 2020). In one instance (i.e., Tina), past church experiences were positive and fostered bonding and belonging (Saroglou 2011); for most, it was semi-involuntary and resulted in tensions in early adulthood. Religion's control of their young lives was precipitated by both familial as well as congregational influences and largely functioned to shape the level and extent of church engagement via frequency and consistency. This process is common in Black Church youth socialization (Wimberly et al. 2013). For several individuals, early religious control in churches was a form of indoctrination designed to undermine non-heterosexual identities and behavior (Greenway et al. 2022); becoming agentic included distancing themselves from certain facets of religion and church life and being comfortable choosing dynamics, such as belief in God and prayer, that continue to have positive functions in their lives (Park 2005).

7.2. Theme 2: Religion as a Conflict Mechanism

Individuals included in Theme 2 often continued to be involved in a local church and associated with organized religion. However, an increasing pattern of negative experiences and observations began to sour their views about religion. As a result, religion became a point of conflict and contestation that required redress. This theme is illustrated by the following research finding in Quinn et al.'s (2015, p. 19) analysis of the religious experiences of young Black male members of the LGBTQIA community, "as they got older and began to identify as gay or bisexual and acknowledge their sexuality, the perceived incompatibility of homosexuality and religion became even more pronounced." Fred, Tommy, Juana, and Jemmon shared their stories.

According to 24-year-old Fred's experience, shared below, a specific church leader, the pastor, was influential in their decision to continue to embrace God—but outside the U.S. Black Church. Studies document the power wielded by Black clergy inside and outside church walls (Billingsley 1992; DuBois 2003; Frazier 1964; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). Fred's views place the onus on how scripture, a key church element, is interpreted and imparted by clergy as well as whether sermons empower or disempower:

We [biased Christians] exiled them from church while they were growing up. So, that's why I feel like now the Millennials are at a point where they don't go to church . . . I've seen it happen many a times. I've seen a pastor have a sermon ready, but when he see a room of gays . . . [imitating pastor] "I had a feeling that I wanted to change my sermon!" And I'm sitting here like, you didn't have no feeling. You just looked in your crowd, but you're probably one of us sitting in this pulpit . . . At the end of the day, we are still part of the Black community. Therefore, instead of hurting us, you should be building us up. . . We look like fools and dumbasses to the other races . . . we need to stop doing that. We need to take back our power to let people know that we can stand together and not fight each other. (Nonbinary college student, completing a degree in management)

In the above critique, Fred posits that decisions to intentionally weaponize scripture point to prejudiced pastoral agendas (Barnes 2013) in contrast to the community-building challenge that “Christians are called to bear witness to the truth that God has gathered all people into one family” (Nouwen 1986, p. 45). Moreover, he concludes that the homophobia and heterosexism embedded in Black Church culture in the U.S. ultimately disempower the African American community as a structural force, undermine collective efforts to rally against racial discrimination and other common concerns, and have dechurched his generation (Balaji et al. 2012; Cohen 1999; Wimberly et al. 2013). Fred’s comment also alludes to both the possible collective power of the over 8.2 million estimated Black sexual minorities in the United States, and sexuality as a vital component of interlocking identities among Blacks to be harnessed rather than diminished⁵ (Bowleg 2013; Cohen 1999; Greenway et al. 2022).

Participants included in Theme 2 identified other ways in which religious socialization during childhood extended beyond church walls. Tommy, a 25-year-old graduate school history major who embraces being gay suggests that the educational system negatively influenced the formation of his religious, spiritual, and sexual identities (Bynner 2005; Cote 2014):

I went to this Christian school and one of our first field trips was this movie. I thought it was cool because we got to see a movie at night [and] I got to see all my friends. But it was a very messed up movie called *Escape from Hell*. The premise was this doctor wanted to induce his own death and then be revived to see if there’s a heaven. But he ends up going to hell. And it’s the most torturous thing for the next hour and thirty minutes. Me, as an impressionable young middle school kid, I’m like, what the hell! Then I’m learning that gay people go to hell.

Per the above memory and Emerging Adulthood theory, systemic effects during one’s formative years can be particularly enduring (Arnett 2000; Nelson 2020). Tommy describes a traumatic incident as a Christian school student during which a seemingly informational movie translated into years of fear of hellfire, in general, and damnation due to his sexual orientation, in particular. His comment also illustrates the connections between religious institutions, in this case, churches and Christian schools that may jointly function to socialize youth about heteronormativity that can vilify homosexuality (Griffin 2006). As was the case with Fred, internal conflict resulted that took years to reconcile (Greenway et al. 2022; Quinn et al. 2015). Fred and Tommy’s commentaries above parallel research on the universality of homophobia in religious spaces in general; “anti-gay and -lesbian prejudice as a function of individual religiosity is common in major religions” (Saroglou 2011, p. 1333).

A 20-year-old transgender female who identifies as straight, Juana does not self-identify as religious or spiritual. She alludes to dangers associated with her sexual identity that a Higher Power enabled her to circumvent. Her disdain for religion and the Black Church is apparent as she describes church hypocrisy that includes prioritizing indiscretions and a preoccupation with an antiquated book of instructions (i.e., the Bible) of questionable origin and translation that has been embraced by many U.S. Black Christians without question:

Black people and Christians are the biggest hypocrites, and they like to pick apart a book [the Bible] that is (laughs) very, very flawed, a book that was written down however many hundreds of years after it was orally dictate to somebody, translated from one dead language to another, given to kings and queens around the world to be used. And, religion is a tool that has been used to control the masses since the beginning of time. So, nobody wants to go somewhere and be judged. . . Stop gay and trans shaming . . . if you gonna call one person out, call everybody out. . . when your pastor is one to sleep with the boys and the girls. If you’re gonna call somebody out about something, call out the child molesters. Call our gluttonous Sister Patterson . . . she got to eat before everybody and pass the ham.

The above conflict overlaps Themes 1 and 2 by contrasting religion with control (i.e., “the masses”) across time. Juana suggests that present-day control often takes the form of judgment and shaming of sexual minorities (Garrett-Walker and Torres 2017; Quinn et al. 2015; Watkins et al. 2016) while ignoring biblical censure against sins such as pedophilia⁶ and gluttony.⁷ Another important dimension of Theme 2 is the critique of intra-racial inequality with origins in White supremacy in general that participants consider an illogical, divisive function of religion (Cohen 1999; Douglas 1999; West 1993).

The final comment below from Jemmon, a 19-year-old sophomore Business Administration major who self-identifies as gay, reflects a different conflict: “When you start to run a church in an ungodly manner and look at it as a business, you’re not doing God’s work . . . there shouldn’t be all these fees. . . the pastor’s living in a mansion with a Range Rover . . . But is that what God intended the church to be for?” Jemmon’s critique also arises among heterosexuals and suggests that some Black sexual minorities have problems with the Black Church outside of heteronormativity, with what they consider to be intra-racial economic exploitation in American spaces. He calls into question behavior that seems to be secularly focused and preoccupied with expanding coffers and subsidizing pastors’ lavish lifestyles (Tucker 2011; Barnes 2013). For Jemmon, such materialism contradicts the Black Church’s mission in the United States.

Conclusions

Several patterns emerge from the representative remarks in Theme 2, including descriptions of past trauma and conflicts linked to the unwelcoming and non-affirming church, clergy, and congregant beliefs and behavior. Individuals critique Christianity for being preoccupied with homosexuality and prioritizing indiscretions. Responses also evidence critiques of the religious “status quo” expected during emerging adulthood (Arnett 1998, 2000, 2011, 2012, 2014; Nelson 2020); with age, individuals have become more cognizant of inequitable treatment, theological inconsistencies, and exclusionary practices in U.S. churches. Another central dimension of this theme is the tendency to reject intra-racial divisiveness that functions to undermine racial unity and the collective mobilization to combat inequality and discrimination; persons often associate this tendency with White-influenced sexual conservatism in Christianity in America (Cohen 1999; Douglas 1999; Griffin 2006; West 1993).

7.3. Theme 3: Religion/Spirituality as a Cathartic Mechanism

Despite episodes of control and conflict during childhood and early youth, certain young Black persons with diverse sexual identities here have or are in the process of liberating themselves from the negative utilities of religion, including unwelcoming churches. Their catharses include realizing that the heteronormativity and homophobia in many U.S. churches have served to marginalize them and their peers (James and Moore 2005; Quinn et al. 2015; Watkins et al. 2016; Woodyard et al. 2000). Such religious inequities now function as examples of dynamics to avoid and/or push back against. Additionally, their catharses include concerted efforts to reconcile their sexual and religious identities. For some persons, this means exiting churches altogether; others pick and choose parts of religion that meet their needs (Van der Braak and Kalsky 2017). And still others do not appear to be running away from church, but rather running toward spirituality. Representative remarks by Leopold, Tina, Lonnie, and Brad suggest that such individuals want to have godly relationships and to live godly lives, but not necessarily to practice religion. Moreover, they appear to have reconciled many past challenges associated with Christianity and/or Black Church involvement and found solace and support in spirituality as a faith tradition (James and Moore 2005).

Part of the catharses illustrated in this theme has meant realizing that Black churches are imperfect places filled with imperfect people as well as learning to appreciate the benefits of what religion and some congregations have to offer (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Quinn et al. 2015; Barnes 2013). For example, Leopold’s personal experiences, noted

below, provide evidence of God's existence. A 20-year-old gay, full-time college student, he associates his relationship with the deity with personal situations and succinctly describes the sermonic functions and benefits of church attendance:

Yes, I believe in God because I've seen Him do miraculous things for me in my life and bring me from places that I thought I could never return from. I believe I'm more of a spiritual person. . . for me religion is such a box. Yes, I attend church . . . I've learned to go to church, just to get a message from God.

According to the above reflection, supernatural experiences (i.e., "miraculous things" and "places . . . I could never return from") evidence a powerful, supportive God. However, Leopold has found the freedom to embrace both spirituality and the parts of Christianity that he enjoys (i.e., church attendance and sermons). Yet he makes the distinction between religion as a structure (i.e., "a box") and its positive functions. Also, part of his catharsis involved re-socializing himself ("learned to go") to focus on the utility of church as a place to hear from God.

Theme 3 also emphasizes "multiple religious belonging"⁸—comfortability picking and choosing beliefs and practices inside and outside religion that are valuable to them (Van der Braak and Kalsky 2017). Their beliefs and behavior parallel observations by Saroglou (2011, p. 1330) that "partially explain how, within the same religion, people (here Christians) may believe without belonging or behaving or may belong without believing or behaving or finally may behave without believing or belonging". Similar to Leopold, 25-year-old Tina continues to be excited about certain *dimensions* of religion, but explains why they and their peers are embracing more practical forms of worship that reject the class-based respectability politics often associated with the Black Church (Douglas 1999; Griffin 2006; Sorett 2022):

No dressing up. No ties. None of that stuff. It's just coming for God. I also feel like there's still a standard. Our generation, they want God and they want something that works . . . They're willing to push away the entire church building. (Transgender teacher's aide)

Tina provides an example of a present-day burgeoning, progressive church that appears to be harnessing the best of organized religion in ways that are relevant to them and their peers—as recognized by the following scholar: "Some prophetic heterosexual Black church leaders are beginning to lead their congregations in becoming open and affirming houses of worship for gay congregations" (Griffin 2006, p. 206). Central to Tina's catharsis is an ease in embracing the positive functions of both religion and spirituality, including supplanting the Trinity (i.e., "just coming for God"), continuing to embrace a godly standard for living, as well as attending non-traditional sanctuaries (Nouwen 1986). And for Tina, "pushing away" from traditional church tenets does not mean a lack of love for and accountability to God.

Next, Lonnie, an 18-year-old gay college freshman, reflects on being reared in a staunch Christian family wedded to the Jehovah's Witnesses. Although inactive, he still expresses allegiance to this faith tradition despite its exclusionary theology. He still participates in certain religious practices like prayer to Jehovah rather than God:

I grew up as a Jehovah's Witness and I still believe in it . . . So I pray. I pray to Jehovah. I don't pray to anybody else . . . that sort of thing still sticks with me. I still have knowledge about my religion. I don't really care to go to anybody else's place of worship because I have my own religion. But I'm not an active member because of the fact that I am gay . . . I can't fully go there and fully be myself, which of course I understand and still respect that.

Lonnie's continued connection to a faith tradition that is unable to embrace him holistically parallels the difficulties some young Black members of the LGBTQIA community in the U.S. have in reconciling their religious upbringings with their sexual identities (James and Moore 2005; Quinn et al. 2015). Self-identified as spiritual, Lonnie appears to have reconciled the frailties of his religious upbringing such that he still respects the church

and continues to embrace tenets of the Jehovah's Witnesses, while rejecting continued direct involvement.

Akin to Leopold and Tina, Lonnie acknowledges certain positive functions of religion—despite the homophobia and heterosexism he has experienced. For him, holdovers of his religious upbringing include denominational information (i.e., “knowledge about my religion”) and the importance of prayer. The positive utility of prayer is also central to Theme 3 as summarized by the following research finding that is particularly germane to reflection, growth, and maturation during emerging adulthood: “Through prayer people make themselves vulnerable to God. They share their emotions, their needs, and their wants . . . prayer, when used in the service of coping with life problems, provides many opportunities for self-reflection and examination and spiritual growth” (Taylor et al. 2004, pp. 79, 108). However, Lonnie's comment suggests lingering tensions (i.e., “I can't fully go there and fully be myself”) around this impasse reflective of the challenges some Black sexual minorities have in distancing themselves from churches that have had an indelible place in their lives. Quinn et al. (2015, p. 6) corroborate this conundrum: “Gay youth who leave the Church because of their sexuality experience lower levels of internalized homonegativity but also greater mental health consequences, potentially indicative of the struggle involved with distancing from the Black Church”.

Lastly, like 18-year-old Brad and many young adults in this study, embracing one's sexual identity means questioning reductionist religious interpretations that automatically associate homosexuality with death and damnation. For Brad, the family and organized religion are intertwined, and they undermined how he felt about himself and religious involvement (Bowleg 2013). Despite past pain due to homophobia, heterosexism, and intersectional invisibility (Greenway et al. 2022), Brad remains certain of God's unconditional love:

Hey, we have feelings, too. There are some gay people that believe in God, believe in going to church every Sunday, Wednesday, whatever. Let's be open to the fact that God loves us all, actually! . . . Even outside of being gay, my generation, I would say we don't attend church because we want to believe in what we want to on our own. We want to figure things out on our own instead of being pushed by a church to think a certain way.

Brad's reflection summarizes the trauma, conflict, and control he suggests is often found in churches. He recognizes similar functions of Christian beliefs and practices among gay and straight adherents (Sorett 2022) and the same biblical promise of God's love afforded both groups found in passages such as John 3:16,⁹ Romans 5:8,¹⁰ and 1 John 3:1¹¹. Part of Brad's catharsis includes self-reflection, self-love, and the choice to distance himself (i.e., “figure things out on our own”) from organized religion and unhealthy churches; he suggests that his peers are doing the same.

Conclusions

According to responses associated with this theme, religion in the U.S., specifically Christianity, often functions as a non-traditional litmus test of dynamics to avoid that can undermine catharses. This theme emphasizes comfortability, calm, and a sense of solace in terms of decisions about religion and/or spiritual beliefs. Most individuals appear to have reconciled certain frailties and flaws found in their early religious experiences and previous churches. They also realize that distancing themselves from certain parts of organized religion via church is vital for their emotional, psychological, and spiritual survival (Greenway et al. 2022; Griffin 2006; Quinn et al. 2015; Sorett 2022). Each person continues to believe in God or a Higher Power (Park 2005). Most maintain a prayer life (Saroglou 2011), and several persons periodically attend a local church. Also, multiple religious belonging is apparent around their religious/spiritual attitudes and actions that reflects maturation indicative of the Emerging Adulthood model as they strategically and proactively determine the facets of religion and/or spirituality that engender holism in their lives (Arnett 2000; Nelson 2020; Van der Braak and Kalsky 2017). In this way, part of

maturing appears to be recognizing that religion and/or spirituality are not fixed belief systems that require exclusive belonging. Persons included in this final theme do not “focus on bounded religious traditions but on hybrid expression of religiosity” (Van der Braak and Kalsky 2017, p. 663) that includes spirituality and secular practices. Their views do not mean that they exonerate sexually biased people and places, but rather make the choice not to allow such toxicity to continue to infect and affect their lives.

8. Discussion and Conclusions

According to Emerging Adulthood theory, late adolescence is a period during which individuals question the status quo and the organizations, institutions, and ideologies associated with it (Arnett 1998, 2000, 2011, 2012, 2014; Nelson 2020). Yet structural constraints may prevent Black sexual minorities from participating (Arnett 2000; Bynner 2005; Cote 2000, 2014). Findings in this study suggest that, when the topic is religion, young Black members of the LGBTQIA community in the U.S. are not exempt from this period of reflection and contestation. To my knowledge, this theory has not been used to focus on the experiences of young Black sexual minorities in America.

Experiences with Christianity and, typically, the Black Church in the U.S. have resulted in a pattern of control, conflict, and/or catharsis for persons in this study. Their responses suggest that Christianity as a religious belief system exhibited in Black churches in America often serves to maintain a heteronormative status quo that encourages heterosexual relationships in ways that foster heterosexism and homophobia (Greenway et al. 2022; Griffin 2006; Quinn et al. 2015; Sorett 2022). As an extension, the same religious beliefs and behavior directly or indirectly often serve to make religion, in general, as well as church spaces unwelcoming and non-affirming for Black members of the LGBTQIA community. Yet these same negative religious dynamics appear to fuel counternarratives and function as mechanisms for liberation when individuals reject marginalizing, discriminatory, oppressive beliefs, processes, practices, people, and places. This is a central finding here worthy of additional studies that address this study’s limitations to include longitudinal research that documents specific ages for responses and larger samples in the U.S. and internationally. However, reflections about the past and present provided here do allow for broad implications about how views changed with age.

Individuals describe changes in perceptions about the functions of religion, Christianity, and the Black Church as they aged. As children, persons often willingly participated in religion via churches despite their semi-involuntary involvement (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). Simply put, they participated because their parents told them to. Religious and non-religious resources meant that the functions of religion, specifically Christianity and the Black Church in America, were largely beneficial as children and youth experienced relationship- and friendship-building, support, racial affirmation, mentoring, and other intangible resources during events such as Sunday school, Bible study, children’s choir, and extracurricular activities (Barnes Forthcoming; Billingsley 1992; Frazier 1964; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). However, with age came the realization that many of the same events, beliefs, and practices often tacitly served to control their beliefs and behavior around sexuality.

The functions of religion also changed during late adolescence, as microaggressions, stigma, shame, alienation, and isolation left most persons marginalized and feeling invisible (Garrett-Walker and Torres 2017; Greenway et al. 2022; Quinn et al. 2015; Watkins et al. 2016). Over time, religion began to provide a non-traditional litmus test or measuring rod about *what not to do* if one wanted to experience self-love, unconditional acceptance, as well as reconcile their religious and sexual identities. Yet for certain individuals, a sense of catharsis emerged from periods of control and conflict. Thus, the same intersecting, often multiply marginalized identities based on factors such as sexuality, gender, race, and age functioned as buoys that moved them toward what they consider to be spiritually transformative lives. This finding suggests that, for this population, studying the functions of religion in the U.S. must also include the functions of spirituality in these same spaces. But it is important to note that some individuals are still *in process* and continue to be

conflicted about their past religious experiences (Greenway et al. 2022; Lefevor et al. 2020). There is no definitive endpoint for the Emerging Adulthood process (Arnett 2000; Nelson 2020). For some, such trauma continues, even if they are no longer involved in organized religion. Yet according to studies, certain dynamics such as belief in a transcendent deity and rituals such as prayer tend to manifest universally across most cultures (Park 2005; Saroglou 2011) but seem to resonate uniquely for individuals here in Black Church spaces (Billingsley 1992; DuBois 2003; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Barnes Forthcoming). Many young Black persons who reside in the U.S. describe now moving down a path that includes spirituality, multiple religious belonging, belief in God or a Higher Power, a consistent prayer life, and periodic church affiliations as needed, particularly for racial affirmation and sermonic support. These direct or indirect functions of religion are invaluable and indicative of the holistic lives they endeavor to lead.

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Notes

¹ Due to the timing of birthdays and/or continued participation in the program, a small group of participants were over the age of 24 years old when interviewed. Given the overall small sample size, I elected to retain them in this study.

² “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (Ephesians 5:1–2, NRSV of Bible 1989).

³ “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters.” (1 John 3:16, NRSV of Bible 1989).

⁴ “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.” (1 Peter 2:21, NRSV of Bible 1989).

⁵ For example, according to the 2019 U.S. Census, there were about 48 million Blacks in the U.S. (14.6%) (quoted in Black Demographics 2021). If, according to the 2019 Black Census, about 17% of Blacks identify with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual [lesbian (3%), gay (3%), bisexual (7%), and other (4%)], this translates to roughly 8.2 million Black members of the LGBTQIA community. Research included here suggests that a certain percentage of such persons are already involved, if only periodically, in the Black Church.

⁶ “If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” (Mark 9:42, NRSV of Bible 1989).

⁷ “They shall say to the elders of his town, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.’” (Deuteronomy 21:20, NRSV of Bible 1989).

⁸ Also referred to as “syncretism” in some studies.

⁹ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16, NRSV of Bible 1989).

¹⁰ “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8, NRSV of Bible 1989).

¹¹ “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.” (1 John 3:1, NRSV of Bible 1989).

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Article

To Be Safe and Seen: BIPOC Gen Z Engagement in Evangelical Campus Ministries

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Abstract: This paper investigates the Gen Z counter-demographic of the religious nones on college and university campuses by focusing on BIPOC students and the stories that they tell about why they actively engage in evangelical campus ministries during their college years. This is carried out by being attentive to the racially segregated campus ministry context and the preponderance of “white spaces” in colleges and universities, including in campus ministries. Data for this study come from the Landscape Study of Chaplaincy and Campus Ministry (LSCCM 2019–2022) in the United States. Like other students in campus ministries, we find that BIPOC students who are “churched” with a Christian upbringing seek out campus ministries that function as a “home away from home”, where they can find authentic belonging—genuine connections and acceptance among like-minded Christians. For BIPOC students, however, this search for authentic belonging included a search for a campus ministry where they could be “safe and seen” for both their ethnoracial and Christian selves.

Keywords: evangelical Christian; campus ministry; Generation Z; racial diversity; BIPOC; belonging

1. Introduction

How is it that in the era of religious “nones”, a portion of emerging adults in the United States not only identify as religious when they come into adulthood but choose to spend time in college actively involved with a campus ministry? This paper answers this question by focusing on an often-neglected student demographic—Generation Zs (Gen Zs) who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and their religious engagement in evangelical campus ministries, which make up the largest share of campus ministries in US colleges and universities. It answers why BIPOC Gen Zs engage in evangelical campus ministries by listening to the stories that they tell about why and how they became involved in campus ministries and where they find “home” on the college campus. This is carried out by paying special attention to how race shapes BIPOC students’ religious engagement amidst the segregated and white spaces that predominate the college and university landscape, including the terrain of evangelical campus ministries.

Gen Zs on the College Campus

Increasing numbers of “nones” (those who report no religious affiliation) make up today’s Gen Z demographic, and this is nowhere more apparent than on the college campus.¹ Since the year 2000, the proportion of religious “nones” has soared, making up nearly 30% at 4-year colleges and a little over 40% in universities in the 2019 American Freshman Survey. Though only about half identify as atheists or agnostics, student disaffiliation from formal religious institutions represents a growing challenge for campus ministries (The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2019). It is also of concern for student affairs as religious affiliation has been associated with positive student outcomes, and faith communities have traditionally functioned as a major source of supportive networks in college (Bryant 2007; Kim 2004, 2006; Park 2018; Pfund and Miller-Perrin 2019; Rennick et al.

2013). This community support is even more important for today's Gen Zs who are going through an unprecedented mental health crisis and loneliness epidemic (Demarinis 2020). According to the Healthy Minds Survey, one-third of college students experience psychological difficulties and 10% have suicidal thoughts (Soni 2019). Loneliness has also become a major social problem for Gen Zs—the first digital native generation more familiar with connecting through their thumbs and screens than in person. Questions that students commonly ask on college campuses today are: “How can I belong?”, “How do I make friends?” (Bui et al. 2022; Soni 2019). Meanwhile, traditional evangelical campus ministries, which make up the majority of campus ministries on college and university campuses, have been suffering from an image problem. Particularly since Trump's ascendancy, evangelicalism has become increasingly associated with racism and general intolerance, evident in part from the rise of white Christian nationalism to the growing culture wars led by conservative Christians against the 1619 project, CRT, and “diversity curriculum” in schools throughout the nation (Gorski and Perry 2022; Kim 2023).

Indeed, a growing body of research suggests that the rise of the religiously disaffiliated, particularly apparent among Gen Zs, is partly a backlash against the intolerant politics of the religious right (Batchelder 2020; Braunstein et al. 2022; Kim 2023; Manalang 2021). As the most racially diverse generation yet, Gen Zs tend to be politically progressive and activist and turned off by hierarchy, inequality, and intolerance (Kaplan 2020; Katz et al. 2021; Rue 2018; Twenge 2017, 2023).

Coinciding with the rise in evangelicalism's association with racism and general intolerance is the racially and ethnically diversifying college and university landscape. With post-1965 immigration and changes in Civil Rights legislation, historically and predominantly white American college and university campuses have become more demographically diverse (The Chronicle of Higher Education 2022). Researchers predict that the number of white high school graduates will continue to decrease, while the population of Asian and Latinx college applicants will grow (Kim 2014). In California, the demographic bellwether for the rest of the US, public universities are becoming significantly Asian and Latinx.² In 2021, the University of California admitted “its largest and most diverse undergraduate class ever” with 43% of the admitted California freshmen making up underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. For the 2021 school year, Latinxs were the largest group admitted (37%), followed by Asian Americans (34%), white students (20%), and Black students (5%). These demographic shifts parallel the growth of an international student population on university and college campuses across the US (roughly 5%), which is primarily Asian, with over half coming from China and India.³ The future of the student demographic on college and university campuses will only be more racially diverse with the majority of the students being BIPOC.

2. Literature

Evangelical Campus Ministry Engagement

Work on young adults' engagement in evangelical campus ministries is sparse, but what exists points to three main explanations for their religious engagement. First, students may engage in campus ministries as part of their spiritual or personal identity development. For example, Bryant (2011) found that some students remain religious throughout their college years and into early adulthood because they are able to identify values found within the Christian faith that affirm their sense of self, particularly as they strive to develop their own faith and religious engagement vis-à-vis their parents. Second, students who are already evangelical may engage in campus ministries because campus ministries provide a familiar and comfortable space in a new college environment (Kim 2004, 2006; Small and Bowman 2011). Third, students may participate in campus ministries because of the various resources that they may provide. Campus ministries can connect students to mental health resources (Davidson et al. 2020), help students to make friends and cultivate social capital (Moran et al. 2007), and enable students who are already evangelical to enhance their identity and status within a religious context and accrue cultural capital

(Moran 2007). One study even found a relationship between religious observance and an overall sense of satisfaction with college for students (Mooney 2010). In short, students engage in campus ministries as part of their self and spiritual identity development, for comfort and community, and the various resources that campus ministry may provide.

These existing studies on young adults' engagement in evangelical campus ministries shed light on what may broadly motivate students to participate in evangelical campus ministries. None, however, take race seriously in their analysis of religious engagement among today's Gen Zs. Studies on Gen Zs' religious engagement also invariably focus the narrative on white Gen Zs. The literature on Gen Z evangelicals, what little that exists, is centered on white students and neglects BIPOC Gen Zs. Implicit or explicit, the focus is on white students and BIPOC students are discussed, if at all, as a supplement to the main conversation centered around white students. This is particularly problematic given Gen Zs' racially diverse demographic (approximately half are BIPOC) and the racially diverse yet divided evangelical campus milieu. The few studies that consider racial diversity and campus ministry engagement suggest that race and the racial landscape clearly affect the choices and opportunities that students have to engage in campus ministries (Kim 2004, 2006, 2015; Park 2013, 2018).

As the college campus has become more racially diverse, so too have the evangelical campus ministries. Even still, the campus ministry community remains largely racially segregated, much like the broader Christian landscape. Most campus ministries, like the churches in their local communities, are racially homogenous (Dougherty et al. 2020; Emerson and Smith 2000; Kim 2004, 2006, 2015, 2023). Following this pattern of racial homogeneity, one of the main ways that national campus evangelical organizations such as InterVarsity, Cru, and Navigators have responded to a growing racially diverse student body is by creating separate ethnic niche ministries within their organizations.

For example, depending on the racial makeup of the campus, InterVarsity has separate ministries: Black Campus Ministry, LaFe (for Latinx students), and Asian American Ministries. At the turn of the 21st century, independent Asian American campus ministries were founded by Asian Americans for Asian Americans (e.g., Asian American Christian Fellowship, Koinonia Campus Mission). In spite of their efforts to be more racially inclusive, these campus ministries tend to function similarly to other ethnic niche ministries and are racially homogeneous.

Although racially homogenous campus ministries predominate, multiracial campus ministries, like multiracial congregations, also exist (Dougherty et al. 2020; Edwards and Kim 2019, 2023; Kim 2023). Having a demographically multiracial community, however, does not mean all is well (Barron 2016; Christerson et al. 2005; Edwards 2019; Edwards and Kim 2019, 2023; Kim 2023). A "peek below the surface" of numerically multiracial churches "reveals they are not necessarily spaces that foster equality, justice, or belonging" (Edwards 2019, p. 417). As a testament to this on the college campus, some of the largest campus evangelical ministries that have become more racially diverse in recent years are currently going through a "civil war" over the issue of racism and racial justice post-BLM (Black Lives Matter) and Trump's ascendancy (Kim 2023; Yee 2021).

Existing studies on young adults' engagement in campus Christian life fail to account for this racially diverse but segregated and divided structural context of Gen Zs' religious engagement. They also fall short in accounting for the racialized structural context of US colleges and universities. As various studies in higher education show, many US colleges and universities continue to be quintessentially "white spaces", terrains of whiteness, which constrain BIPOC students' development and success in college (Bonilla-Silva and Peoples 2022; Briscoe et al. 2022; Cabrera et al. 2017; Duran et al. 2022; Gusa 2010; Sanchez 2021).

White spaces are public spaces such as neighborhoods, schools, or workplaces that are "overwhelmingly white", which can be perceived as being "informally off limits" for people who are not white, e.g., Black people (Anderson 2015, p. 10). The historically white colleges and universities (HWCUs) in the US are some of these "overwhelmingly white"

public spaces that are formally open to everyone, yet informally can be perceived as being spaces primarily for white people (Bonilla-Silva and Peoples 2022; Briscoe and Jones 2022; Cabrera et al. 2017; Duran et al. 2022; Gusa 2010; Moore 2008, 2020). Whiteness shapes the history, traditions, symbols, curriculum, demography, and overall climate of these colleges and universities. HWCUs are “white spaces”—they are not spaces where everyone belongs equally (Bonilla-Silva and Peoples 2022, p. 1491). Similarly, there is a plethora of research that describes how the evangelical church, including the many evangelical campus ministries on college campuses, are also primarily white spaces that mainly support white people and their wellbeing as opposed to BIPOC (Christerson et al. 2005; Curtis 2021; Edwards and Kim 2019, 2023; Emerson and Smith 2000; Jennings 2020; Jones 2020; Jun et al. 2018; Kim 2004, 2006, 2015, 2023).

Given the clear lack of in-depth study on students’ engagement in campus ministries that center BIPOC students and takes the racialized structural context of college campuses and evangelicalism seriously, this study examines BIPOC Gen Z college students’ engagement in evangelical campus ministries by being attentive to the racially diverse yet segregated campus ministry context and the preponderance of “white spaces” in colleges and universities, including in campus ministries.

3. Data and Methods

Using data from the Landscape Study of Chaplaincy and Campus Ministry (LSCCM 2019–2022) in the United States, which included a range of campus ministry denominations, 90 in-depth interviews with students, ministry staff, and directors of evangelical campus ministries were analyzed.⁴ Interview data used for this study include 52 interviews with student leaders and 38 interviews with directors, ministers, and staff of evangelical campus ministries across the nation. The perspectives of both students and directors and staff from campus ministries studied are included in the data set. Approximately 60% of the sample included people who identified themselves as BIPOC and/or mixed and 40% included those who identified themselves as “white only”. Most of the interview data with students came from students involved in evangelical campus ministries on the West Coast, which were more racially diverse. They included one liberal arts college, a private university, and three public universities. The evangelical campus ministries represented in the study include both national university ministries, such as Cru, InterVarsity, and Navigators, and regional campus ministries such as Koinonia Campus Mission, as well as ministries specific to the college or to a local church. To increase the representation of BIPOC students in the study and account for the diversity of campus ministries in the contemporary college landscape, ethnic-specific campus ministries for Black, Latinx, and Asian American students were also purposefully included in the study. The directors of these various national, regional, and local evangelical campus ministries were also interviewed for the study.

Data were collected between 2020 and 2021 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviews were conducted via Zoom. Prior to an interview, participants were sent surveys that asked a few demographic questions about themselves and their campus ministries along with a consent form. Interviews tended to last about 60–90 min. All participants consented to be interviewed. Students who were referred by campus ministry staff as active members or leaders of their campus ministry were interviewed. The main questions, which were developed as part of the larger LSCCM project, discussed in each interview included the following: the participant’s spiritual journey from high school to college, how the participant became involved with the campus ministry, what attracted them to their ministry and what they appreciate about it, what they feel could be improved about their ministry, the participant’s perspective on the ministry’s racial demographic makeup, the participant’s perspective on how race impacts the ministry or their choice in which ministry to become involved with, where the participant feels at home in college, and, lastly, what challenges they feel students are facing today in college.

Focusing on BIPOC Gen Zs, responses to these questions were analyzed to see how they varied, if at all, by the race of the interview participants as well as the racial composition of the campus ministry to understand BIPOC Gen Z's religious engagement. Surveys were collected through Qualtrics. Interview data were coded and analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software.

4. Results

We find that BIPOC students who are already churched (having an experience of growing up in a Christian household or churchgoing community and familiar with Christianity) participate in evangelical campus ministries as part of their search for a “home away from home” during their college years. As the classical functional theories in sociology may suggest, campus ministries have a stabilizing function. Students who are already familiar with the Christian faith and norms engage in campus ministries because they provide them a place of familiarity and comfort, a home away from home, for students adjusting to their new lives on the college campus (Durkheim [1912] 1995; Kim 2004, 2006). Specifically, we find that these campus ministry homes are attractive because they can function as important sites of authentic belonging. Like other students involved in campus ministries, BIPOC students who were under-represented on their predominantly white college campuses sought a Christian community where they could make genuine friendships and connections, one that would accept and support them as they are. Unlike white students, however, we find that BIPOC students' search for authentic belonging included a search for a campus ministry where they could be “safe and seen” for both their ethnoracial and Christian selves. They sought a Christian community on campus where they could be “safe” and affirmed for who they are ethnoracially and religiously.

4.1. Churched BIPOC Home Seekers

Regardless of race, there were no new converts to the faith among the student leaders and active members of evangelical campus ministries that were interviewed in our study. All of the students interviewed that engaged in an evangelical ministry in college had at least some prior church experience or would have described themselves as Christian before entering college. What we have is a kind of “circulation of saints”—Christians reaffiliating and circulating among existing evangelical congregations, in this case, from churches to campus ministries (Bibby and Brinkerhoff 1983). Students who are already Christian-inclined and familiar with the faith were engaged in evangelical campus ministries.

Like other students, BIPOC students that actively participated in campus ministries came from Christian backgrounds. They grew up going to church with their family or at least had a strong familiarity with Christianity from those around them. More often than not, BIPOC students sought out a campus ministry experience, knowing that they appreciated their involvement in church or ministry during high school or because they had relationships with people involved in specific ministries present at their college. Some students had friends or family in the ministry, so they knew about it before entering college, others were looking to find a Christian environment to support their faith, and still others were searching for a sense of community, a feeling easily filled by campus ministries given their familiarity with church practices.

A Korean American student, Paul, who was studying to be a computer scientist and participated in a Korean American campus ministry typified BIPOC students who saw their participation in campus ministry as part of their ongoing journey as Christians being involved in ministry.⁵ This is how Paul responded when asked about his spiritual journey and how he became actively involved in his campus ministry, Koinonia Campus Mission (KCM):

I actually was born in the church. I have been going to church all my life and going through high school, it was the same thing... I have always been very involved and I always enjoyed just serving and hosting events and just helping

out with overall logistics of the church. So coming into college, I was also looking for a campus ministry...

Paul grew up in the church and enjoyed participating in Christian community and expected to do the same once he came to college. He “checked out” KCM, among other campus ministries, as soon as he got to his campus.

Another experience that was common for the BIPOC students in our study was a desire to develop a faith of their own by participating in campus ministry. Choosing to engage in a faith community on campus was part of their desire to grow in their faith and develop a faith of their own in relation to their parents and the Christian community that they grew up in. Trey, an African American student explains this experience—why participating in campus ministry was “really critical” for him:

It was really critical, I would say. I have always grown up calling myself a Christian, my family is Christian and whatnot, but I didn’t really know what that meant—to have like a personal relationship with God ... And so coming into college, I knew that I wanted to really find out this whole Christianity thing for myself and not just because like, my family is (Christian), you know.

Thus, even though he was a busy engineering major and a student-athlete at his large public university with plenty of alternative student activities that he could engage in, he made sure that he found a campus ministry early on so that he could develop a faith of his own.

Additionally, just as students are approached by members of Greek life organizations and other student clubs, participants discuss ways in which members of certain campus ministries “outreached”—reached out and encouraged them to join the group. One staff member of a COGIC (Church of God in Christ) campus ministry in the Midwest identifying as a Black male shares: “Fraternities and sororities and other clubs and other groups, are going to be there presenting themselves to them. And we want to make sure that we’re there presenting ourselves to them as well, as much as possible”. Thus, part of the reason why students who are already church-ed or familiar with the Christian faith participate in campus ministries is because campus ministries do their part in outreaching—taking steps to present themselves and attract students to their campus ministries. All of the campus ministries in our study participated in student organization fairs where various student groups introduce themselves to potential members on campus. They did this in addition to the various other ways that student organizations attract members, e.g., passing out flyers, offering free food, posting various events on social media, tabling on popular walkways on campus, and using existing friendship networks to invite newcomers to their campus ministries.

Thus, a significant reason why BIPOC students participate in campus ministry is that they are already Christian-inclined and seeking out a Christian community upon or even prior to matriculating at a college. Meanwhile, campus ministries are more than eager and ready to receive them. What then, are these BIPOC Gen Z college students looking for in a campus ministry home? What about a particular campus ministry draws BIPOC students in and makes them feel at home in a marketplace full of campus ministries?

4.2. *Seeking Authentic Belonging: To Be Safe and Seen*

Regardless of race, church-ed Gen Zs sought a campus ministry “home”, where they could experience authentic belonging. They were seeking a genuine community where they could make “real” friendships and deep connections (as opposed to shallow or “fake” relationships), one that would accept them as they are and genuinely care for them.

A bi-racial African American student, Darren, explains how finding this authentic community was crucial in his decision to commit to his campus ministry among the various other campus ministries that he visited in his first year in college. Although he did not grow up Baptist, he decided to commit to participating in Challenge, a Baptist campus ministry, because he met people, in particular a campus ministry staffer who also happened to be bi-racial, that genuinely expressed interest in him. Darren shares:

She was so excited to get to know me. Like, it wasn't just a, "Oh, here's the information for the night and whatnot", but like, she was like, "Where are you from? How many brothers do you have? What's your background?"... And then also she wasn't afraid to just spend the time just talking to me... She wasn't like, "Okay, see ya, now I am going to talk to other people". She was very focused in on me in that moment. And the first time I talked with some of the other people (in other student groups)... it was almost like a business transaction kind of thing. Like, we are trying to get numbers, trying to get people. Whereas this was very personal... She wanted to get to know who Darren was.

Another African American male student who is close friends with Darren and also attends Challenge explains why he too decided to join Challenge, one of the few racially diverse campus ministries at his university. It was because he was able to find genuine belonging—intimate and transparent friendships at a deep level with other Christian peers, including Darren.

The degree of like intimacy and transparency that I share with my friends in college, most of them who are specifically in Challenge, it is just much deeper and it is much more... than anything I have ever had... I definitely feel like the strongest sense of belonging really.

Amidst the backdrop of a loneliness epidemic, virtual realities, and superficial ties, BIPOC students, like the two students that we just heard from who were already Christian-inclined, sought a campus ministry where they could find genuine connections and support with peers and potential mentors while being themselves. This was a universal impulse among the students in our study regardless of the student's race, ethnicity, or gender, region, and the racial composition of their campus ministries—whether the students were involved in multiracial or more racially homogenous campus ministries.

Like everyone else, BIPOC students sought a campus ministry where they could find genuine belonging—a community where they matter and can be supported and cared for, as they are for their whole selves. That said, what only the BIPOC students, specifically those who are demographically under-represented on their college campuses, talked about wanting in their search for authentic belonging was a "safe" space. In a college landscape, including campus ministries, predominated by white spaces, under-represented BIPOC students' search for authentic belonging and genuine connections included a search for a "safe" space where they could be "seen" and known for their full ethnoracial *and* Christian selves.

To understand why underrepresented Black, Latinx, and Asian American students in our study talked specifically about wanting a campus ministry home that is "safe" and where they can be "seen" is to first consider the racial terrain of their college campus. Although the demographics of the college and university campuses in our study varied and included two of the most racially diverse universities in the country, the culture, history, and institutional structure of the campuses were predominantly white. Despite the racial diversity of many of these campuses, the main spaces were white spaces, and the majority of the student organizations were "white spaces", informally and implicitly perceived by those who are BIPOC as spaces primarily for white people (Anderson 2015; Bonilla-Silva and Peoples 2022).

In this predominantly white terrain, including the campus ministry landscape, being in a space where under-represented BIPOC students can be "safe and seen" for their ethnoracial selves was an imperative part of their search for genuine belonging in campus ministries. BIPOC students want to be safe in a genuine community where they can be "seen" and known for who they are, for their ethnoracial selves versus just as Christians. In short, they want to be "safe and seen" for *both* their ethnoracial and Christian selves, which is something that white students could take for granted in their campus ministries. This was a unique aspect of BIPOC students' search for authentic belonging on the college campus through campus ministries in the era of a loneliness epidemic and racial strife, during a global pandemic no less.

To be “safe and seen” was the primary reason that BIPOC students at large secular university campuses gave for why they chose to participate in an ethnic campus ministry where their ethnoracial group was the clear majority such as InterVarsity’s Black Campus Ministry and LaFe. It was also why a handful of Black students at a Christian college that had mandatory chapel and various university-sponsored campus ministry activities decided to start a separate “diverse” campus ministry primarily for Black students. It is also why Asian American students who were the demographic minority on the same Christian campus decided to participate in Koinonia Campus Mission, a campus ministry that is primarily Korean American. The following BIPOC students discuss why they sought to participate in an ethnoracial campus ministry of their own over participating in other campus ministries that are formally open to everyone.⁶

4.3. To Be Safe

LaFe is an ethnic campus ministry for Latinx students within InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, which is one of the large nationwide evangelical campus ministries in the US. Maya, who self-describes herself as Black, Latinx, and Indigenous, is a student who participates in one of the chapters of LaFe at a large private university on the West Coast that is predominantly white but also significantly Asian. Maya explains her campus racial demographic in her own view and how she feels Black and Hispanic students are a clear minority in the racial topography: “It is predominantly white, but there are also a lot of Asian people. . . I would say that Black and Hispanic students are definitely the minority.”

As a sociology major interested in studying race relations, Maya sees people who look like her in her major classes. This is not the case, however, in her general education classes, which include a broader student body. In such general spaces for “everyone”, she “definitely feels like the minority”. Maya explains:

I tend to take classes that focus around race relations and stuff. So, you know, those types of classes cater to a certain demographic, like people who are interested in race tend to be like BIPOC. So. . . I don’t feel like the minority there but like for my general education classes (where) like everyone is taking those classes. . . I definitely feel like the minority.

In these main and general spaces where she is clearly the minority, Maya experiences various racial microaggressions and general unease for being who she is, even a sense of inferiority, which is not good for her mental health. When asked why a separate campus ministry for Latinx students like LaFe is needed when there is already an InterVarsity chapter on her campus that is open to everyone, Maya shared the following:

I would say (LaFe) is needed because you find a lot of microaggressions. Whether students want to or not. . . it comes off as racist. . . And like the other person doesn’t see it, but you do. And there’s this constant feeling of inferiority. . . and like a lot of that can become very unhealthy, very fast. So, I think that by creating a safe space and a place where Latinx students can congregate is really healthy and we can kind of let our guard down. . . Because when you’re in a predominantly white institution, being a BIPOC, you always have to have your guard up, you always have to be on your A game. You have to work twice as hard to get like half of what white students are getting. . . So creating that safe space allows us to let our guard down and connect with people who have the same perspective as us and the same struggles as us.

In the general spaces of a predominantly white institution, including the “main” InterVarsity space that is open to everyone, BIPOC students feel like they need to have their guard up. They are in a battle to preserve their mental health and defend their self-worth and dignity as a people. They have to deal with racist microaggressions and general unease for their ethnoracial selves, where things can get “unhealthy” very fast. As such, safe spaces where Latinx students can relax, be themselves, and not have their guard up and defend their self-worth can be vital.

Kim, who is a Nigerian American and president of BCM at another large university on the West Coast shares what InterVarsity's Black Campus Ministry (BCM) offers for the Black students on her campus. BCM offers students a "safe space" for Black students on a campus full of campus groups, including campus ministries like InterVarsity, that are predominantly white and/or Asian. For Kim, InterVarsity's BCM offers a "safe space" not just from the broader predominantly white and Asian university campus, but also within InterVarsity, which is also largely white and Asian. She explains:

Because there's BCM, Black students can feel safe being a part of InterVarsity. . . because I think a lot of campus fellowships can be very dominated by a certain type of person. For example, at (university) there are a lot of white people, a lot of Asian people. So naturally a lot of campus fellowships are predominantly white, predominantly Asian. So. . . it is nice for a larger fellowship to have spaces for less represented or underrepresented minority groups to feel like they have a space.

BCM, while open to other races and ethnicities, is an intentional "safe space" for Black students at a predominantly white and Asian campus. Kim explains further: "we are inviting of people who are not Black, but at the same time, I think it's important to keep it as a safe space for Black students to feel comfortable because that's the purpose of BCM". BCM, by design, is a "safe space" for Black students.

At a historically and predominantly white Christian college campus also on the West Coast, BIPOC students shared similar stories about needing a "safe space". As one of these students shared, "There aren't a lot of spaces that are built for people that look like us" on campus. As such, safe spaces are an important part of students' search for authentic belonging. Lisa, the president of a campus ministry that operates as a safe space, particularly for Black students, explains why such a space is needed at a Christian college that already has a university campus ministry and various chapel services that are open to everyone:

It's been hard being at (names the college). . . just because there aren't a lot of spaces that are built for people that look like us It's a very like white Jesus culture. . . like. . . "If you're anything but white and Christian, why are you here?" . . . "You're not the Aryan race, why are you here? This school was not meant for you, and if you're here, you're here because of (affirmative action) or to get your reparations."

In such a "very white school" where being white and Christian are synonymous, Lisa, who is Black, had trouble finding a Christian community that suited her. She explains: "I didn't find any student ministry that really, really clicked with me where I was like, this is my community". Thus, she decided to help develop a small Bible study and worship space primarily for Black students. The only way that she could find a campus ministry community that looked like her and was "safe" at her college was to create it.

In a separate "safe" Black campus ministry space, Lisa and other Black students did not have to worry about racial microaggressions to blatant racism such as people asking them if they could pet their hair "as if they were a pet" or having the "Confederate flag waving" in front of their face on campus. They did not have to explain why the murder of yet another Black person by police officers was weighing heavily on their souls, disrupting their studies and their overall sense of emotional and physical safety on campus.

Compared to Black and Latinx students, Asian American students at the large universities on the West Coast where they were a significant numerical majority did not specifically talk about wanting or needing to be "safe" in their campus ministries. They did not use the language of a campus ministry as a "safe space". The Asian American students at the aforementioned Christian college where they were the clear numerical minority, however, did. This is what James, one of the leaders of the sole Asian American campus ministry, Koinonia Campus Mission (KCM), on campus, shared about why their

campus ministry is needed at a Christian college that already has various student clubs and Christian gatherings that are open to everyone:

There is kind of like this insecurity within myself and I am sure with, you know (other) Asians too. . . We kind of feel like. . . not a part of other clubs or we feel like unsafe. So, we need to gather together. And I think sometimes we can kind of be cliquy because of that, but I think we are just trying to be safe together.

Feeling insecure about being Asian and feeling unsafe being who they are in the “white” spaces on campus, students like James take time out of their lives to participate in a campus ministry that is predominantly Asian American, even at the risk of being criticized for being “cliquy”. The “other clubs” that James mentions that dominate his predominantly white Christian campus are historically White Greek life, which are quintessentially white and exclusive spaces. Ironically, these white clubs are not similarly accused of being racially “cliquy” at his school. Thus, on a campus with a preponderance of white spaces, white clubs, and “white Jesus culture”, Asian American Christian students, like the other under-represented BIPOC students, gather separately in their effort to be “safe together”.

4.4. *To Be Seen*

A common theme in BIPOC students’ descriptions of their desired “safe space” was a space where they could be “seen”. For BIPOC students seeking authentic belonging, being in a “safe space” significantly meant being in a space where they could be “seen” and known for their full ethnoracial selves, something that they could not fully and ordinarily experience on the broader campus, including in the non-ethnic specific Christian campus groups that are formally open to everyone.

Being in predominantly “white spaces”, an elementary feature of being “seen” is being able to visibly see others who look like you significantly represented in the group. Maya, from LaFe, explains the value of being part of a small Bible study group for Latinx students like LaFe: “Being at a predominantly white institution. . . like while you’re in class and walking around, you don’t really see other Latinx students. So, it can be hard. . .” As such, being at a LaFe gathering, a room full of people that not only know her by name but also look like her has been a tremendous comfort.

This was the case for Melinda as well, who also leads a chapter of LaFe at another university on the West Coast. She shares what drew her specifically to LaFe:

(In) the fellowships that I saw, I didn’t see any Mexicans there or Hispanics. . . I didn’t see any other person at the table, besides, you know, there was one table that I went to that was just like white girls. And so, I mean, that’s fine, I’m not saying that I could never be in a fellowship with those kinds of people because that’s ridiculous. But, I feel that it does weigh a little bit in the fact that InterVarsity had the Latino fellowship.

Not seeing other Mexican Americans, people that looked like her, in the Christian fellowship groups on campus, made an impression on her that InterVarsity had a small group, LaFe, just for Latinx students. Although she could certainly be in a fellowship with other people who are not Latinx, e.g., “white girls”, it made a difference that she could find a campus ministry where she could “see” other people like herself. It also helped that the IVCF staffer who oversees LaFe is also a Mexican American, a Latina like herself.

Besides seeing others that look like them significantly represented in the group, the next and more profound level of being “seen”, critical for authentic belonging, is to be more fully known for their ethnoracial selves versus just as Christians. In LaFe, Latinx students like Melinda can be part of a campus ministry home where being Latinx and Christian align. In fact, that is the *de facto* function of LaFe. As Melinda shares, while LaFe is open to anyone who is interested in joining, it is intended to be “a welcome space for people who are of Latino heritage”. It is a separate Christian space where someone like her can “say things”, “eat things”, and share “whatever that are familiar” with those who are of Latinx heritage. It is where she says she can “just like be with people who have the same

experience” that “know where I am coming from”. She explains in more detail why places like LaFe feel like home for her in college:

I think it’s just the places (like LaFe) where there are people that get me. . . sharing the experience of, you know, like childhood too. And even things like the types of punishments that you get, like getting beat with the chancla (slipper), or like the candy that you ate or, you know, elote, stuff like that. . . . It’s really awesome.

White students can expect that their ethnoracial identity and faith will be mutually supported and normative in the campus ministries that predominate their college campus. Students like Melinda cannot expect the same. Thus, being able to share her Latinx identity and background in the Christian community and having her Latinx heritage and Christian faith align in places like LaFe is precious. It is indeed “really awesome”, especially as a STEM major in a broader university context where very few people look like her.

Campus ministries like LaFe are also attractive to Latinx students because they are able to have Bible studies and discussions catered specifically to being both Latinx and Christian. Bible studies and faith discussions in LaFe explore what it means to be not just a “Christian”, but a Christian of Latinx heritage. Carlos, a president of another chapter of LaFe on the West Coast, explains how his chapter of LaFe, a small Bible study group for Latinx students, helps him to be who he is, someone who is both a Mexican and Christian. Carlos explains, “I am a Mexican Christian. I identify as both almost simultaneously”. As such, Carlos appreciates that LaFe lets him and other Latinx students at his predominantly white campus be seen and known as both Latinx and Christian. In fact, the mission of LaFe, as he puts it, is to provide a “community that has like that love for Christ and also has that Latino perspective”. Thus, Carlos shares how his LaFe small group spent the year talking about “the Brown church and what that means, being able to see the Bible through that Latino perspective”. This included serious conversations on how they could decolonize their faith from the European Christian influence and embrace a “Brown theology”, a Christian faith informed by their Latinx heritage. Their discussions centered around a book called by just that name: *Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latina/o Social Justice, Theology, and Identity*.

While students in LaFe can discuss Brown theology and learn about how they can embrace being Latinx Christians, they can enjoy hanging out with other Latinx Christians sharing familiar experiences and stories, and eating, in Carlos’ words “tacos and tamales” or “pan dulce y cafecito”. The following is how one of LaFe’s events was advertised on Carlos’ campus: “LaFe: Home away from Home—A homestyle afternoon with the family food, drinks, and fun of our Latinx culture”. In LaFe, Latinx students can find a home and belonging in an authentic community where being both Latinx and Christian align—where it is affirmed, supported, and celebrated. Carlos could not find this kind of community in the other campus ministries at his college. LaFe is the only campus ministry that is specially catered to Latinx Christian students at his large historically white secular campus known for having dozens of different campus ministries.

Similarly, Korean American students involved in KCM at the predominantly white Christian campus that already has a plethora of Christian communities and events decided to start a campus ministry primarily for Korean American students because they wanted a space where being Korean American and Christian could be shared without explanation or hesitation. Having to inhabit predominantly white spaces with a plethora of white clubs and “white Jesus culture”, Korean American Christians wanted a space of their own, what a student called a “haven”, where they could be seen, known, and affirmed for being both Korean American and Christians. The president of KCM at the Christian college which we previously discussed explains why a separate space like KCM is needed at his Christian campus and what draws students to KCM:

As Korean Americans, we all have this distinct kind of past and beginning. Whether it be with first gen Korean parents, having the mentality of like, “Go to school or get straight A’s”, . . . having strict parents, or going to school and. . . being discriminated for our Korean lunches and the way they smell, things like that.

We kind of all have these similar kinds of experiences that include discrimination and maybe even suffering, maybe I am getting bullied for my race... (so we) gather at this kind of haven, for a lack of better words, where we can share the similarity of being Korean American and Christian. I think that is really what is binding us together.

Since all of the Korean American students in our study grew up in a Korean American church, the experience of growing up attending a Korean American church is yet another point of similarity and bonding experience that draws Korean American students to choose to participate in KCM over the predominantly white campus groups and events that are offered at the Christian college with a “white Jesus culture”. They can be seen and known for being both Korean American and Christian in a “haven”-like space offered by KCM.

When discussing their reasons for participating in an ethnic-specific campus ministry, such as LaFe, BCM, or KCM, various under-represented BIPOC students pointed out that it is not that they “can’t” participate in white spaces, including in white Christian spaces. As Melinda noted before, it would be “ridiculous” to think otherwise. In fact, participating in cross-racial spaces is something that under-represented BIPOC students are more than familiar with attending predominantly white institutions. Interacting cross-racially in white spaces is a must, and they are more than accustomed to it. However, they would not be able to do so while being their full ethnoracial Christian selves. This was particularly evident for BIPOC students who first tried participating in a predominantly white campus ministry, Cru, but then eventually found themselves in a campus ministry where they could be with other co-racial Christians.

Kim, the president of a BCM chapter, shares why she started to get more involved in BCM when she was already participating in Cru, a predominantly white campus ministry on her campus. She explains why she realized Cru was not the community for her:

(I) kind of realized Cru wasn’t the community for me, because I didn’t feel very seen, or like anyone could relate to me. I was like one of the only Black people in Cru. So naturally, like, I just didn’t really feel comfortable there after some time. Then, that’s how I started to get more involved in BCM and InterVarsity.

Kim emphasizes that she did not get more involved in BCM because Cru did something wrong. In fact, she says she made really good friends there, but the point was that she did not “feel very seen” for who she was as “the only Black” person in Cru. She had to do more bending, assimilating, and accommodating within Cru’s de facto “white culture”. People were not meeting her as she was and accommodating her as a Black woman who grew up worshiping in the Black church. She explains further:

This is not to dog Cru at all or people that are in Cru because I made really good friends that are still my friends today through Cru, and learned so much and grew in faith with the resources that Cru provided. But, I guess my thing was just that I kind of realized that... I was doing more assimilating to mainstream culture than people were trying to relate to who I am as a person... It was a lot of me bending to mainstream culture, white culture essentially, than there was like people trying to meet me where I was.

There was nothing wrong with Cru as a Christian campus ministry. Kim enjoyed the Bible studies and grew a lot as a Christian there. However, she could not be her full self—a Black Nigerian American woman who grew up in the Black church. She felt she had to “hold back” aspects of her ethnoracial self and could not be her “whole complete self”. She continues on about what she realized having first participated in Cru before joining BCM:

I realized like the side of myself that I presented to people (at Cru), I don’t feel like is really my whole complete self. And in that sense, I felt like I was holding back a lot of who I am to people in terms of... like how I talk, think, what my interests (are),... what I spend my time doing... I was holding a lot of myself back. And so people didn’t really know fully me, like my friends (did), for example, from high school days (who were all Black). And so I realized that I needed to find a

community where I felt like I could walk with God and also bring my full self to the table in my relationships.

Kim, therefore, stopped attending Cru and joined BCM in her freshman year because she could be more herself at BCM, including worshiping in the Black church tradition, and find people who would know her more fully and authentically in return. She could bring her “full self to the table” in her “walk with God” in BCM. She could be unapologetically Black and Christian.

Another Black student from the same large public university, John, also found himself participating in BCM after having first participated in Cru. He shared a similar journey of seeking a campus ministry home where he could be more fully seen, where he would not have to compromise who he is as a Black man. Again, John noted that it is not that he could not participate in Cru, which he described as a nice Christian community with good teaching:

Coming to college, I was just a part of Cru. . . Everyone was cool, I knew that I was the only Black person, I mean I wasn't ignorant. . . It didn't really bug me because I had been in similar environments before, just being in things like AP classes and stuff like that. . . So, getting there, had a good time there. They were teaching good lessons, went to some retreats. . . People liked me, they were cool with me. . . They have a nice community that was always trying to do everything together. . . It's not a problem.

There is nothing wrong with Cru. It is a nice Christian community with good teaching. However, as John learned more about his Black identity and living in a community with other African Americans, and the “Black experience”, he had a change of thought:

But then as I became a second year, I also became the Resident Assistant for the African diaspora living learning community on campus, that's basically a way a lot of Black people, if they want to live amongst other Black people, can apply for. . . And so, I became the resident assistant for that, and I think that that's where a lot of my learning about my Black identity, how that looks like, how we are on a predominantly white campus, and just thinking about things like that.

Living in a community with other Black students and thinking about what it means to be Black in a predominantly white campus, John eventually stopped attending Cru.

I was just like, there's nothing inherently wrong, but. . . When I learned more about what it means to be Black, what it means to other people, like the Black experience of other people. . ., I was just like. . . I don't know if I am quite going back to Cru.

Instead of going back to Cru, John found himself attending BCM, thanks to one of his buddies, who is also Black who invited him to join a BCM Bible study for Black men on campus. At BCM he was able to have Bible studies with a group of other Black men and worship in the Black church tradition, which he grew up in. Again, like Kim, he stressed that it was not that he could not find a community through Cru, but it was simply not a community where he could more fully and authentically connect with others and be “seen” for who he is as a Black man. John shares more about the value of having a separate space with other Black men where he can be more genuine about himself and his experiences as a Black man.

Just the importance of being able to understand people's experiences and identities, having that understanding about Black people having inherently underlying lived experiences that we just get when we see one another. And so being able to be a part of the community like that, and feeling like I don't necessarily have to put up as much of a front in a group, even if it is a Bible study because we're all sinners and stuff like that but there's just parts that are easier to explain among other Black men.

Although he could very well connect with other Christians, John wanted to be part of a campus ministry where he could be his more complete self as a Black man and a Christian with others who share underlying Black identities and experiences. At BCM, he could be both safe and seen as Black and Christian.

To have authentic belonging in campus ministries, the reason why under-represented BIPOC students would choose to participate in a Latinx, Black, or Asian American campus ministry is to be in a faith community where they can safely and unapologetically be who they are, ethnoracially and religiously.

5. Discussion

"You Have to Belong before You Believe"

A campus pastor who we interviewed for the LSCCM study that has over 30 years of experience in campus ministry shared the above quote when asked what wisdom or insight he may have gained from his long career in campus ministry. In order for students to believe and grow in their faith, they have to first feel like they "belong" to the campus ministry. The takeaway for religious leaders is that students first need to "belong" before they can commit to participating in a campus ministry. Building on this insight, the BIPOC students in our study needed to first feel like they belonged, specifically that they could authentically belong, before committing to participate in their campus ministries.

Regardless of race, students who were already church and Christian-inclined sought a campus ministry where they could find authentic belonging—"real" community with friends and mentors who genuinely cared for them and supported them as they are. Focusing on the stories that BIPOC students in particular shared regarding their journey to campus ministries, what we found, however, is that this search for authentic belonging included a distinctive search for a campus ministry home where BIPOC students who were also under-represented on their predominantly white campus could be "safe and seen". In contrast to white students, these BIPOC students talked about the critical need to be "safe" and "seen" for who they are in their search for a campus ministry home. They wanted a Christian space where their ethn racial identities and faith could align and be affirmed without qualification, hesitation, or trepidation—where it could be taken for granted, as it is for white students.

In predominantly white spaces where BIPOC Christian students were not equally safe nor seen, they sought campus ministry homes where they could naturally and simultaneously embrace who they are, ethnoracially and religiously.

6. Conclusions

You Have to First Be Safe and Seen

The importance of first being "safe and seen" for BIPOC students to feel like they can belong revises the axiom that you have to first belong before you believe. Before students can feel like they belong and believe, they need to first and foremost feel safe. Before students can feel like they can authentically belong, they need to first feel "seen" for who they are both for their ethn racial and religious selves.

In this climate where diversity is both celebrated and assaulted in a campus ecology predominated with white spaces, our study suggests that religious organizations and student affairs should encourage the cultivation of these separate spaces where under-represented BIPOC students can find "havens" and refuge. In these pockets of authentic belonging, they can hope to nurture a faith of their own and remain a counter-demographic to the rising numbers of Gen Z nones. Moreover, we know that these separate spaces can function as important sites of belonging, which are crucial for the psychological, social, and academic well-being of BIPOC students during their college years. Until the main university spaces are truly inclusive spaces, our study suggests that campus ministry and student life leaders should consider creating and supporting more of these "safe spaces" where under-represented BIPOC students can be "safe" and "seen" for their full selves, where both their religious as well as ethn racial identities can be affirmed.

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Notes

- ¹ According to Gallup’s 2020 estimates, 31% of millennials have no religious affiliation while 33% of Generation Z (the portion of Gen Z that has reached adulthood) have no religious preference. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx> (accessed on 15 July 2023).
- ² <https://apnews.com/article/education-race-and-ethnicity-79f7d0e7eb812ce36538b9e112c38956> (accessed on 15 July 2023).
- ³ <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/enrollment-trends/> (accessed on 15 July 2023).
- ⁴ I (first author) am one of the co-investigators of the Landscape Study of Chaplaincy and Campus Ministry (LSCCM) in the United States that included a team of sociologists and religious studies professors and graduate students across the country. I helped collect interview and survey data for the project focusing particularly on evangelicals in one of the several regions covered in the study. My positionality as a researcher is a woman of color personally and academically familiar with a variety of evangelical organizations, including campus ministries. While the LSCCM team conducted interviews with individuals involved in a variety of different religious communities on campus (e.g., Jewish student groups, Muslim Student Associations, mainline Protestant campus ministries), the data for this paper rely primarily on interview data collected from those involved in evangelical campus ministries.
- ⁵ Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper to protect interview participants’ identity.
- ⁶ Given space constraints, we are unable to discuss the few under-represented BIPOC students that participated in campus ministries that are formally open to all. However, what we can share is that the few BIPOC students that did participate in these communities were able to do so because they were often able to find “pockets” of safe spaces where they could be seen more fully for their ethnoracial selves.

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Article

Is the Black Church Dead?: Religious Resilience and the Contemporary Functions of Black Christianity

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Abstract: Recent sociological literature draws attention to the changes in religious affiliation and expression among younger generations. More specifically, extant research suggests that the increase in religious “nones” (those who no longer identify with a religion) and “dones” (those who no longer affiliate with a religious congregation) substantiates the secularization thesis which contends that religion is becoming increasingly insignificant in modern society. However, when these trends are disaggregated across racial lines, religious affiliation remains high among Black Millennials. The present study explores this anomaly further, drawing on data from in-depth interviews with 65 Black Christian Millennials to assess how, if at all, the historic functions of the Black Church are still prevalent among Black Christians today. Findings suggest that while some functions have remained constant across generations (i.e., social-cultural), others have evolved (i.e., socio-political and socio-educational) or become defunct (i.e., socio-economic) and new functions have emerged (i.e., socio-emotional). As such, I introduce the concept *religious resilience* as a framework for understanding how and why a religion’s “afterlife” is sustained despite macro-level processes that might undermine its prominence. Altogether, this study has implications for how we conceptualize racialized religion and how we measure, operationalize, and understand religious expression across social locations.

Keywords: religious resilience; Black Millennials; Black Christianity; racialized religion; religious afterlife

To understand the power of the Black Church it must first be understood that there is no disjunction between the Black Church and the Black community. The Church is the spiritual face of the Black community, and whether one is a “church member” or not is beside the point in any assessment of the importance and meaning of the Black Church. Because of the peculiar nature of the Black experience and the centrality of institutionalized religion in the development of that experience . . . the Black Church, then, is in some sense a “universal church,” claiming and representing all Blacks out of a long tradition that looks back to the time when there was only the Black Church to bear witness to “who” or “what” a man was as he stood at the bar of his community”.

C. Eric Lincoln

1. Introduction

Sociologists have concerned themselves for some time with the symbiotic relationship between individuals and institutions. As the highly organized components of social life, social institutions shape not only how people interact with one another but also dictate how individuals and groups form attitudes and beliefs, and how they come to understand themselves and their role(s) in society. One of the most prominent social institutions that has experienced major shifts over time in both how it has been perceived and engaged with, is religion (Pew Research Center 2015a, 2015b). Ongoing scholarly conversations concerning the sociology of religion have consistently acknowledged how American religiosity has, from the outset, operated as a racial project (Omi and Winant 2015; Mayrl 2022). More specifically, sociologists have argued that religion is inherently racialized

and politicized and, as a result, works to uphold America's racial hierarchical system while simultaneously offering ideologies that help individuals move within and across the "matrix of domination"¹ (Du Bois [1903] 2003; Weber [1905] 2009; Marx [1846] 1978; Brown 2011; Barnes 2014; Wilde and Glassman 2016; Whitehead and Perry 2020; Allen 2019b; Park et al. 2020; Yukich and Edgell 2020; and Perry et al. 2022).

Black Americans'² engagement with the Christian faith has and continues to present a socio-political paradox. Despite Christianity's role in perpetuating anti-Black racism, particularly during slavery, Black Americans remain one of the most religious demographics in the country. This puzzle compels the question: why do Black Americans continue to affiliate with a faith that has and continues to be used as a mechanism for justifying their oppression? This critical inquiry has led some portions of the Black community to reconsider their engagement with Black Christian institutions and beliefs and even refer to the Black Church as "dead" or at least "dying". The present study explores this phenomenon further by examining Black Christian Millennials' perceptions of the Black Church's contemporary function(s) in society. Here I define functions as the various roles the Black Church has played in the Black community over time (i.e., how Black Americans leveraged resources from Black churches to sustain Black life beyond the church). Drawing on data from 65 in-depth interviews, I argue that while some of the historic functions have remained constant across generations, other functions have evolved or become defunct, and new functions have emerged. Claiming these fluctuations as evidence of the Black Church's vitality, I introduce the concept of *religious resilience* as a framework for understanding how and why a religion's "afterlife" is sustained at the micro-level despite changes within macro-level processes that might undermine its institutional prominence.

Considering the steady rise in rates of disaffiliation (Pew Research Center 2015b), this study is particularly timely and significant because it extends scholarly conversations on racialized religion by offering new insights on how (and why) Christianity survives and thrives among portions of the Black community today.³ Additionally, this study compels scholars to think about the "afterlife" of other prominent social institutions experiencing significant change, such as marriage and family, education, and even media and technology.

2. Background: Historic Functions of the Black Church

American religion is highly racialized and this is particularly evident when considering the tradition of Black American Christianity.⁴ As the first stable and systematic aspect of Black life and culture, the Black Church is the oldest social institution in the Black American community,⁵ and one of the preeminent institutions throughout American history (Gates 2021). In the first sociological study of religion in the U.S. context and of the Black Church, Du Bois ([1903] 2003, p. 154) notes, "The African church is the oldest Negro organization, dating in part from Africa itself, and here Negroes have had the most liberty and experience". He suggests that the high value placed on the Black Church historically is in part due to it being the first institutional space in which Black people experienced (constrained) agency and (perceived) autonomy.⁶

While most organized religions attract adherents across social identity markers and historical subjectivities, faith-based beliefs and practices often manifest differently across ethno-racial groups. Christianity, in particular, has been leveraged in distinct cultural and political ways by Black and white communities (Du Bois 2000; Morris 1984; Shelton and Emerson 2012; Allen 2019b; Butler 2021). For instance, Lincoln (1974, p. 107) notes that the Black Church was formulated via "the determination of Black Christians to separate themselves from white Christians, whose cultural style and spiritual understanding made no provision for racial inclusiveness at a level acceptable to Black people". In this way, the Black Church, from its outset as the "invisible institution" within slavery, has always served the Black community in both religious (sacred) and non-religious (secular) ways (Frazier 1974). Barnes (2017, p. 167) referred to the sacred functions as "priestly", noting that "Priestly functions tend to focus on the spiritual or "other worldly" dimensions of religious life ... Priestly congregations tend to emphasize the importance of personal

religious hygiene, godly living, worship, and events to meet the spiritual/religious needs of congregants". To further illustrate the multifaceted impact Black Christianity has had in the lives of Black Americans, below I identify and discuss the four most prominent extra-religious functions the Black Church has offered the Black community over time: (1) socio-cultural functions; (2) socio-political functions; (3) socio-economic functions; and (4) socio-educational functions.

2.1. Socio-Cultural Functions

First, the Black Church provided socio-cultural resources for Black people. Black Churches have a long history of replicating the social activities and cultural amenities present in white society that Black people were excluded from due to slavery and Jim Crow segregation laws. For this reason, Allen (2019b) describes the Black Church as both a "space of social refuge" and as a "cultural incubator". These socio-cultural functions aided Black folks in cultivating community and a sense of connectedness. Frazier (1974, p. 54) describes this function further when stating, "The Negro church, as we have seen, was not only the organization that had created cohesion among the slaves but it was also the basis of organized life among the Negroes who were free before the Civil War and among the freedmen following Emancipation. Moreover, it had set the pattern for organized social life among Negroes". The organization of Black social life that Frazier mentions involved the establishment of several Black voluntary associations. Clarifying the overlap between Black churches and Black social clubs, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, p. 123) note, "Since Black people were by and large excluded from most white groups, they created parallel institutions such as lodges, fraternities and sororities, and civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and the National Urban League . . . Throughout most of their history in local Black communities, many of these groups depended upon Black churches and pastors for meeting places, leadership, financial resources, publicity, and members". Black Churches also played a prominent socio-cultural role as Black people transitioned geographically from the southern United States to the mid-western region. For instance, in their discussion of churches formed in the North during the Great Migration, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, p. 121) note that the "main function of these churches from World War I until the mid-1950s was to act as a "cultural broker," a mediating institution, to help acculturate rural migrants to the urban environment". Altogether, the Black Church is an undeniable purveyor of Black culture and sociality.

2.2. Socio-Political Functions

Second, Black people relied on the Church for socio-political functions. The Black experience has been politicized from the outset as it has been fraught with various efforts to sustain imbalanced power dynamics between Black and white communities. These efforts include anti-Black institutionalized racism via state-sanctioned violence and legalized disenfranchisement among others. Because Black Churches represent the first spaces of Black independence in America, it is within this institutional space that the community first began to develop a collective oppositional consciousness that helped them identify ways to respond to their oppression.⁷ Many of the oldest political organizations in the Black community have ties to the Black Church. For instance, in his research on the history of the Black Church, Carter G. (Woodson [1921] 2017, p. 167) states that, "Through the Negro churches, and these alone, have the Negroes been able to effect anything like a cooperative movement to counteract the evil influences of such combinations against the race . . . The National Association for the Advancement of Colored people would be unable to carry out its program without the aid of the Negro Church". Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, p. 9) made similar claims about the overlap between Black Churches and Black civic organizations when stating, "The important fact about the development of these secular institutions such as the NAACP or National Urban League is that they were often founded with the help and support of Black Church leaders, their memberships also often overlapped with Black Church membership".

The socio-political efforts of the church were evident during slavery and reconstruction but were particularly prominent during the Civil Rights Movement. In his classic text *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, Morris charts out the foundational role that Black Churches played in the early years of the movement. Seeing the Black Church as the “institutional center” of the movement, Morris (1984, p. 4) notes, “Churches provided the movement with an organized mass base; a leadership of clergymen largely economically independent of the larger white society and skilled in the art of managing people and resources; an institutionalized base through which protest was financed; and meeting places where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves to the struggle”.⁸ Here, Morris draws attention to how the leadership and organizational skills developed by religious leaders were effective outside of the church house and were particularly transferable to political leaders. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, p. 212) additionally argued that “Black churches were the major points of mobilization for mass meetings and demonstrations, and Black church members fed and housed civil rights workers from SNCC, CORE, and other religious and secular groups”.

The socio-political function of the Black Church was also evident in decades after the Civil Rights Movement (Barber 2015). For instance, Brown and Brown (2003) found that church attendance alone did not impact if Black Christians engaged in political activities, such as voting. Conversely, the study reveals the factor that contributed most to rates of Black political engagement was whether or not the church offered civic resources, such as political discussions and opportunities to join committees. Additionally, research by Pattillo-McCoy (1998) and Barnes (2005) has further revealed the diverse ways Black Church culture has been replicated in the broader Black community for political purposes. Ultimately, Black Christianity in America can be considered a political artifact precisely because the Black American experience has and continues to involve a struggle for power, status, and resources, and the Church has been involved with these struggles in both explicit and implicit ways.

2.3. Socio-Economic Functions

The third prominent function the Black Church has historically offered the Black community was socio-economic resources. Black Churches, via the mutual aid societies they helped found, operated as the first Black banks and insurance companies. Frazier (1974, p. 41), in his analysis of Black Christianity from slavery to the great migration, found that “these benevolent societies grew out of the Negro church and were inspired by the spirit of Christian charity. They were supported by the pennies which the Negroes could scrape together in order to aid each other in time of sickness but more especially to insure themselves a decent Christian burial”. This function, like many of the others, emerged because racist politics disguised as social norms prevented Black Americans from utilizing the white businesses that offered these same resources. The Black Church, then, remained adaptable to meet the various needs of the community.

It is not all that surprising that the Black Church offered economic functions for the Black community considering historically it was the “most economically self-sufficient institution in the Black community” (Allen 2019b, p. 2). As many Black congregants faithfully tithed portions of their income to Black churches, these institutions became economically independent, allowing them to purchase property and evade white influence—actions that were less common among individual Black households. Woodson ([1921] 2017, p. 157) further articulates the socio-economic power of the church when stating, “these church groups, large and small, have held together for decades, and even generations, in the sacrificing effort to purchase houses of worship for which some of them have well paid two or three times because of thieves within and thieves without— that fact alone is evidence of the development of the power of the consolidation among Negroes”. Evidently, the history of the Black Church is fundamentally a history of social work within the Black community. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, p. 243) illustrate this when noting that, “From their pulpits many Black preachers preached the moral messages of saving for a rainy

day, learning to read and write, getting an education, finding a job and working hard, supporting the family, and raising the children respectably and industriously". Here, they also draw attention to the last major function.

2.4. Socio-Educational Functions

The fourth and final function I identify is socio-educational. The Black Church, in more ways than one, filled the educational void within the community. Early education efforts within the Black community often had explicit religious aims. For instance, Frazier (1974, p. 42) notes how "the first real educators to take up the work of enlightening American Negroes were clergymen interested in the propagation of the gospel . . . the purpose of education was primarily to transmit to the Negro the religious ideas and practices" of Christianity. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, p. 251) similarly found that "Sunday schools were often the first places where Black people made contact with the educational process, first hearing, then memorizing, and finally, learning to read Bible stories" (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, p. 251). Black churches, alongside the Freedman's Bureau, and in some cases white philanthropists, played formidable roles in establishing schools for Black children and young adults, including many historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

As Sunday schools became day schools, which then eventually evolved into Bible schools as well as prominent HBCUs, the educational content also shifted away from its initial focus on religion (Frazier 1974; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Woodson ([1921] 2017, p. 157) described the Black Church as "the school of experience for the Negro community. The Church furnished the opportunity for this experience and the people . . . learned how to discriminate, how to think for themselves, how to take care of themselves in a critical situation, in short, how to be self-sufficient". In this way, the Church provided educational resources, at both professional and cultural levels, for Black Christian communities across age cohorts.

2.5. Church Functions as Social Gospel

Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, p. 17) referred to Black American Christianity as the "Black Sacred Cosmos" because it "permeated all of the social institutions and cultural traditions of Black people". The historical extra-religious functions discussed above certainly substantiate this claim. It is important to note that each individual Black church was not able to provide all of the aforementioned functions, all of the time. Rather, some churches only offered one or two, while others primarily focused on providing the expected religious functions of a church. Billingsley (2003, p. 11), in his study delineating the ways in which Black churches have prioritized social reform, found that the Black church moves "beyond its purely spiritual or religious or privatistic mission to embrace its communal mission, provided that the church, as an organization, is strong, stable, and resourceful and provided that the minister, as leader, is strong, charismatic, innovative, and community oriented". In this way, he clarifies that only churches with extensive resources, as well as leadership committed to a "social gospel"⁹ that sees Black community development as a permanent item on the church's overall agenda, were situated to offer extra services to the community. More pointedly, Social Gospel Theology sees social inequality as "society's sin" and as a result prioritizes efforts that will contribute to establishing "social salvation" through social reform (White et al. 1976; Evans 2017). Among Black churches, these efforts often materialized in non-religious functions.

Although these secular functions were most commonly ascribed to protestant churches, there is also some evidence that other Black Christian denominations met community needs in innovative ways as well. While most of the scholarly literature on Black Christianity centers the experiences of protestant denominations, there is also a limited discussion of the extra-religious functions prevalent within Black Catholicism as well, acknowledging how some parishes offer adherents socio-cultural and socio-political resources (Winstead 2017). Altogether it is clear that, historically, the Black Church was foundational in supporting the Black community's transition from slavery to Jim Crow and again through the Great

Migration and the Civil Rights Movement. However, as new legal protections were introduced to society via the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, many components of the U.S. social landscape began to evolve, and in some cases were perceived as deteriorating—one of such cases is the prominence of religious institutions and Christian ideological influence on American culture. In the following section, I further discuss the major components of religious change in America and its implications on perceptions of contemporary Black Church functions.

3. Racializing Religious Change among Millennials

Perceptions of whether or not religion remains a stronghold in American culture have shifted over the last few decades. Much consideration has been given to the secularization thesis, which contends that as a society modernizes and advances, religion will become an increasingly insignificant social institution (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Voas and Chaves 2016; Schnabel and Bock 2017). Scholars have conceptualized shifts in religious expression in a variety of ways, framing it as “lived religion” (Ammerman 2014, 2016), “public religion” (Lichterman 2012), and even “digital religion” (Campbell 2012; Gault 2022). Sociologists of religion, though, have become particularly fascinated with disaffiliation and growing demographics, such as the “nones” and “dones”.

Religious “Nones” are defined as individuals who report having no religious affiliation. Baker and Smith (2009) characterize “nones” as those ascribed to a lifestyle of religious nonbelief and/or nonbelonging. They go on to identify three categories of non-religiosity: atheists, agnostics, and unchurched believers and then use nationally representative data to demonstrate that “there are distinctive differences between these categories when it comes to private religiosity and spirituality, as well as the level of opposition to religion in the public sphere” (Baker and Smith 2009, p. 731). Religious “dones,” despite reporting as unaffiliated with organized religion, maintain their religious beliefs and ideologies (Packard and Ferguson 2019). For this reason, Packard and Hope (2015, p. 14) refer to “dones” as the “dechurched,” claiming “they’re done with church. They’re tired and fed up with church. They’re dissatisfied with the structure, social message, and politics of the institutional church, and they’ve decided they and their spiritual lives are better off lived outside of organized religion”.

These scholarly conversations are rarely disaggregated by race and have also failed to fully explore how religious change materializes among younger generational cohorts, such as Millennials. More importantly, inquiries surrounding why people continue to affiliate with religious institutions, at a time when not doing so is more commonplace, have not been fully explored. Together, these limitations engender a particular need for additional research on the contemporary religious experiences of Black Millennials whose “racial and cultural scripts dictate the way they engage with prominent social institutions like religion” (Allen et al. 2020, p. 481). Pew Research Center’s (2021) “Faith Among Black Americans” study found that Black Millennials are less likely to report affiliations with a church institution than older Black generations, such as Boomers and the Silent Generation, yet are more likely to report believing in God when compared to the general U.S. public. Even within the COVID-19 era, Black Millennials’ distinctive religiosity led Jones (2022, p. 55) to characterize them as “the champions who have advanced Black faith into the furthest reaches of the online arena”. These data suggest that although Black “dones” are a growing population, Christian faith remains strong in the Black community, suggesting that many Black Christian Millennials are critical yet still engaged with religious institutions (Mitchell 2018; Parker 2018). How, then, have perceptions of and engagement with the Black Church shifted across generations and what does this indicate about the resilience of Black Christianity? The present study explores this further.

4. Methods

This study examining the resiliency of the Black Church is part of a larger project exploring how Black Millennials make sense of race and faith during Black Lives Matter.

The Millennial cohort, also referred to as Generation Y, includes individuals born between 1981–1996 (Pew Research Center 2010) and is particularly known for its progressive politics and disillusionment with prominent social institutions (Howe and Strauss 2000; Milkman 2017; Risman 2017). Scholars argue that Black Millennials are culturally distinct from their generational cohort mates of other races and ethnicities in both their standpoints and social experiences (Allen 2019a; Allen et al. 2020). The present study specifically focuses on the subjugated knowledge of Black Christian Millennials to fully assess what role the Black Church plays in the Black community today and how this compares and contrasts with the functions it has historically provided.

Here, I specifically draw on data from semi-structured, in-depth interviews that were conducted between March 2019–July 2020, amid the current and ongoing Black Lives Matter movement. Altogether, I spoke with 65 participants who were recruited with flyers posted on social media and then through the snowball, convenience sampling technique. On average they were 30 years old at the time of the interview. Respondents were ethnically diverse, identifying as Black Americans (descendants of American slavery; 75%), African and Caribbean immigrants (20%), and bi-/multiracial Black (5%). Additionally, the sample was predominantly women (57%), heterosexual (89%), non-Denominational (52%) and highly educated (92% reported having earned a Bachelor's degree).

As a sociologist, I believe it is important to acknowledge how one's social positioning impacts the studies they construct and the data that they have access to. In this regard, my identity as a Black Christian Millennial certainly influenced the present study's methods, data, and analysis. I believe that sharing the same broad racial and religious identities with the study population ultimately allowed me to recruit participants, informed what questions to ask and how those questions were worded, and also positioned me to probe efficiently throughout the interview conversation for deeper revelations. Being part of the population studied additionally allowed respondents to feel comfortable sharing with me the nuanced ways their Christian faith impacts their social and political lives. I acknowledge that studying religion qualitatively involves an important and ethical responsibility, or what Small and Calarco (2022) refer to as "cognitive empathy," to honor the intimate secrets of participants' faith journeys that are shared throughout the interview process. Because I am part of the Black Christian Millennial demographic, I am equipped to fulfill this responsibility.

Scholarly literature suggests that respondents are more likely to disclose intimate data when they feel connected to the researcher; however, when the researcher is very similar to the respondent, there is also a risk that important data might appear ordinary and familiar and thus go uncritically examined (Sprague 2005; Reyes 2020). To ensure this was not the case, I enhanced the study's analytic strategy by triangulating the interview data with quantitative surveys and researcher memos. Triangulation refers to the methodological strategy of applying multiple methods to the study of one phenomenon in order to strengthen the overall analysis. The purpose of this approach is not to suggest that qualitative data are insufficient in and of themselves. Rather, triangulation simply allows scholars to contextualize their data further by adding extra dimension(s) to the study. Additionally, triangulation assists with research validity as the use of multiple methods can compensate for the limitations of any one method alone (Denzin 2015).

The transcription excerpts analyzed below respond to the following interview prompts:

1. What role does attending church play in your life? If you currently have a church home, what do you like about your church?
2. In your opinion, what value do you find in attending church?
3. What do you think the Black Church should look like today?

Responses were recorded, transcribed, and then thematically analyzed. Specifically, I read each transcription to establish an inductive coding strategy. That is, I allowed themes to emerge as I assessed each interview transcript. Saldaña (2016) defines thematic coding as identifying descriptions of behaviors, explanations, and cultural meanings. This coding strategy allowed me to ascertain how study participants perceive and articulate

the contemporary functions their churches provide. The major themes are discussed in the following sections. Pseudonyms, selected by the participants themselves, are used to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

5. Black Millennials' Contemporary Perceptions of the Black Church

Black Millennials' relationship with the Black Church is complex (Mitchell 2018; Parker 2018; Jones 2022) and this study captures to what extent their perceptions of the church's role in the community contrast with the ways previous generations engaged with the church. The Black Christian Millennials I interviewed reveal that some functions have remained constant while others have evolved or become defunct in their experience. Lastly, the data suggest that a new function has emerged.

5.1. Continuous Functions

I refer to functions that exist in a similar fashion both historically and contemporarily as continuous functions. Historically, the Black Church provided socio-cultural resources to Black people by offering a space where Black sociality could be fostered. When talking with study participants about what role attending church plays in their lives and the value that they assign to maintaining affiliation with a church at a time when many are opting out of congregational membership, several of the Black Millennial respondents similarly cited social network and community development as a contemporary benefit of going to church. For instance, Angelica, a 30-year-old Ghanaian woman who lives on the West coast, shared:

In [my city], which is a city that's mostly white, more than probably 80% white, there are fewer Black Churches. And I kind of really wanted to be in a Black Church because I was around white people all day. I was the only Black person at work. And one of my friends was kind of bragging about her church and how great it was but she mentioned that it was interracial and I was like, 'no, I gotta be around Black people', you know? And that has nothing to do with God necessarily, it was just the external environment and feeling like I needed to be around my people at least once a week, you know?

As a young Black professional living in a western city with a relatively small Black population, Angelica shares that attending a Black church is particularly important to her because she otherwise would not see any other Black people throughout the week. Just as previous generations of Black Americans relied on the Church to create opportunities to meet and socialize with Black people in addition to operating as a space of refuge from violent white society, Angelica demonstrates that this is still the case for Black Millennials as well. More pointedly, Angelica uses her church membership to engage in what Karyn Lacy refers to as strategic assimilation. Lacy (2004, p. 910) argues that "many middle-class Blacks with access to majority white colleges, workplaces, and neighbourhoods continue to consciously retain their connections to the Black world" through engagement with Black spaces and Black organizations, such as churches. When stating that her decision to attend a Black church had "nothing to do with God" but rather was in response to her living in a predominantly white "external environment," Angelica illustrates how the tendency to make religious decisions based on racial and cultural politics and priorities has remained constant across generations of Black Christians.

Not only did the interviews confirm that Black Millennials leverage their Black church membership as a way to access Black space and culture, the data also revealed that study participants specifically wanted to meet individuals who were religiously compatible as well. Historically, Black Christians utilized the church to replicate social events and positive racial identity development. However, in the present moment, there are many opportunities to enhance one's sense of Black pride and culture outside of the church via museums (Brooms 2011), affinity groups and other voluntary associations (Kimbrough 2003; McClure 2006; Robinson 2019), and most popularly online in virtual community spaces (Graham and Smith 2016; Brock 2020). What is particularly difficult in the current moment, where religion is perceived as less prominent in society, is finding other Black people

with comparable ethics, values, and beliefs. As a result, many respondents mentioned participating in their church's small life groups which they considered important for cultivating a "like-minded" community.

This topic came up during my conversation with Shuri, a 27-year-old Black and Mexican biracial woman from the West coast. When I asked her to identify what benefits attending church brings to her life, she stated:

making friends at church— sometimes friends that turn to family. And just having a support system, kind of like a group of like-minded people. Like, you can go hang out with these people and it's not going to get crazy or anything like that.

As a Black Christian Millennial, Shuri has cultivated a distinct personal ethos and desires to surround herself with a friend group that understands her lifestyle and thus are able to support and encourage her. In noting that she wants to be able to hang out while not having to worry about things getting too "crazy" she reveals just how significant her religious beliefs are in shaping her social behaviors. She specifically seeks friendship at church because she believes these relationships will align with her religious convictions. This process is consistent with research that suggests most social networks are homophilous in nature as people tend to organize their lives in such a way that they are most often surrounded by people similar to them (McCabe 2015). For many Black Christian Millennials, religious identity is just as salient if not more salient than their racial identity. Using religious beliefs as a factor in organizing one's social network is a form of value-based homophily (McPherson et al. 2001). In retaining church membership as a tool for maintaining close ties with other Black Christians, Millennial study participants like Shuri engaged in this process.

Nathan, a 24-year-old Black man from the West coast similarly discussed the value of a homophilous church community. He shared:

So for me, I've just seen the value of being in community in terms of enriching my faith experience. Talking with people who I built relationships with and knowing that there's a sort of mutual investment in each other's lives. I think for me, that's kind of what brings the value of church and knowing that there are other people who are hearing the same sorts of things that you're hearing and you can sort of bounce questions off of— I think just the communal experience still kinda maintains value to me. Especially as an adult, like, yo, making friends as an adult is hard! Like it's really hard. So to know that there's like-minded people or to some extent, like-minded people who you're going to encounter in the church environment [is nice]. Also, for me as someone who got married at a young age, [church has helped with] finding mentor couples who were older than I was. And, people who are just at different stages of life who I felt like could help me as I was trying to navigate life and also navigate faith. I think, for me, that makes the church community experience an irreplaceable one.

Here, Nathan acknowledges the complexity of navigating life as a young Black man who is Christian and married. He admits that making friends has been hard because his lifestyle varies significantly from most of his peers. As a result, Nathan relies on his church family to reconcile the friend deficit he experiences. He found that not only can other church members serve as friends but they also operate as marriage mentors and life coaches as well.

Nathan and Shuri's comments illustrate that a primary reason Black Millennials continue to affiliate with the Black Church is so that they can bond with other "like-minded" individuals. As religious adults in a society that increasingly trivializes organized religion,¹⁰ some Black Christian Millennials find it challenging to make and maintain friendships with other Black believers. Attending church helps with that. Here we see that some Black Christian Millennials engage in what Todne Thomas refers to as kincraft. She argues that Black religious communities "use their spiritual relationships as a mode of kincraft that speaks to their religious aspirations for Christian relationships and their lived material experiences with racialization, spatial mobility, and social mobility" (Thomas 2021,

p. 2). More specifically, kincraft draws attention to the distinct sociality cultivated among Black Christians which often mirrors kin-based relationships.

Ultimately, I contend that the socio-cultural function is a continuous function because the Black Church still operates as a space of refuge from dominant society where the racialized religious ontology of Black Christians is not always legible. Black Christian Millennials, a demographic with the highest levels of religiosity among their generational cohort, value being part of a church community where congregants share cultural resources with one another—resources like opportunities to see Black people, to cultivate faith-based friendships, and to identify marriage mentors. While extant literature suggests that Black Millennials are highly critical of the church and disillusioned with many other prominent institutions (Allen 2019a; Allen et al. 2020), this study provides evidence that criticality does not necessarily lead to disengagement. Black Christian Millennials still value church affiliation and see the community and culture it offers as an “irreplaceable” component of their lives.

5.2. *Evolving Functions*

I refer to functions that existed historically but manifest differently in the contemporary moment as evolving functions. While Black Christian Millennials acknowledge that the church continues to offer political and educational resources, their perceptions of these resources differed from the descriptions of how these functions manifested historically.

For earlier generations of Black Christians, the majority of their political engagement was cultivated and conducted in the church. Churches were able to operate as political mobilization centers because they were economically independent and therefore free from white influence. This independence also engendered a general level of trust between Black people and the church. However, it appears that younger generations may not trust the politics of the church in the same way. Some Black Christian Millennials reported feeling like the Church was not doing enough, politically, in the current moment. According to Shannon, a 31-year-old Black woman from the South:

The Black Church has been non-existent with Black Lives Matter. I mean, don't get me wrong, there might be a sermon or two when it comes to that, but the majority of the sermons are talking against what the younger generation is doing, or [how we] are reacting. I feel like [the church has] been non-existent and I feel that the churches today hide under the umbrella of the fact that they have 501(c)(3) [status] and I feel that they're afraid to speak up . . . And if a church is getting donations from somewhere, they're afraid of ruining that, you know? I feel like it's a money thing, like more so like a business [than a church] . . . if you're going to be radical and you really want to invoke change, you can't be safe.

Shannon, like many other respondents, was disappointed in the Church's limited political reach. She perceived that contemporary Black Churches are not willing to take risks but instead are playing it “safe” and are “afraid to speak up”. Shannon was particularly critical of many churches' 501(c)(3) tax exempt status, which allows them to receive charitable donations from individuals and entities wanting (and needing) additional tax deductions. These donations often result in a transference of power to the donors, allowing them a particular type of influence over the organization. Additionally, this status comes with particular political restrictions, such as the inability to endorse political candidates or participate in certain political activities. Aware of this matrix of power, Shannon recognizes how contemporary Black churches with 501(c)(3) status have their hands tied in such a way that limits their political impact, which starkly differs from the political role that early Black churches played. Shannon draws attention to how this difference is in part due to the fact that contemporary Black churches are no longer economically independent and therefore are not protected from external influence as they were historically.

In mentioning that she has heard “a sermon or two” that were political in nature, Shannon, confirms that churches are indeed still, to a certain extent, providing political resources to congregants. However, when discussing the sermons, she perceived a genera-

tional divide within the church community, noting that the political sermons problematized “what the younger generation is doing”. Considering generations tend to have distinct standpoints as a result of their “generational habitus” (Allen et al. 2015), it is not surprising that Black Christians across generations hold disparate attitudes about social inequality and varying beliefs about how to respond to it. In fact, this divergence likely mirrors a long-standing tension in Christian communities between this-worldly and other-worldly ideologies.¹¹ Younger generations, such as Millennials, are more likely to embrace this-worldly ideologies.

Other respondents similarly addressed this disconnect between the desires of older church leaders and the needs of the broader Black community. For instance, Dubois, a 28-year-old Black man residing in the Midwest, shared:

What I realized, too, is that it’s a generational gap. So a lot of the older people who be in church, who a lot of times be the religious leaders, have this mindset like ‘we just trying to survive.’ While Millennials, I would say, have this mindset—most of us have this mindset like, ‘yo, we trying to do more than survive. We trying to flourish’ . . . the church be like, ‘we just trying to make it’ and just tell you stuff to keep you going. And Black Millennials are like ‘we need more than that from a church. I need more than just something to keep me going’ and Black Lives Matter was doing the [work]. Also [the church’s lack of engagement] is probably based on who [the BLM movement] is led by— women and LGBTQ people which goes against a lot of the stuff from Black Churches because they have a terrible history with those affinity groups.

Dubois’ comments echo Shannon’s point about the differences in political ideologies across generations. Dubois draws attention to two points of distinction between older Christians and Black Christian Millennials: (1) politics surrounding race and ethnic relations and (2) politics surrounding gender and sexuality. First, in mentioning that older Black Christians just want to “survive” while Black Christian Millennials want to “flourish,” Dubois insinuates that younger generations have embraced a more radical and transformative politic. More specifically, he suggests that in order for Black people to not just survive but also thrive, major changes are needed in the social structure and racial hierarchy so that Black communities can have access to the opportunities and resources necessary to be successful.

Dubois additionally pointed out disparities in gender politics across generations. When stating that Black Churches have a “terrible history” with women and queer folk, he is complicating narratives about the trust between Black churches and the Black community historically. More specifically, Dubois implies that the Black community is now able to critique the church in ways that it could not before because it was the institutional epicenter of Black life. This, in turn, compelled those on the margins to engage with the institution despite the fact that it may be harming them. However, now that the Black community’s dependence upon the Black church has weakened, Black people are able to critique the ways that Black Christianity perpetuates cis-heteropatriarchal values (Higginbotham 1993; Gilkes 2001) and as a result, some Black Millennials do not view it as an institution equipped to champion Black liberation when it does not even embrace liberatory politics within its own organizational spaces and cultures.

Other respondents had specific ideas about how the church could support present-day Black liberation efforts. For instance, when discussing how he perceives the church’s involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement, Jerome, a 26-year-old Black man from the Midwest, stated:

I think folk in our generation, because of church hurt or whatever, are very hesitant to let the church sort of be involved. Cause let’s be honest, sometimes when the church gets involved with stuff, it just takes over [with] its agenda. I’ve seen it happen . . . Sometimes we got to learn how there are different roles that can [and] need to be played. So, for example, the [church] that I’m at, it served as a housing center for folks when the protests happened. And that was just a space. There was no forum, there was no speaker to come through to pray over

the people. It was just like, ‘our doors are open. It’s safe here. No one’s really gonna mess with it cause it’s a church. So you’re welcome to come here.’ And so, I think the church should definitely be involved and I think if it is, it should look to come humbly as a servant and not say, ‘yo, we have it all figured out and we are the ones who are going to make it happen.’

Jerome similarly acknowledges the generational divide within the Black Christian community while also reflecting on the ways in which he sees the Church showing support for the movement. In drawing attention to “church hurt,” or the adverse experiences one has within a church environment and/or by people affiliated with church organizations, Jerome identifies one reason individuals have grown apart from the church. His comments also suggest that Black church leadership do not know how to adequately respond to their lesser dominant role in the community as they tend to “take over” with their own “agenda” assuming they “have it all figured out” rather than working collaboratively with other community organizers and Black voluntary associations. Jerome believes that one way for Black churches to rebuild trust is for them to “come humbly as a servant” as his church did when they offered housing to BLM protestors. While this is certainly a different role than the central one Black churches played historically, this does demonstrate that they are still political organizations, even if those politics differ across generations.

The socio-political function was not alone in manifesting differently in the present moment than it had historically. Findings additionally suggest that the socio-educational function has also evolved. Historically, the church was a major contributor to scholarly efforts throughout the Black community. Supporting literacy and establishing secondary and post-secondary schools, Black churches stepped up to provide academically where the federal government had neglected Black people. In the contemporary moment, Black people do not need religious institutions to provide supplementary scholastic resources because desegregation provided access to a wide array of academic institutions. Subsequently, contemporary churches have shifted to nearly exclusively focusing on religious education, which has produced a desire among Black Christian Millennials, who are part of the most educated generation, to be “spiritually fed” with innovative and meaningful sermons.

I spoke with Lanae, a 31-year-old Black woman in the South about how she benefits from attending church. She noted:

The pastors at my church are teachers. They don’t talk at you, they teach you the Word. And one of the things that I really admire is that we have Bible series. So right now we’re in [the book of] John and we will spend 15–20 weeks in John and we will go literally, you know, scripture by scripture and the pastors will dissect each word. They explain what’s happening currently and how it relates to what’s going on so you’re able to connect the dots. Especially for somebody like me who, I don’t know the Word like that. I want to but I just kind of came in [to the faith.]

In categorizing her pastors as teachers rather than preachers, Lanae signifies that learning is a primary component of the culture of her church. She describes how the church leaders take their time to break down the religious lessons “scripture by scripture” because they are passionate about ensuring their church members are able to “connect the dots” between the Bible and their everyday lives on their own. This experience was particularly impactful for Lanae who was raised as a Jehovah’s Witness and had only recently switched to identifying as non-Denominational and thus engaging with a new translation of the Bible.¹² As such, she was not confident in her ability to study and understand the Word of God and sought out a church that could help strengthen that component of her faith journey.

Stokely, a 32-year-old Black man residing in the South, similarly valued that his church leaders were capable of intriguing the intellectual part of his personality. When describing what he loved about his church, he told me:

Not only are we a Black church, we are an open and affirming Black church, which kind of blew my mind . . . And so, I came back to the faith or came back

to going to church regularly, around the idea that there's actually a church that aligns with how I think intellectually. I think it has everything to do with the co-pastors—it's a man and woman and they're trained! They're trained to do preaching . . . and [one has] a PhD in the Hebrew Bible . . . They can talk about the Bible being a book that's not right about everything. (laughs) They can talk about the culture that informs the writing of the Bible, they can teach it in ways that still help us hold up in the faith. So I came [to this church] based off of this kind of socio-political understanding of the world that I wanted to see reflected in theology.

For many Black Christian Millennials, it is important that they see their politics reflected in the religious educational content they consume at church. Stokely had given up on attending church regularly because he was uninterested in being exposed to intolerant interpretations of Christian theology that he considered inconsistent with his understanding of the faith. It was not until he found a church that (1) was open and affirming of gender and sexual minorities and (2) had pastors equipped to wrestle with the Biblical inconsistencies he perceived, could he commit to church membership again.

Stokely and Lanea's experiences reveal to what extent the educational experience has shifted over time for congregants of Black churches. Desegregation ultimately had a dual effect on the socio-educational function. While on one hand it freed Black churches from providing general education to the community, allowing them to instead focus predominantly on religious education, on the other hand it engendered a highly educated Millennial generation that now has high standards and expectations for the type of religious educational experience they desire to receive, including preferences about preaching and/or teaching style and theological interpretations.

5.3. *Defunct Functions*

I refer to functions that existed historically but are no longer prominent in the contemporary moment as defunct functions. Findings suggest that Black Christian Millennials have not experienced Black churches in the present moment providing economic resources in the way that older iterations of Black Christian communities did. Instead of money coming in so that it can go back out to the community to support families and political efforts, study participants perceived that the process had been corrupted overtime and now money was coming in and staying in the church.

Raven, a 30-year-old Black woman in the South shared her frustrations with me, stating:

One thing that bothers me a lot is when events happen in a church, I guess I understand that things cost, but sometimes I think some churches are becoming more corporate-based and having different events but then charging for them or other different things. I feel like it's becoming more corporate-based than anything.

From Raven's perspective, churches today are not prioritizing the need to economically support their members. While Black churches of the past served as the first Black banks and mutual aid societies, Raven sees that contemporary churches only want to make money by taking it from their members for events that should be free. Raven describes the economic culture as "corporate" and business-like rather than community focused.

M.T., a 35-year-old Black man living on the East coast, complicated Raven's perspective when sharing:

I have heard that, statistically, those older generations, not only do they come to church, they give! They give to church, they give money. It's just part of who they are. Our generation, not so much. (laughs) So it's interesting being a Millennial who's a pastor in an established denomination with an older congregation. It's pretty clear to me who pays the bills, you know, and stuff like that. And people say, 'Oh, it's not about money.' Well, yes it is 'cause we're a business and we got bills to pay. And I have a commercial insurance policy that I have to pay for just like you have an insurance policy on your car that you gotta pay for it. So it also

is complicated by that. And some of us will say, ‘Oh, we don’t need that to have God,’ which is true. And that sort of creates a interesting tension at times.

As a pastor who is intimately familiar with the church finances, M.T. knows that many churches, like his, are barely staying afloat financially. He discloses that older congregants tithe consistently whereas Millennials do not, thus drawing attention to the fact that the generational difference among Black Christians extends beyond politics and into the realm of economics as well. Many Black Christian Millennials, such as Raven, perceive that churches are too focused on making money. They have witnessed megachurch pastors promote prosperity gospel theology for their own personal profit and as a result have become highly critical of churches’ propensity to be money hungry. When they perceive this to be the case, Millennial congregants often withhold their tithes and offering as a form of resistance. M.T. notes how this creates an “interesting tension” because churches are businesses with “bills to pay”. Ultimately, it is not surprising that, according to study participants, the socio-economic function has become defunct in the contemporary moment considering only a fraction of the church membership pays their tithes which in turn is used to primarily cover operational costs. Under these conditions, there is not much left over in the church budget to offer free events or other economic resources to the community that would represent the social gospel that many Millennials want to see from religious organizations.

While the respondents in this study described the economic function quite differently than how it has been characterized in the literature, it is important to note that these data stem from a convenience sample in which the findings reflect the perceptions, experiences, and meaning-making processes of the selection of Black Christian Millennials I spoke with. In other words, a representative sample-based study might reveal differing perceptions of the economic resources exchanged between churches and the Black community in the present day that is more reflective of the broader Black Christian Millennial demographic. This study remains noteworthy, though, in that even among this sample of Black Christian Millennials who consider the Church’s economic politics to be more focused on securing funds from congregants and corporations rather than on sharing economic resources with the community, participants still overwhelmingly valued church membership and affiliation, which further complicates the narrative that criticality alone leads to and/or explains religious disaffiliation.

5.4. Emergent Functions

I refer to functions that were not prominent historically but have emerged in the contemporary moment as emergent functions. Several of the Black Christian Millennial respondents reported that attending church helped them to better manage their emotions, to navigate interpersonal relationships, to process and de-escalate conflict, and to strengthen their capacity to be self-reflexive. Together, these resources constitute the socio-emotional function, which has emerged more recently. Mental health has become less stigmatized in recent years, creating a new opportunity for churches to meet the needs of their members. This is not to say that mental health was not a concern for previous generations of Black Christians; rather, this emergent function acknowledges how the Millennial generation has successfully advocated for the need to make resources for psychological well-being more readily accessible.

My conversation with Dubois also addressed this benefit of church affiliation. He described how his church helps him socio-emotionally when stating:

When I think of my religion, my Christianity, it’s really about how to be the best version of myself. And so I see church almost like a workshop where I can go and workshop myself. And so I can go to church and think about the different ways I can negotiate difficult relationships, how I can negotiate my personal life, my work life. How I can negotiate feelings of anxiety. Like it doesn’t replace therapy and I think the pastor at my church now would even say you still need to go to therapy, but hearing other people relate and tell you stories about how they’ve

dealt with stuff and how they're still dealing with stuff and the strategies they use is never not helpful.

Like many of the historical functions, the socio-emotional function caters to both the sacred and secular needs of church members. When Dubois compares attending church to a self-development "workshop" it becomes evident that he finds value in the fact that his church cares about him holistically. Navigating a culture that encourages emotional intelligence, Dubois continues to attend church because it offers a free supplement to his traditional therapy sessions, which together equip him with both faith-based and research-based strategies for managing anxiety and depression.

Rainelli, a 29-year-old Black man living on the East coast, also relied on his church affiliation to manage his emotions. He shared with me:

[Attending church offers] a chance to hang around young adults, discuss young adult issues concerning Christianity, and Christians in the world. And then we'd go to service and I get spiritually replenished. Like if it's been a draining week, [church] is my refill station. When I would get to church [I'd be] like, 'ahh, I needed this message,' even if I didn't know I needed it. 'Cause sometimes I walk in, I'm like, okay God, I need you to tell me how to fix this problem' . . . it's such a replenishing feeling before going back into the work week. And I remember there was a time that I did disengage from the church, not because the church was doing anything bad, it was more of a personal issue . . . But in that six weeks of me waiting to get my new car, not having that weekly refilling was incredibly draining. I remember, it was literally one point in like week four or week five, where I was just sitting in my bed, I was crying. I was like, I just want to go back to my church.

In some ways the socio-emotional function overlaps with the socio-cultural function of providing Black Christians access to a community of like-minded people. Church members find it particularly comforting to be around people with similar values and beliefs. However the socio-emotional function is distinct in that it draws attention to how the communal worship experience yields specific psychological benefits. In Rainelli's case, through his church attendance and interactions with other congregants and with God, he was able to feel "spiritually replenished" each week. He believed that through church, God could (and would) use his pastor and his church family to speak directly to what was going on in his life. Rainelli's Christian praxis continues a long tradition of Black Protestantism which believes that individual Christians can have direct access to God through the Holy Spirit.¹³

Rainelli demonstrates how churches are able to continue to meet the distinct needs of their members. His church offered an elevated spiritual experience that he was not able to achieve on his own when practicing the faith independently.¹⁴ Not only did he report feeling empty when unable to attend church for 6 weeks due to car issues, like he had been "drained," but he also felt sad. In sharing that missing church for over a month led him to tears, we can see that church affiliation has a direct impact on members' mental and emotional well-being.

6. Conceptualizing Religious Resilience

Public discourses assessing and critiquing the Black Church have led some to perceive it is a dead, or at least dying, institution. In comparing descriptions of Black churches historically to perceptions of Black churches today, this study has found variations in and across the diverse functions offered by Black religious institutions which ultimately serves as evidence of vitality. Through this vitality, I identify the concept of *religious resilience*.

Religious resilience refers to a religious artifact's capacity to withstand changes in the social, political, and racial landscape that would otherwise undermine its value, yet instead the artifact maintains its perception as a significant component of society that fundamentally influences the lives of individuals and groups. Religious artifacts are situated across institutional, ideological, and individual/interpersonal levels. Conceptually,

religious resilience offers a framework to examine a number of topics, including why certain religious leaders are able to fill pews and convention centers even after continuous reports of their indiscretions (e.g., Hillsong United) and why certain theological beliefs and spiritual tenets are reified despite new forms of contrasting evidence from scholars, cultural experts, and in some cases other religious leaders (e.g., depictions of Jesus as white with blonde hair and blue eyes). Ultimately, this concept identifies the various ways religious artifacts reduce the negative implications of social critique. Additionally, religious resilience compels us to ask, “who benefits?” when certain religious artifacts are reified. In the case of the present study, religious resilience responds to critiques of the Black Church as a “dead” or “dying” religious institution, by capturing how the various functions it has offered the Black community over time have, and continue to, fluctuate, and reads the, at times, inconstant nature of these functions as evidence of livelihood rather than evidence of death.

Ultimately, the concept of religious resilience extends McGuire’s (2018, p. 321) notion of religion’s afterlife which he uses to describe “religion’s reach beyond physical institutions”. Religious resilience not only considers how individuals carry faith and spirituality beyond physical space but also considers how religious continuations exist among various social actors, social locations, and socio-historical contexts. Religious resilience accounts for how religious entities respond to factors that might undermine their influence by serving as an analytic tool that examines how religion recalibrates itself amid shifts in the social climate. More pointedly, religious resilience considers how the value of religion as a social institution is renewed among new iterations of society and why.

This concept equips us to examine what impact structural changes (such as COVID-based shelter-in-place mandates) and cultural changes (such as Trump-based political backlash) has had on religious institutions and religious praxis, particularly among racialized religious communities. As spiritual technologies and opportunities to perform Black Christianity individually and/or virtually are ever expanding (Allen 2019b; Gault 2020), the concept of religious resilience draws attention to why offline, or traditional, modalities of religion, such as church attendance, remain impactful to many. To put it clearly, religious resilience allows us to acknowledge that church membership is in decline while also asserting that the Black Church is not dead. While rising demographics, such as “nones” and “dones”, may lead some to that conclusion, the concept of religious resilience compels scholars to reconsider how religious entities, like the Black Church discussed here, may be leveraging a cross over effect between this-worldly and other-worldly needs to maintain vitality—a reality that is not being captured in extant research due to survey measures and operationalizations that do not fully reflect the diverse motivations toward and modalities of religious expression available today.

7. Critical but Engaged: Conclusion and Implications

The Black Church’s dynamic role in the everyday lives of Black Americans is undeniable. Historically, it offered the community many secular services and resources in addition to providing its customary religious functions. Scholarly literature suggests that engagement with religious institutions is in decline, yet little is known about how macro-level religious change has manifested at the micro-level within the Black community, one of the most religious demographics in the country. To address the gap regarding how the Black Church resonates with Black Christian communities who have witnessed major changes in the American religious landscape, the present study explores to what extent the historic functions of the Black Church (i.e., socio-cultural, socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-educational functions) are still prevalent among Black Christians today.

Data from in-depth interviews with 65 Black Christian Millennials revealed that the socio-cultural function has remained constant, while the socio-political and socio-educational functions have evolved from the perspective of study participants. The socio-economic function has become defunct and the socio-emotional function has emerged. Ultimately, I introduce the concept of religious resilience which accounts for the afterlife of

religious institutions, ideologies, and individuals that one might expect to be negatively impacted by changes in society's religious landscape yet somehow maintain their powerful influence on individuals, groups, and culture, and contend that the Black Church is a prominent exemplar of this concept.

This study extends the literature on religious change by demonstrating how and why younger generations can simultaneously critique and value the church and, more importantly, why criticism of religious organizations does not always lead to disengagement for demographics like Black Christian Millennials. Just as complex religion theory (Wilde and Glassman 2016) offers a framework for thinking through the co-dependent relationship between religion, race and power, this study demonstrates why sociology of religion research must examine the meaning-making processes of racialized religious groups, especially those socialized into a social gospel-based Black Christianity.

This study has many implications for future research. First, because this study relied on a convenience sampling technique, it is plausible that additional functions exist and that there may be heterogeneous perspectives of the functions discussed above. Future research should focus on other lesser discussed functions of the Black Church, such as family socialization and the governing of sexual identity and expression (via purity culture and critiques of it).¹⁵ Scholars might also consider assessing the nuanced ways Black Christianity spans across institutional, ideological, and interpersonal levels in the present moment so that we can gain a better understanding of the mechanisms and machinations of religious resilience. How other prominent social institutions remain resilient amid societal change is also worthy of study. Scholars should consider the "afterlife" of changing institutions, such as marriage and family, education, and even media and technology.

Additionally, examining religious resilience among other religious communities, such as white Christians, Muslims, and Black Hebrew Israelites, will crystalize what religion's future role in the public sphere might look like. While comparative studies are not always necessary, and at times are problematic as they often normalize white groups and "other" the experiences of marginalized ethno-racial groups, future studies assessing religious change and religious resilience could utilize a comparative analytic strategy to demonstrate how religion and religious institutions continue to operate differently across racial lines. Finally, considering the many references to generational tensions between older and younger Black Christians, how Black Christian Millennials merge their Christian theology with their radical politics is in need of further exploration as well. Despite speculation that the Black Church is dead, or dying, this study has shown that it is perpetually capable of revival as it attempts to adapt to the needs of its members and the Black community at large.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the University of Cincinnati Human Research Protect Program and Institutional Review Board (Study ID: 2018-6963, 12 December 2018) for studies involving humans.

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Notes

¹ See Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) *Black Feminist Thought* for more on the matrix of domination.

² I align my racial capitalization practices with that of Du Bois who considered "the use of a small letter for the name of twelve million Americans and two hundred million human beings a personal insult" (Tharps 2014). More specifically, I follow in the tradition of Kimberlé Crenshaw who stated, "I capitalize "Black" because Black people, like Asians, Latinos, and other

- ‘minorities,’ constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation as a proper noun. By the same token, I do not capitalize “white,” which is not a proper noun, since whites do not constitute a specific cultural group” (Crenshaw 1991, p. 1244).
- 3 Some portions of the Black community, namely Black women and Black LGBTQ folx have, and remain, critical of the cis-heteropatriarchal ideologies perpetuated through the church (Higginbotham 1993; Gilkes 2001; Barnes 2013).
- 4 Throughout this article, I draw on frameworks prevalent in extant sociology of religion literature and use “Black Church” and “Black Community” to “reflect the collective nature of these predominantly Black institutions” (Du Bois [1903] 2003, p. xvii). However, these terms should not be interpreted as if there is no heterogeneity across Black America, and within Black Christianity specifically. In this regard, I similarly use “Black church” when referencing a specific institution and “Black Christianity” as an umbrella term to encompass the denominational and theological pluralism reflected among the many Black Christians across time and space in America.
- 5 Du Bois ([1903] 1995, [1903] 2003) argues that the Black Church, as a social institution, actually predates the Black family because the Black family was subjected to white influence, and more pointedly white disruption, as a result of the racial capitalistic politics of U.S. chattel slavery. Black religion, though, was permitted and therefore provided Black America its first institutional space to cultivate a distinct identity and culture.
- 6 Scholars have complicated the Black American Christian tradition by noting that enslaved Africans were spiritual people prior to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. While they eventually came to embrace white protestant Christianity by infusing many of their native African spiritual practices into it, the Black community was nonetheless forced to convert to the Christian faith within the coercive political conditions of U.S. chattel slavery (Raboteau [1978] 2004).
- 7 See Mansbridge and Morris (2001) for more on oppositional consciousness.
- 8 To further elucidate *how* Black Church culture proved useful for the movement, Morris (1984, p. 4) notes, “The Black Church supplied the civil rights movement with a collective enthusiasm generated through a rich culture consisting of songs, testimonies, oratory, and prayers that spoke directly to the needs of an oppressed group”.
- 9 See Dorrien (2015, 2018) for more on the Black social gospel.
- 10 See Gault (2018) for more on the policing of Black Christianity.
- 11 This-worldly ideologies contend that Christians have a responsibility to address social issues as part of their religious praxis, while other-worldly ideologies suggest that Christians should see their time on earth as temporary and focus more on preparing for eternal life in Heaven.
- 12 Jehovah’s Witnesses use the New World Translation Bible which greatly differs from prominent translations, such as the King James Version, New King James Version, and the New Living Translation, which have lots of overlap.
- 13 Some scholars have linked the contemporary practice of spiritual in-dwelling to native forms of African spirituality that were carried through the middle-passage and infused into Black Christian religious expression during slavery (Costens 1993; Raboteau [1978] 2004).
- 14 A prominent Bible verse within Black Christian communities is Matthew 18:20 which states, “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (New King James Version). This verse is often cited as evidence that corporate worship (worship performed with community) is distinctly more powerful than individual worship experiences because one can see and learn more about the character of God through observing how He moves in the lives of other people.
- 15 See Cooper (2018) and Benbow (2022).

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Article

Does a Religious Atmosphere Impact Corporate Social Responsibility? A Comparative Study between Taoist and Buddhist Dominated Atmospheres

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Abstract: The impact of religion on business has attracted cross-academic attention in recent years. Does the religious atmosphere impact corporate social responsibility (CSR)? This study addressed this question using a sample of Chinese-listed companies from 2010 to 2018. Our findings reveal that firms in regions with a Taoist-dominated religious atmosphere are more charitable and less environmentally invested. In contrast, firms with a Buddhist-dominated religious atmosphere are more ecologically engaged and less charitable. This study extends the literature on the impact of the informal institutional environment on corporate social responsibility by distinguishing the heterogeneity of the impact of Buddhist- and Taoist-dominated religious atmospheres on CSR. It also provides a new perspective for enterprises to formulate corporate social responsibility strategies based on the regional cultural environment. And it also enriches the application of informal institutional theory to the fields of management and religion.

Keywords: religious atmosphere; corporate social responsibility; corporate philanthropy; environmental investment; Buddhism; Taoism

1. Introduction

The impact of religion on business has attracted cross-academic attention in recent years. A growing number of domestic and foreign scholars have focused on the intersection of religion, culture, politics, economics, and management in the academic field. Many scholars have examined its impact on Western economic growth, business ethics, managerial behavior, and business decisions (Barro 2003; Longenecker et al. 2004; McGuire et al. 2012). Some have also examined the relationship between religion and corporate social responsibility (CSR), focusing on religion and religious atmosphere influencing corporate culture and behavior, among other factors (Díez-Esteban et al. 2017; Hunjra et al. 2021; Tsendsuren et al. 2021). In addition, research on the influence of religion on CSR has begun to attract the attention of scholars (Du 2017; Griffin and Sun 2018; Zolotoy et al. 2019; Xu and Ma 2022). Extant literature indicates that CSR is compatible with the teachings of most religions, as most religions guide believers to do good deeds and emphasize their value (Angelidis and Ibrahim 2004; Brammer et al. 2007). However, most of this literature is based on Western religious beliefs, typically Christianity and Catholicism. Few studies have explored the influence of Eastern religions on CSR in the context of Eastern countries (Barron and Chou 2017; Vu 2018; Su 2019; Suriyankietkaew and Kantamara 2019). As the Chinese government and the private sector have focused more on and demanded CSR fulfillment in recent years, studies on CSR in China have increased. However, there are still gaps in the literature on the religious informal institutional environment. Religions have unique doctrines and influences on their followers; the different implications of these strategic choices on CSR are still unknown.

In forming modern business ethics, informal institutions play an important role in devising official policies (Bampatsou et al. 2017; Elbousserghini et al. 2019; Tolmie et al. 2020). In this informal system, ideology is at the core because it encompasses ethical norms, moral values, and customs. (Estrin and Prevezer 2011; Williamson and Kerekes 2011; Azari and Smith 2012). Religion is a cultural phenomenon that emerged at a certain stage in the development of human society. It has meaningfully shaped culture and is an outstanding social institution. Religious culture is a unique ideology of society, which develops to a particular scale and forms a religious atmosphere. The religious atmosphere as an informal institutional environment refers to the geographic proximity between religions. The degree of influence of religious culture in a region can invariably influence all aspects of people's lives and behaviors (Tarakeshwar et al. 2003; McCullough and Willoughby 2009). We believe that the religious atmosphere significantly influences the fulfillment of corporate social responsibility strategies. This study aims to analyze this environment's effects on local companies' activities. It is based on the idea that religious culture is an integral part of the local social culture and can be used to create an informal environment of religious learning. This study argues that the religious atmosphere significantly influences CSR strategy and that the influence of different religious atmospheres on CSR strategy is heterogeneous, which has not been focused on in previous studies related to Eastern religions and CSR, for example, the difference in the religious atmosphere between Buddhism and Taoism, their differing impacts on CSR strategy, and the difference in CSR for social and natural environments. This study (1) distinguishes between Buddhism and Taoism, which have a long history and extensive influence in China, and (2) examines the impact of the Buddhist- and Taoist-dominated religious atmospheres on philanthropic and environmental investments, respectively.

First, we pursue the religious view of harmony between humans and nature through Buddhism, which may influence the local religious atmosphere, thus creating an informal institutional environment that promotes the protection of the local natural environment. This fact, in turn, may affect the environmental investment behavior of local firms. Second, we argue that temple merit boxes mediate in the charitable agency. This consensus on indirect forms of charity creates an informal institutional environment for a charitable agency. This, in turn, can influence the charitable giving behavior of local firms. Third, we argue that the Taoist view of nature and "inaction", which reveres and follows nature, creates an informal institutional environment that does not destroy or actively change the natural environment. This affects the environmental investment behavior of local firms. Finally, Taoism's religious views of pursuing worldly sentiments and the merit of helping the world create an informal institutional environment of caring for people and giving to society, influencing local firms' charitable behaviors.

Previous studies have explored the impact of religion on CSR, but research on the influence of religion on strategic choices in CSR is scarce. This study primarily considers the degree of geographical proximity between religions or the degree of influence of religious cultures in a region. We start with the premise that religious culture and the local social culture are intertwined and can form an informal institutional environment of a religious nature. In examining the influence of the religious atmosphere on local enterprises' choice of social responsibility strategies, we focus on the heterogeneity of the impact of different religious atmospheres formed by Buddhism and Taoism on CSR strategies. This heterogeneity is ignored in the literature related to Eastern religions and CSR.

We focus on the following research objectives: First, we distinguish the influence of Eastern religions on CSR strategy choices, that is, the impact of the heterogeneity of Buddhist- and Taoist-dominated religious atmospheres on CSR. Through the study and analysis of Buddhist and Taoist teachings, we distinguish the philosophical relationship between these religions and human society and the natural environment. The literature's composition in this field has been enriched by the religious organization of the core literature related to CSR. Second, our study enriches the application of informal institutional theory to management and religion. We explore the impact of the religious atmosphere on how local companies fulfill their social responsibility in the informal institutional en-

environment formed by Buddhism and Taoism in the region. From a different perspective, it has enriched the research in related fields, such as informal institutional theory and religion. Finally, we added empirical evidence on the impact of religious atmosphere on CSR strategies. Our data analysis systematically demonstrates the differences in the effects of Buddhist and Taoist religious atmospheres on philanthropic and environmental investments.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

2.1. Buddhism and Taoism in China

In China, Buddhism and Taoism are traditional religions with a long history of integration with Chinese society and culture, a broad social base, and many followers (Dong 2017). Buddhism and Taoism's ideas profoundly influence individual believers' thoughts and behaviors.

According to Buddhist teachings, there are eight sufferings in life: Life itself is suffering, so one should cultivate it to avoid the suffering of the six degrees of reincarnation in the next life. The only way to be liberated is to look at life and death lightly. Buddha advocates the existence of an afterlife, as this life is predestined. Buddhism advises people to fast, endure, and place their hope in the afterlife. To reach nirvana, Buddhism emphasizes desire as the source of all suffering (Brazier 2003; Du et al. 2014b; Pace 2013). Thus, Buddhists exercise restraint in pursuing materialistic desires, encourage discarding desires, and practice self-discipline (Barnhill 2004). Therefore, its followers are taught to reject materialism (Wiese 2011). Actions with attributes of excessiveness are considered sins of desire in Buddhism. This view profoundly impacts Buddhists, who themselves have a view of material things that extends to themselves and others. Buddhism is concerned with the suffering and impermanence of this world. The belief is that the cause of suffering is selfish desire—greed, envy, and addiction (Ross 1979). Eliminating desire through moderation, calmness, and wisdom can stop suffering. With the disappearance of suffering, there will be absolute peace, tranquility, and perfect bliss, constituting nirvana. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is to save people in this material world and help them attain nirvana.

Chinese Buddhism's moral philosophy, moral code, and moral behavior are embedded in traditional Chinese cultural thought. For example, the Five Precepts and Ten Virtues of Buddhism are not only common to all Buddhists but are also among the most basic moral principles that civilized societies in China must observe. The Five Precepts of Buddhism are consistent with the traditional virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith, which Chinese society has always advocated (Liu 2021). The Buddhist Way, with its compassion, equanimity, tolerance, concern for self-reliance, and responsibility—above all, its cosmic view—can be a model for society (Kaza and Kraft 2000).

Taoism is based on Tao as its firmest belief and the ideas of the "Tao Te Ching" as its main doctrine. The Tao advocates respect and virtue and emphasizes human life in harmony with all things. It presents its true nature and keeps its simplicity, unifying the human spirit and form through cultivation. It allows people to clear their minds and return to nature. It advocates kindness, frugality, and non-confrontation with the world. The most fundamental belief of Taoism is the Tao, and all doctrines and teachings are derived from it. Taoism believes that the Tao is all-encompassing, all-pervasive, and the beginning of everything. Taoism fears death, values life, and wants life forever (Hyun 2017). Taoism seeks to cultivate merit to become immortal and emphasizes "both merit and action," more specifically, cultivating the inner work of life and the outer work of helping the world. People cannot become immortal without virtue and good deeds by only refining and nurturing (Kim 2008).

One of the modern implications of Taoist thought is to find a peaceful spiritual harbor for people outside the current materialistic and the fiercely competitive real world. Taoist thought opens up a spiritual world that is much better than the real world to believers and gives them spiritual satisfaction beyond material possession. In addition, Zhuangzi's bold critique of worldly concepts helps people open their minds and break their spiritual

shackles and provides a way to alleviate their misery and stabilize their minds. Taoism rejects the behavior of the strong bullying the weak and the young disrespecting the old. It also advocates helping the world and emphasizes the need for mutual assistance and love among people (Zeng 2006). Taoism's ethical and moral norms, which once played an important role in stabilizing ancient Chinese society and in the harmony of human relationships, are equally valuable in communities.

The survey results show that China has the lowest ratio of religious beliefs to population in the world. However, the survey data indicate that a significant percentage of people in China are religious or have a religious experience and that the number of religious believers in China may be underestimated (Yang 2016). The popular understanding of the religious situation in modern China is that the government supports freedom of religion, but most Chinese people are supporters of atheism. According to the white paper "China's Policies and Practices for Safeguarding Freedom of Religion" published by the State Council Information Office in 2018, China's religious population is increasing yearly, with Buddhism and Taoism accounting for a larger proportion of adherents. Because of their special religious characteristics and liberal forms of belief, ordinary believers have no strict initiation procedure, and it is difficult to count their numbers accurately. Taoism is a traditional Chinese religion and has a certain base of believers. Although Buddhism is an imported religion, it has been closely integrated with traditional Chinese culture and customs due to its early introduction to Chinese society. It has a wide social base and extensive influence. Owing to the nature of Buddhist and Taoist forms of belief, more people are involved in folk beliefs and activities than the official survey figures would suggest. There are currently only about 222,000 Buddhist clergy and 144,000 places of religious activities registered according to the law, including about 33,500 Buddhist monasteries and more than 9000 Taoist palaces. As of 2017, there were 91 religious colleges approved by the State Administration of Religious Affairs, including 41 for Buddhism and 10 for Taoism. The Buddhist Academy of China, High-Level Tibetan Buddhism College of China, Chinese Taoist College, and others are national religious institutions. There are seven national religious groups; the Chinese Buddhist Association and the Chinese Taoist Association are the two most important groups.

Religion has a long history in China. It has been integrated into traditional culture, and to a certain extent, it affects people's consciousness and behavior. However, China is a vast country with great regional differences in culture. There is often a different dominant religion in different geographical regions, which creates a dominant religious atmosphere. Therefore, we can logically infer that these differences have affected the informal institutional environment of regions to a certain extent.

2.2. Religious Influence on CSR

As a member of social citizenship, companies have an inescapable responsibility to society and the resource environment (Cui et al. 2015; Yao et al. 2022). As the largest developing country in the world, the number of enterprises in China is increasing yearly. CSR has become the consensus of the Chinese government, enterprises, and society. It is also considered an important contribution to a harmonious society (Lim 2010; Zhou 2006). Many factors influence the fulfillment of CSR. Most religious teachings are consistent with the concept of CSR, as most religions advocate the value of charity (Angelidis and Ibrahim 2004; Brammer et al. 2007). In emerging markets, some well-known determinants that influence CSR, such as ethical culture and corporate governance, are sometimes ineffective in motivating it. Therefore, scholars have turned to informal institutions to seek explanations for CSR behavior (Angelidis and Ibrahim 2004; El Ghouli et al. 2013; Mazereeuw-van der Duijn Schouten et al. 2014).

Weaver and Agle (2002) identified three possible effects of religion on individual behavior: no effect, positive effect, and negative effect. They believed that different influences are based on various religious beliefs. Intrinsic religiosity can positively impact ethics and morality, and religious beliefs can inspire positive attitudes toward social responsibility.

The act of fulfilling social responsibility is based on the attitude towards CSR. The social norms promoted by religion can have a powerful influence that is not limited to believers. To some extent, the social behavior of non-believers can also be improved through the desire for conformity to religious beliefs (Du et al. 2014b; El Ghoul et al. 2013). Several studies have verified that religions in different countries have varying impacts on corporate behavior and CSR (Mazereeuw-van der Duijn Schouten et al. 2014).

Empirical evidence suggests that religion can influence economic choices (Dyrenge et al. 2012), and religious belief can influence moral judgment and behavior (Weaver and Agle 2002). El Ghoul et al. (2013) and Hilary and Hui (2009) argue that religious consciousness has a civilizing influence on people's minds. Regardless of individual religious beliefs, once religion is elevated to a social norm, the community's religious beliefs can influence corporate decisions and behavior (Du et al. 2014b; Dyrenge et al. 2012; Grullon et al. 2009; McGuire et al. 2012). Kennedy and Lawton (1998) argue that religion acts as an essential social norm that influences individual behavior, promoting social solidarity, providing norms that reduce conflict, and imposing sanctions. Even if directors/managers are not religious, they may (or even must) respond to local religious norms. These religious norms create a general religious atmosphere that interacts with religious employees, customers, and suppliers (Du et al. 2014b; El Ghoul et al. 2013; Kennedy and Lawton 1998).

To some extent, a person's religious self is associated with the place or space where their religion is significant. In sacred places, believers participate in important religious rituals and activities and interact with important religious peers. Gerber et al. (2016) argue that attending religious events leads to greater information sharing and social compliance. Jones-Correa and Leal (2001) found that religion can increase civic and social awareness, which comes from the sense of participation and collaboration prevalent among its believers. In the context of China, we believe that the most important component of the religious atmosphere can be considered in terms of the number of local Buddhist monasteries and Taoist temples.

The religious atmosphere within a community can be seen as a cultural perception that provides a common intellectual framework based on religious ideology (Xia et al. 2021). It also shapes corporate behavior to some extent. Additionally, religion can serve as a social norm influencing CSR behavior (Du et al. 2016). The results of Western religious studies may not suit the context of Eastern religions. This study examines the impact of the religious atmosphere on the social responsibility of local companies in the informal institutional setting of the Chinese context.

2.3. *Buddhism, Taoism, and CSR*

CSR is usually discussed in two parts: corporate philanthropy and environmental responsibility. We are mainly looking at the integration of religion with the local society and culture to form a religiously informal institutional environment, based on which we examine the heterogeneous influence of religious atmosphere on local companies' fulfillment of their philanthropic and environmental responsibilities.

2.3.1. *Buddhism and CSR*

The practice of Buddhist environmental activism takes shape. How is Buddhist practice relevant to the task of caring for the earth? The Buddhist vision of dependent origination, in which everything depends on everything else, can function both as an insight into the nature of reality and as a basis for analyzing environmental problems. Understanding the self from an interdependent ecological perspective radically recasts the task of protecting the planet (Kaza and Kraft 2000).

Buddhist culture contains rich and profound ecological thought. In the Buddhist view, the environment in which human beings live is not mechanical nature, nor is it merely biological nature. It reflects both human moral self-consciousness and the religious practice of "humanizing nature." The environment affects the state of mind, and one must create a

good living environment to transform one's heart. Therefore, many Buddhist theories have ecological implications.

The first is "karmic theory." Buddhism believes that all phenomena are interdependent and interact and that phenomena always have a mutual cause and effect. From an ecological point of view, its significance lies in the warning that individuals, human beings, and society do not exist independently but are closely linked to nature. To damage nature is to damage humankind, thus destroying human existence (Huang and Chen 2009).

Second, "Cosmological schematism" discusses the Chinese Buddhist doctrine of the universe's structure. It focuses on two major issues: the cosmic spatial schema theory and the cosmic concept of time (Fang 2011). From an ecological perspective, it describes the ideal world in people's minds: the orderliness, wholeness, and infinity of the world's ecology emphasizes the importance of the environment to people and expresses humankind's desire to pursue an ideal living environment.

Third, Buddhism regards all things in the world as equal, and that one should not kill for one's selfish desires. This fundamental idea of the right to exist for beings other than humans states that the existence of these creatures is a vital part of the human experience (Huang and Chen 2009).

In addition, Buddhism advocates a spiritually reverent view of everything, believing all things in nature have an aura. Thus, we must protect the natural environment, maintain ecological balance, and reconcile the world. In Buddhism, compassion and wisdom are the qualities that develop out of your practice. In Zen Buddhism, responsibility means responsiveness. Responsiveness is responsibility. A developed, compassionate, loving person influences people unselfconsciously, motivates them, and inspires them to act in similar ways. The whole community benefits (Kaza and Kraft 2000). The Buddhist religious view of pursuing harmony between humans and nature, others, and the universe may influence the local religious atmosphere. Areas with a strong Buddhist culture create an informal institutional environment that promotes the protection of the local natural environment and can affect the environmental investment behavior of local firms. Companies develop more aggressive environmental investment strategies to make their social image more consistent with local ecological views and gain local stakeholders' support. Such a religious atmosphere can positively impact corporate environmental investment behavior. Therefore, we formulate:

Hypothesis 1. *A Buddhist-dominated religious atmosphere is positively associated with the environmental investment behavior of local firms.*

The ultimate goal of Buddhists is to achieve nirvana, and Buddhism emphasizes that desire is the source of suffering (Brazier 2003; Du et al. 2014a; Pace 2013). Buddhist followers control the pursuit of material desires through self-discipline (Barnhill 2004). Having too many possessions is considered a sin of desire, so they should focus less on material things (Wiese 2011). The Buddhist tradition of setting up merit boxes in monasteries has three purposes: first, to allow us to cultivate blessings; second, to help in our practice, and third, to help the circulation of the Dharma. Buddhism has three treasures: "Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha." The Dharma represents the Buddhist classics, and the monks represent the monk practitioner. One of the most direct ways to cultivate blessings is to "make offerings to the Three Jewels." The function of the merit box is to receive good money wisely, which is called merit. The monks use good money, give charity, and do good deeds, which is called virtue (Asking Zen with a Mortal Heart 2019). A merit box is a place for good people to do good deeds since many mortals desire to do good. It is also believed that only through merit box donations, offerings to the Buddha, and extensive almsgiving can one achieve merit and success. Monks are more likely to establish donations within monasteries rather than communities. This suggests that areas with strong Buddhist traditions are more likely to have a religious atmosphere. The specific adsorption mechanism of Buddhist monasteries for charitable donations based on merit boxes has the intermediary role of

charitable agents. There is a tendency to make charitable donations through temples in areas with a solid Buddhist atmosphere. Donations of large amounts are made directly through the temple administration and recorded in the temple's merit book. This consensus on indirect forms of social, charitable giving creates an informal institutional environment of a charitable agency, which can influence local businesses' charitable giving behavior. To align their social image with the local view of merit and virtue and to gain the recognition and support of local stakeholders, the tendency is to align corporate charitable giving with the Buddhist tradition of giving. We believe that the religious atmosphere of charitable agencies in Buddhism has a negative impact on corporate charitable giving behavior. Therefore, we formulate:

Hypothesis 2. *A Buddhist-dominated religious atmosphere is negatively correlated with the charitable giving behavior of local firms.*

2.3.2. Taoism and CSR

An important foundation of Taoist thought is the natural concept of "the Taoist method of nature." There are two meanings for this. One is that "everything in heaven and earth has a law." That is to say, humans and all natural things follow the universal law, which means "Tao." Another one is that "The essence of the Tao is nature." As a universal law, the Tao is natural, evolves according to its own laws, and is not subject to human intervention. This statement reveals the general law of all things "to follow nature," and the law is universal and cannot be violated. The Taoist view of nature is one of reverence for nature and emphasizes naturalness, spontaneity, simplicity, and freedom from desire (Chan 1963). Taoism emphasizes social order and secular life, focusing on harmonious natural order, tranquility, and transcendent spirituality. Lao Tzu suggests that following Tao results in peace and safe success, while contrary actions lead to conflict and destruction (Maspero 1981). Additionally, "inaction" is one of the most basic spirits of Taoism, a spiritual realm, which is completely consistent with the value orientation of "The Daoist method of nature." The essence of "inaction" is "do nothing, and everything is done." The spiritual state of "inaction" is the direct manifestation of the value of "Taoism and Nature." It is to follow the changes of nature, keep things in their natural state, and not create artificially.

Zhuangzi inherited and developed Laozi's ideas, and "inaction" is usually understood as an attribute of the Tao. Zhuangzi's basic principle is that if we only abide by the Tao, the world will naturally order itself. Zhuangzi viewed the natural world as a single, constant system that is essentially static, in which various species feed on each other to survive. Nature is a constantly fluctuating and self-regulating network in which human existence is neither intrinsic nor permanent. Zhuangzi's ideas further explain why Taoism is not environmentalism (Paul 2005).

Areas with an intensely religious atmosphere will develop a view of revering to and following nature. Emphasis is placed on keeping things natural, spontaneous, and simple rather than artificially altering their basic nature. Therefore, an informal institutional environment that does not artificially destroy or actively change the natural environment will be formed, influencing local enterprises' environmental investment behavior. Companies do not tend to develop strategies for active participation in local ecological investments to align their social image with the local view of nature and gain the support of local stakeholders. We believe that this religious atmosphere can have a negative impact on the environmental investment behavior of firms. Therefore, we formulate:

Hypothesis 3. *A Taoist-dominated religious atmosphere is negatively correlated with the environmental investment behavior of local firms.*

Taoist classics contain many noble ideas and concepts, such as charity, to "feed people with joy," and "save the poor and the urgent." Those who wish to live forever must want

to accumulate good deeds and establish merit, be compassionate to things, and forgive themselves and others. The main view of charity in Taoism is the balance between profit and loss. The major point is that nature gives humans equal rights to live and develop, but some people have better opportunities and get rich first. For the affluent, it should be similar to the way of heaven that gives life to all things. As there is no absolute fairness, Taoism advocates the pursuit of a dynamic relative balance to achieve relative justice and harmony. Taoism believes that charity is a conscious “good deed” motivated by inner “compassion” and an instinctive reaction of conscience. Doing good should be a genuine, unselfish spirit of doing for others without expecting anything in return (Hu 2015).

Areas with a solid Taoist atmosphere form an informal institutional environment that advocates helping people, accumulating and performing good deeds, caring for people, and giving to society, influencing local enterprises’ charitable giving behavior. Companies tend to develop more aggressive charitable giving strategies to align their social image with the local atmosphere of doing good deeds and giving to the community, as well as to gain the support of local stakeholders. We believe that Taoism’s religious view of seeking initiation and merit for the world may influence the local religious atmosphere, positively impacting corporate charitable giving behavior. Therefore, we formulate:

Hypothesis 4. *A Taoist-dominated religious atmosphere is positively associated with the charitable giving behavior of local firms.*

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and Data

We select the relevant data for analysis to confirm the previously proposed research hypothesis further. Our research object is the philanthropic donation and environmental investment behavior of listed Chinese companies during 2010–2018. China provides a suitable empirical setting to study the impact of the religious atmosphere on corporate social responsibility. First, the central government has issued CSR guidelines since China’s 11th Five-Year Plan and initiated the concept of a harmonious society in 2006 (See 2009). Under the impact of traditional culture and government policies, CSR has received significant attention from Chinese firms, especially among listed companies. Second, Buddhism and Taoism are China’s two most influential religions (Du 2013). Although economic development has led to positive public attitudes toward wealth distribution, the Chinese are still deeply influenced by traditional values and religious culture (Wang and Qian 2011). This informal system also significantly impacts corporate behavior (Su 2019).

Our research sample comprises all listed companies on the Shanghai Stock Exchange and Shenzhen Stock Exchange from 2010 to 2018. By the end of 2021, the sum market capitalization of the two exchanges reached 91 trillion, ranking second in the world. To test our hypothesis, we combined two major data sources. The first one is the China Stock Market and Accounting Research (CSMAR) database, which is the primary source of financial statements and information for the listed Chinese companies. Therefore, this database is widely used in management and CSR studies (Li et al. 2015; Marquis and Qian 2014). The second data source stems from the Center for the Study of Chinese Religion and Society at Purdue University, where we manually calculated the number of religious sites in each city.

3.2. Measures

We define the relevant variables in the following manner to further substantiate the influence of Buddhist- and Taoist-dominated religious atmosphere on the choice of CSR strategy. According to our research hypothesis, the specific variables involved are corporate environmental investment, charitable donations, and regional religious atmosphere.

3.2.1. Corporate Philanthropy

Following previous studies, we measured philanthropic donation (%) as the percentage of total sales given as philanthropic donations in a given year (Gao and Hafsi 2015).

3.2.2. Environmental Investment

Because firm size in our study varies significantly across the sample, we used the percentage of environmental investment to total sales to measure the environmental investment of a firm.

3.2.3. Regional Religion Environment

The natural logarithm value of the number of Buddhist temples in a given province measured regional Buddhism. Regional Taoism was measured as the natural logarithm value of the number of Taoist temples in a given province.

3.2.4. Control Variables

We also included several firm-level and region-level characteristic variables to control the impact of other factors on corporate donation and environmental investment. Firm size was measured as the natural logarithm value of total corporate assets (yuan), because large firms typically attract attention (Edelman 1992) and are susceptible to the impact of stakeholders (Luo et al. 2017). Firm age was measured as the years since the firm was founded. Slack resources significantly influenced corporate social responsibility activities (Seifert et al. 2004). We also included the debt ratio, measured by the percentage of total liabilities as total assets. The natural logarithm value of corporate subsidy income measured subsidy income (yuan). Since ownership is an important source of political legitimacy (Faccio and Lang 2002), state-owned enterprises are less motivated to seek commercial resources through CSR activity (Marquis and Qian 2014). We included state ownership by measuring the proportion of state-owned shares. The political connection was measured by whether a firm's director served as a delegate to the People's Congress or the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (Zhang et al. 2016). Regional economic development was measured at the regional level by the natural logarithm value of GDP in a given province (10,000 yuan).

3.3. Estimation Methods

To avoid the effects of autocorrelation and heteroscedasticity, the study used a generalized least square method to estimate the religious atmosphere's impact on corporate philanthropy. Furthermore, environmental investment has many zero values in this sample, so we also conducted a Tobit model in this study. The model specification for the hypothesis is estimated as follows:

$$\text{Corporate environmental investment} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Regional Buddhism} + \beta_2 \text{Controls} + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

$$\text{Corporate philanthropic donation} = \beta_3 + \beta_4 \text{Regional Buddhism} + \beta_5 \text{Controls} + \varepsilon \quad (2)$$

$$\text{Corporate environmental investment} = \beta_6 + \beta_7 \text{Regional Taoism} + \beta_8 \text{Controls} + \varepsilon \quad (3)$$

$$\text{Corporate philanthropic donation} = \beta_9 + \beta_{10} \text{Regional Taoism} + \beta_{11} \text{Controls} + \varepsilon \quad (4)$$

where β_1 and β_4 are the coefficients of the regional Buddhist environment and are used to test Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2; β_7 and β_{10} are the coefficients of the regional Taoist environment to test Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4; Controls represents a collection of control variables; ε is a random error term.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistic and Correlation

Tables 1 and 2 report the descriptive correlation for all the variables in this study. In Table 1, the mean value of regional Buddhism and regional Taoism is 5.525 and 4.015, respectively, and the firms donated a mean value of 4.647 as a natural logarithm value. The correlation between philanthropic donation and regional Buddhism and Taoism is 0.044 and 0.026, respectively. As shown in Table 2, the mean value of environmental investment is 0.01 as a proportion of environmental protection investment to total sales. We also

calculated the variance inflation factor (VIF), finding that the mean of VIF is 2.38, which avoids the risk of multicollinearity.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation for donation dimension.

Variables	Mean	Sd	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
(1) Philanthropic donation	4.647	12.267	1.000									
(2) Firm size	22.216	1.590	−0.036	1.000								
(3) Firm age	15.313	5.793	−0.035	0.188	1.000							
(4) Debt ratio	0.429	0.227	−0.116	0.537	0.238	1.000						
(5) Subsidy income	14.552	4.954	−0.006	0.029	−0.159	−0.027	1.000					
(6) State ownership	0.047	0.141	−0.004	0.162	−0.029	0.051	0.013	1.000				
(7) Political connection	0.652	0.477	0.071	−0.141	−0.189	−0.179	0.106	−0.147	1.000			
(8) Regional economic development	10.26	0.724	−0.043	−0.005	0.052	−0.066	−0.023	−0.100	0.127	1.000		
(9) Regional Bud	5.525	2.044	0.044	−0.173	0.000	−0.054	0.036	−0.086	0.123	0.261	1.000	
(10) Regional Tao	4.015	2.193	0.026	−0.157	−0.029	−0.069	0.046	−0.084	0.140	0.342	0.914	1.000

Note: N = 6757; correlations greater than |0.03| are significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlation for environmental investment dimension.

Variables	Mean	Sd	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
(1) Environmental investment	0.010	0.783	1.000									
(2) Firm size	22.216	1.590	−0.009	1.000								
(3) Firm age	15.313	5.793	−0.009	0.188	1.000							
(4) Debt ratio	0.429	0.227	−0.009	0.537	0.238	1.000						
(5) Subsidy income	14.552	4.954	−0.001	0.029	−0.159	−0.027	1.000					
(6) State ownership	0.047	0.141	0.032	0.162	−0.029	0.051	0.013	1.000				
(7) Political connection	0.652	0.477	−0.017	−0.141	−0.189	−0.179	0.106	−0.147	1.000			
(8) Regional economic development	10.26	0.724	−0.006	−0.005	0.052	−0.066	−0.023	−0.100	0.127	1.000		
(9) Regional Bud	5.525	2.044	0.009	−0.173	0.000	−0.054	0.036	−0.086	0.123	0.261	1.000	
(10) Regional Tao	4.015	2.193	0.009	−0.157	−0.029	−0.069	0.046	−0.084	0.140	0.342	0.914	1.000

Note: N = 7066; correlations greater than |0.03| are significant at the 0.05 level.

4.2. Hypothesis Testing

Model 1 includes control variables. Models 2 and 3 add regional Buddhist and Taoist environments as independent variables, respectively. Tables 3 and 4 report the empirical results of the estimate for corporate donation and environmental investment, respectively.

Table 3. Estimation of environmental investment.

Variables	DV: Environmental Investment		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Firm size	0.754 *** (0.169)	0.754 *** (0.169)	0.754 *** (0.169)
Firm age	0.024 (0.035)	0.024 (0.035)	0.024 (0.035)
Debt ratio	−0.519 (1.055)	−0.519 (1.055)	−0.519 (1.055)
Subsidy income	0.149 *** (0.042)	0.149 *** (0.042)	0.149 *** (0.042)
State ownership	3.739 * (1.522)	3.739 * (1.522)	3.739 * (1.522)
Political connection	0.163 (0.41)	0.163 (0.410)	0.163 (0.410)
Regional economic development	10.265 *** (1.228)	10.265 *** (1.228)	10.265 *** (1.228)
Regional Bud		17.978 * (7.544)	
Regional Tao			−6.171 * (2.59)

Table 3. Cont.

Variables	DV: Environmental Investment		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	−150.807 (3838.505)	−228.187 (3838.671)	−131.731 (3838.497)
Observations	7066	7066	7066
Pseudo R ²	0.180	0.180	0.180
LR chi2	455.20 ***	455.20 ***	455.20 ***
Log likelihood	−1037.2208	−1037.2208	−1037.2208
Industry dummies	yes	yes	yes
Province dummies	yes	yes	yes

Standard errors are in parentheses *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Table 4. Estimation for donation.

Variables	DV: Philanthropic Donation		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Firm size	0.130 *** (0.029)	0.130 *** (0.029)	0.130 *** (0.029)
Firm age	−0.037 *** (0.006)	−0.037 *** (0.006)	−0.037 *** (0.006)
Debt ratio	−2.084 *** (0.190)	−2.084 *** (0.190)	−2.084 *** (0.190)
Subsidy income	−0.014 ** (0.005)	−0.014 ** (0.005)	−0.014 ** (0.005)
State ownership	−0.346 * (0.170)	−0.346 * (0.170)	−0.346 * (0.170)
Political connection	0.425 *** (0.073)	0.425 *** (0.073)	0.425 *** (0.073)
Regional economic development	−0.687 *** (0.145)	−0.687 *** (0.145)	−0.687 *** (0.145)
Regional Bud		−4.196 *** (1.111)	
Regional Tao			1.440 *** (0.381)
Constant	8.289 *** (1.681)	26.35 *** (5.355)	3.836 * (1.866)
Observations	6757	6757	6757
Wald chi2	928.61 ***	928.61 ***	928.61 ***
Industry dummies	yes	yes	yes
Province dummies	yes	yes	yes

Standard errors are in parentheses *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Hypothesis 1 predicts a positive effect of the amount of regional Buddhist temples on corporate environmental investment. As shown in Table 3, Model 2, the coefficient of regional Buddhism is positive and significant ($\beta = 17.978$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that a religious atmosphere dominated by Buddhism promotes the environmental investment behavior of local firms. As shown in Table 3, Model 3, the coefficient of regional Taoism is negative and significant ($\beta = -6.171$, $p < 0.05$), which supports Hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 2 predicts a negative effect of the number of Buddhist temples on corporate philanthropy. As shown in Table 4, Model 2, the coefficient of regional Buddhism is negative and significant ($\beta = -4.196$, $p < 0.001$), which supports Hypothesis 2. As shown in Table 4, Model 3, the coefficient of regional Tao is positive and significant ($\beta = 1.440$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that Taoism's religious atmosphere promotes local firms' philanthropic donations.

5. Discussion

Our research data and empirical results suggest that a religious atmosphere can impact the choice of CSR strategies. In this study, our empirical results show that the

Buddhist-dominated religious climate is positively related to the environmental investment behavior of local firms and negatively related to the charitable giving behavior of local firms. The Taoist-dominated religious climate, on the other hand, is negatively related to the environmental investment behavior of local firms and positively related to the charitable giving behavior of local firms. This also confirms that the CSR philosophy is compatible with most religions' teachings because religions typically guide believers to goodness and good work, emphasizing the value of good deeds. As noted earlier, a religious atmosphere created by combining religion and social culture is a regional informal institutional environment. It makes a social consensus that affects people's ideology, words, and deeds within its scope, influencing their perception and evaluation of CSR. Therefore, companies should fully consider the local religious atmosphere and the social consensus formed on it when formulating their social responsibility strategies, even if this influencing factor has not yet been considered. Further, it is crucial to examine the differences in the influence of the dominant religious atmosphere on the choice of philanthropic or environmental investments. This will enable companies to fulfill their social responsibility effectively.

The following theoretical contributions and practical implications are described based on the study's results:

First, we have broadened the literature on the core ideas of Buddhist and Taoist teachings, comparing and analyzing the philosophical relationship between Buddhism, Taoism, the natural environment, and human society. Second, we distinguish the heterogeneity of the impact of Buddhist- and Taoist-dominated religious atmospheres on CSR regarding the informal institutional environment formed locally through combining Buddhism and Taoism with social culture. We also explore the effect of this heterogeneity on the strategic choices of local firms to fulfill their social responsibility, enriching the application of informal institutional theory in management and religion from a unique perspective. Third, we extend the study of religion on CSR strategies by expanding CSR from a single strategy to charity and environmental responsibility. We emphasize the complexity of the impact of different religions on CSR strategy decisions, which enriches the literature in this field.

Despite its relevant contributions, this study has some limitations. First, the only data used are from 2008, which is cross-sectional. Scholars can use updated data or continuous data in the future to verify whether the present results are supported. Second, we measure religious atmosphere based on the number of temples in the region, which is meaningful but does not directly reflect the attitudes of businesses or entrepreneurs toward religion. Scholars can expand the religious atmosphere to include more dimensions and, thus, enrich the study of the religious atmosphere and CSR. Third, our study focuses on the heterogeneous influence of the religious atmosphere dominated by Buddhism and Taoism on CSR strategy choices in the Chinese context. Future research can examine whether there are differences in the impact of the dominant religious atmosphere in the West on CSR in a larger international context. Studying the influence of the religious atmosphere on CSR in a social environment where Eastern and Western religions coexist and have equal influence is possible.

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Article

Religious Participation: Does It Shape Food Consumption?

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Abstract: As an informal system, religion has a profound effect on all facets of our society. In reality, previous studies have investigated the consequences of religion on education, health, and others. Consequently, the purpose of this article is to examine the impact of religious participation on food consumption in China. Using data from the 2018 Chinese General Social Survey for an empirical study, the findings suggest that religious participation reduces food consumption. In the meantime, replacement food consumption (food2) is used for the robustness test. The findings confirm the argument that religious participation reduces food consumption. Moreover, this article investigates the geographically heterogeneous impact of religious participation on food consumption. The findings suggest the geographically heterogeneous effect's existence. Specifically, religious participation has the greatest negative impact on food consumption in the western region. In contrast, religious participation has the least negative impact on food consumption in the eastern region.

Keywords: religious participation; food consumption; geographically heterogeneous effect

1. Introduction

Religious fervor in China has recently been on the increase, largely due to the re-identification of religion and the social context in which it is active (Madsen 2011). Religion has existed in China for two thousand years, but in recent decades, it has received positive attention and recognition from the government and has grown significantly. This positive religious fervor has driven an increase in religious activities, such as the establishment of monasteries and the development of religious organizations (Fiedler 2010). Religious belief has been extensively used for social good, such as fundraising activities for charities and the development of social welfare activities and charities (McCarthy 2013). Religious beliefs are also used to strengthen social order and good moral standards, thereby promoting social justice and social stability (Brokaw 2014). Moreover, religious beliefs are also used to strengthen social solidarity and the harmonious coexistence of religious peoples, contributing to a harmonious social environment (Wielander 2011). According to statistics compiled by China's State Administration of Religious Affairs, the number of people who identify as belonging to a religious faith in China was approximately 104 million in 2018, an increase of 33.8% from 2008 and an increase of 10.2% from 2010. It has always been common knowledge that religion has had a significant impact on several aspects of Chinese society, including politics, philosophy, culture, and conventions. However, how much of an impact does religion have on the realm of Chinese consumption, and in what ways does it manifest itself? Chinese academics have not paid sufficient attention to this issue up to this point.

The impact of religion on people's consumption behavior is multidimensional and multifaceted. This is not only connected to the precise elements of religion, such as theology, etiquette, and taboo, but also to the cultural background, living environment, religious level, religious focus, and unique understanding of the person who adheres to a certain religion. Therefore, this effect will manifest itself differently across other faiths and adherents. From the perspective of restrictive factors and the consumption structure of consumption

behavior, because life content and lifestyles that contradict or do not conform to religious doctrines or are not advocated are subject to various forms of restrictions or prohibitions among religious believers, the consumption expenditure in this regard will be subject to certain restrictions or prohibitions. Some religious doctrines and commandments do not support or even forbid the acquisition of wealth from the standpoint of consumption concepts and styles. Consequently, various religious believers might disdain savings to varying degrees, which will affect the shift in consumption mode. From the standpoint of the link between self-interest and the commonwealth of consumption, since religions often encourage the moral idea of charity and assisting the weak, certain faiths consider this conduct to be an integral element of their monastic structure. Therefore, for religious believers, social charity consumption expenditures used to aid others become a non-negotiable expense item, therefore reducing food consumption.

In this piece of writing, the topic of the impact of religious participation on food consumption has been examined due to the extensive background and opportunities indicated above. In comparison to the findings presented in this article, three substantial additions have been made to the existing body of information that has been uncovered. First, unlike Minton et al. (2018), who only evaluated the effect of religion on consumption, which included all forms of consumption, this article distinguishes food consumption from total consumption and investigates the effect of religious participation on food consumption. Second, in the wake of He et al. (2021a), who explored the impact of religious engagement on sustainable culture and entertainment consumption, they made it feasible for future researchers to investigate the effect of religious participation on food consumption. The outcomes of this study made up for their lack of contribution to the existing body of knowledge. Third, this article proves that religious participation has diverse effects on food consumption in eastern, central, and western China. This was due to the unequal religious dispersion throughout China. In terms of the quantity of food consumed in the western area, engagement in religious activities was the single most significant determinant. However, engagement in religious activities had the least influence on the overall quantity of food consumed in the eastern area.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: Section 2 is devoted to the literature review. Section 3 focuses on the explanations of variables and the model. Section 4 provides an analysis of the findings and discussions. Section 5 shows the conclusions, policy implications, limitations, and future research directions.

2. Literature Review

The aim of this section is to organize and analyze the previous studies on the impact that religion has on consumption so that they may serve as a strong, trustworthy, and objective theoretical foundation for this study. There is not yet a consensus among the many bodies of extant information about the influence that religion has on consumption.

The challenge of how to express and acknowledge religious identities may be partially solved by the decisions that people make about their consumption. While using this information as a common framework for thinking, Coşgel and Minkler (2004) came to the conclusion that people who held religious views may pick the level of consumption that they engaged in to demonstrate the depth of their dedication to such beliefs. Consumption decisions might help convey these distinctions between people and communities since societies and individuals have different beliefs, conventions, values, and demands for expressiveness. Suki and Suki (2015) investigated whether non-Muslim and Muslim consumers placed differing significance on consuming green foods. Using the convenience sampling method, the data from a sample of 700 students at a public higher education institution located in the Federal Territory of Labuan, Malaysia, were examined by employing average comparison and multivariate regression assessments. They discovered that essential factors such as specialized demands, individual environmental beliefs connected to green foods, and government activities greatly predict prejudice against the consumption of green foods among non-Muslim consumers. Muslim customers adhere

to a diet that strictly conforms to Islamic dietary regulations. Bonne et al. (2008) used the planned behavior theory as a theoretical model to study the factors that determine whether or not a Muslim migrant community in Belgium consumes halal meat, with particular emphasis on the function of Muslim self-identification and cultural assimilation in the host nation. A survey was administered to 367 Muslims, most of whom were from North Africa and were now residing in Belgium. The data for this study were acquired using a cross-sectional method. They found that, in general, a favorable health attitude toward halal meat was a good predictor of the desire to consume halal meat among Muslims. It has been revealed that possible hurdles that impede Muslim customers from consuming halal meat include a lack of confidence in the safety standards or a perception that there are insufficient safety precautions. When deciding whether or not to consume halal meat, Muslims with low levels of acculturation place a significant amount of weight on their own favorable individual attitudes toward the health status of halal meat, while Muslims with high levels of acculturation place weight on animal welfare attitudes, health attitudes, and safety attitudes. Muslims who have a low sense of their own religious identity are more likely to be swayed by the opinions of their religious contemporaries regarding the concerns they have about their own health and the availability of halal meat. However, Muslims who have a strong sense of their own religious identity are more likely to believe that consuming halal meat is healthy. Mullen et al. (2000); Casidy and Arli (2018); and Orellano et al. (2020) corroborate these results.

Whereas previous studies have investigated religion, and sustainable consumption as separate variables, the relationships among these variables have not previously been investigated. Minton et al. (2018) explored how attitudes and behaviors connected with sustainable purchasing are influenced by religious values, using religion as an example of a consumer value system that is long-lasting and widespread. Utilizing a representative online panel, they performed a poll, which indicated that religion positively affected sustainable consumption behaviors. Moreover, Charro Baena et al. (2019) studied a group of 2890 teenagers in Madrid, Spain, ranging in age from 12 to 18, and looked at how religion and alcohol consumption were related to one another. In contrast to Catholics, nonbelievers were found to have much higher rates of alcohol misuse and consumption, according to their findings. In addition, they discovered a link between higher levels of religiosity and reduced alcohol consumption. Consequently, it would suggest that the religious beliefs and the level of religiosity held by Spanish teenagers are associated with their low rate of alcohol consumption. Based on 1380 samples from 26 provinces in mainland China, Qian et al. (2022) examined the problem of food waste in rural Chinese households from the standpoint of religious beliefs. Using the least squares method for empirical investigation, they discovered that religion contributed positively to the reduction of food waste in rural China. Meanwhile, at the state level, Holt et al. (2006) investigated whether or not there was an association between the consumption of alcohol and religious adherence. In spite of the fact that they did not find a statistically significant link between general religious adherence and existing or gorging drinking rates, they discovered that states that had higher adherence rates were significantly more likely to have large percentages of excessive drinking among existing drinkers. They discovered a substantial positive association between adherence rates and ongoing drinking as well as excessive drinking rates in the Midwest and the Northeast. However, they identified a large negative link between adherence rates and present drinking in the Southeast. Stratification by the main religious denominational groups primarily explains these regional discrepancies. It has been shown that states that have high rates of Catholic adherence are more likely to have high drinking rates, while states that have high rates of Evangelical Protestant devotion are more likely to have high drinking rates. In conclusion, their results indicated that the association between religion and alcohol might well be due to a religious organization and contradicted the common belief that religious devotion was related to reduced alcohol consumption and less extreme consumption among drinkers. Sandikci (2021); Tumwesigye et al. (2013); Carlucci et al. (1993); and Kalema et al. (2016) have found similar results, which lend credence to the investigation.

As a result of the ambiguity that exists between religion and consumer behavior, the preceding literature leads us to the conclusion that there is still scope for more investigation into the relationship between the two. Therefore, we distinguish food consumption from other types of consumption and then investigate the effect that religious participation has had on food consumption. It is possible that the result of this work will add to the existing body of literature on the connection between religion and consumption.

3. Variable Description and Model Specification

3.1. Variable Description

In this article, food consumption is considered to be the dependent variable. It is defined by food consumption expenditures and the ratio of food consumption expenditures to total food consumption expenditures. In the meantime, following He et al. (2021b), religious participation is considered an independent variable. This variable is a dummy variable. Specifically, if an individual engages in religious activities, the value is one, and if they do not, it is zero. Several significant control variables were included in this work so that it would be consistent with the authoritative research that had been conducted before. Following Cheng et al. (2022); Orkoh et al. (2020); and Tiwari (2019), income is included in this article. Following Turner et al. (2021); Zhong and Moon (2020); Ketel et al. (2019); and Čajić et al. (2022), gender and age are included in this article. Following Medeiros et al. (2022); Van Bussel et al. (2020); Fernández-Alvira et al. (2013), education is included in this article. Following He et al. (2021b) and Massarelli et al. (2017), ethnic identity and family classification are included in this paper. All the data used in this article are sourced from the Chinese General Social Survey (it is the earliest national, comprehensive, and continuous academic survey project in China, having started in 2003). It also promotes openness and sharing of domestic scientific research, provides data for international comparative studies, and serves as a multidisciplinary platform for economic and social data collection. Currently, Chinese General Social Survey data has become the most important source of data for the study of Chinese society and is widely used in research, teaching, and government decision making. Furthermore, Table 1 provides the forms, definitions, and sources of these variables so that the reader may have a comprehensive understanding of them.

Table 1. Results of variable description.

Variable	Form	Definition
Food consumption 1	food1	Food consumption expenditures (unit: thousand yuan) in log
Food consumption 2	food2	Ratio of food consumption expenditures to total food consumption expenditures
Religious participation *	reli	If an individual engages in religious activities, the value is 1; otherwise, it is 0.
Income	inco	Total income (unit: thousand yuan) in log
Gender	gend	Dummy variable (male = 1; otherwise, 0)
Education	educ	Dummy variable (Bachelor degree or above = 1; otherwise, 0)
Age	age	Age in log
Ethnic identity	ethn	Dummy variable (Han = 1; minority = 0)
Family classification	fami	Dummy variable (rural = 1; non-rural = 0)

Note: data used in this article is sourced from the Chinese General Social Survey in 2018; * In the Chinese General Social Survey in 2018, there was the question: How often do you participate in religious activities? There were nine possible answers: (1) I have never participated in religious activities; (2) I have participated in religious activities less than once a year; (3) I have participated in religious activities about once or twice a year; (4) I have participated in religious activities several times a year; (5) I have participated in religious activities about once a month; (6) I have participated in religious activities two or three times a month; (7) I have participated in religious activities almost every week; (8) I have participated in religious activities every week; (9) I have participated in religious activities several times a week (He et al. 2021b). A total of 9719 valid samples are eventually collected in this article after the observations that are missing or unavailable are deleted. Notably, 1438 respondents participated in religious activities among the 9719 valid samples, whereas 8281 respondents never participated in religious activities.

3.2. Model Specification

To investigate the effect of religious participation on food consumption, the model used in this paper is specified as follows:

$$\text{food1} = a_0 + a_1\text{reli} + a_2\text{inco} + a_3\text{gend} + a_4\text{educ} + a_5\text{age} + a_6\text{ethn} + a_7\text{fami} + \mu_1, \quad (1)$$

where a_0 denotes the constant; $[a_1, a_7]$ denote these coefficients required to be estimated; μ_1 denotes the white noise. In Equation (1), the most emphasis will be put on a_1 . Specifically, if the estimated value of a_1 is positive and statistically significant, it may be concluded that religious participation increases food consumption. On the contrary, if the estimated value of a_1 is negative and statistically significant, it may be concluded that religious participation reduces food consumption. Otherwise, if the estimated value of a_1 is not statistically significant, it may be concluded that religious participation has no impact on food consumption.

Moreover, we carried out a robustness test so that the outcomes of the estimate using Equation (1) would be more accurate and trustworthy. Specifically, as a new dependent variable, we characterized food consumption as the ratio of food consumption expenditures to total expenditures. The model used in this paper is specified as follows:

$$\text{food2} = b_0 + b_1\text{reli} + b_2\text{inco} + b_3\text{gend} + b_4\text{educ} + b_5\text{age} + b_6\text{ethn} + b_7\text{fami} + \mu_2, \quad (2)$$

where b_0 denotes the constant; $[b_1, b_7]$ denote these coefficients required to be estimated; μ_2 denotes the white noise. In Equation (2), the most emphasis will be put on b_1 . In particular, if the values of a_1 and b_1 have the same sign, the minor difference in size is minimal and statistically significant, indicating that the estimated results of Equation (1) are robust and reliable; otherwise, the estimated results of Equation (1) are biased.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Basic Statistical Analysis

In this subsection, the fundamental features, including mean, maximum value, minimum value, and standard deviation of variables utilized in this article, are investigated. The results of fundamental features are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of basic statistical analysis.

Var and Sta	Food1	Food2	Reli	Inco	Gend	Educ	Age	Ethn	Fami
Mean	0.734	0.282	0.148	1.437	0.416	0.102	1.549	0.916	0.512
Max	1.479	0.364	1	4.748	1	1	1.875	1	1
Min	0.334	0.187	0	0.452	0	0	1.241	0	0
Sd	0.142	0.154	0.089	0.151	0.099	0.147	0.119	0.177	0.272

Note: Var variable; Sta statistic; Max maximum value; Min minimum value; Sd standard deviation.

According to Table 2, the mean food consumption is 0.734, with a standard deviation of 0.142. Meanwhile, the mean ratio of food consumption expenditures to total food consumption expenditures is 0.282, with a standard deviation of 0.154. This implies that China's food expenditures are gradually declining, which is consistent with China's actual situation. With the rise in China's national income and the diversity of its goods, it is probable that people are paying less attention to food and clothes and more to spiritual entertainment. Consequently, it makes sense that food expenditures are gradually decreasing. The mean of religious participation is 0.148, with a standard deviation of 0.089. This is consistent with the reality in China. One probable explanation is that Chinese religions are considerably more rigorously regulated by the government than religions in industrialized nations, which may explain why the majority of Chinese do not participate in religious activities. Subsequently, the mean income is 1.437, with a standard deviation of 0.151. The mean of gender is 0.416, with a standard deviation of 0.099. The mean of education is 0.102, with a standard deviation of 0.147. The mean age is 1.549, with a standard deviation of

0.119. The mean of ethnic identity is 0.916, with a standard deviation of 0.177. The mean of family classification is 0.512, with a standard deviation of 0.272. Due to the fact that these variables are control variables, we will not engage in an in-depth study of them in this article.

4.2. Regression Analysis

The goal of this subsection is to examine the impact of religious participation on food consumption. The outcomes are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of the effect of religious participation on food consumption.

Variable and Model	Model (1): Food1	Model (2): Food1
reli	−0.114 *** (−6.916)	−0.094 *** (−6.510)
inco		0.623 *** (3.977)
gend		0.047 (1.376)
educ		0.058 * (1.714)
age		−0.021 ** (−2.018)
ethn		0.118 * (1.831)
fami		0.227 *** (4.995)
c	3.695 *** (2.979)	2.867 *** (2.618)
R ²	0.179	0.136
F-statistic	67.958 ***	62.475 ***
Observation	9719	9719

Note: * 10% significant level; ** 5% significant level; *** 1% significant level; () value of t-statistic.

The findings of models (1) and (2) on the influence of religious participation in food consumption are shown in Table 3. The outcome of model (1) without control variables suggests that religious participation reduces human consumption. Specifically, this shows that a 1% rise in religious participation reduces food consumption by 0.114%. Similarly, the findings of model (2) with control variables reveal that religious participation also reduces food consumption. Namely, this suggests that a 1% rise in religious participation reduces food consumption by 0.094%. Examining the coefficients of religious participation in models (1) and (2) reveals that although the coefficient of religious participation in model (2) is considerably smaller than that in model (1), both are statistically significant at the 1% level. Consequently, we could argue that religious participation reduces food consumption. A potential reason is that religious participation might be considered an informal regulation. It promotes self-discipline and frugality in everyday life. As a result of a person's religious participation, there is a decline in food consumption. Another potential reason is the substitution effect between religious products and food products. When a person accumulates more religious human capital than he or she consumes, the consumption of religious objects is of greater worth. As a consequence, a person's consumption of religious products will increase. Due to economic resource constraints, a person's disposable income will decrease if they increase their consumption of religious products, such as buying religious objects and contributing money to religious communities. In this instance, the consumption of food may result in a crowding-out effect. This new finding is, of course, in line with the findings of earlier research (Mullen et al. 2000; Casidy and Arli 2018; Orellano et al. 2020).

Furthermore, we investigate the influence of control factors on food consumption. These results are shown in Table 3. Income positively affects food consumption. A possible

explanation is that a person with more income has a higher possibility of food expenditure. This finding is consistent with Fisher et al. (2020) and Nelson et al. (2019). Gender reduces food consumption. It is nonetheless not statistically significant. Education increases food consumption. A potential reason is that those with a strong educational background are more likely to consume food. This finding is in line with the findings of Al-Nuaimi and Al-Ghamdi (2022); Toti et al. (2019); and Kebede et al. (2022). Age negatively impacts food intake. A probable explanation is that the elderly consume less food than young people. This result is consistent with Li et al. (2020); and Tamang et al. (2020). Ethnic identity increases food consumption. A plausible reason is that the minority consumes less food than the Han. This finding agrees with Ramírez et al. (2018) and Reddy and van Dam (2020). Family classification influences food intake favorably. A probable explanation is that the rural populace consumes more food, whereas the urban populace has more consumption alternatives. This finding agrees with those of Lei et al. (2021); Mottaleb et al. (2018); Balan et al. (2022); and Yan et al. (2022).

4.3. Robustness Test

As a sort of decision made by consumers, food consumption may be endogenous to certain socioeconomic circumstances. Concurrently, a number of unobservable variables influence people's willingness to participate in religious activities, and these factors may also influence food consumption. Accordingly, the endogenous problem can contradict our results. We redefine food consumption as the ratio of food consumption expenditure to total expenditure and generate a new proxy variable for food consumption (food2). The influence of religious activity on food intake is reexamined using the new proxy variable. The findings are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of robustness test.

Variable and Model	Model (3): Food2	Model (4): Food2
reli	−0.085 *** (−5.392)	−0.063 *** (−5.873)
cv		yes
c	3.179 *** (2.748)	3.926 *** (2.914)
R ²	0.152	0.126
F-statistic	72.133 ***	60.851 ***
Observation	9719	9719

Note: *** 1% significant level; () value of t-statistic.

According to Table 4, religious participation reduces food consumption, and its coefficient is statistically significant at the 1% level. Comparing the findings from Tables 3 and 4, it is apparent that the coefficients of religious participation change in size and are statistically significant. This demonstrates that Table 3's findings are reliable and robust.

4.4. Heterogeneous Effect

Due to China's vast terrain, religious sites and devotees are distributed across the country's provinces and cities. To have a better comprehension of the influence of religious participation in various geographical places on food consumption, the whole sample is split into three sub-samples, which are the eastern area, the central area, and the western area. The outcomes are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Results of heterogeneous effect.

Variable and Model	Model (5): Eastern	Model (6): Central	Model (7): Western
reli	−0.059 *** (−6.382)	−0.087 *** (−6.191)	−0.108 *** (−5.178)
cv	yes	yes	yes
c	3.871 *** (3.232)	2.583 *** (2.895)	3.652 *** (2.627)
R ²	0.124	0.117	0.104
F-statistic	59.702 ***	47.280 ***	42.009 ***
Observation	4025	3169	2525

Note: *** 1% significant level; () value of t-statistic.

The findings of this study are shown in Table 5, which breaks down the effects of religious participation on food consumption according to geographic region. Religious participation has been shown to reduce food consumption. In contrast, the coefficients of religious participation are statistically significant in these three areas. These findings correspond to those shown in Table 3. The influence of religious participation on food consumption is the highest in the western area and the lowest in the eastern area, which is an unexpected conclusion. Specifically, a 1% increase in religious participation causes a reduction in food consumption of 0.059% in the eastern area, 0.087% in the central area, and 0.108% in the western area. Ethnic minorities making up a significant portion of the region's population might be a possible reason for this phenomenon in the western region. It is a multi-cultural region that is home to a variety of religions that live peacefully alongside one another, a sizable number of people who are devout followers of these religions, and a robust ethnic and religious milieu. Moreover, the ideology of thrift that is taught in religious communities serves as a type of unofficial social control that prevents people from overspending and squandering their food. This is an additional significant factor. Finally, the eastern area is far further down the path to development compared to the central and western regions, and as a result, there is a greater variety of options available for consumption. As a result, the consumption of food is being pushed to the background in the eastern area because of the prevalence of other types of consumption. For this reason, it is not surprising that participation in religious activities has little impact on the amount of food consumed.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this article is to investigate the influence that religious participation has on China's food consumption. With the use of information obtained from the Chinese General Social Survey in 2018, an empirical investigation on the impact of religious participation on food consumption is being carried out. In accordance with the results, religious participation reduces food consumption. To maintain a higher level of robustness and reliability in the findings, we have been conducting robustness tests, in which the related dependent variable has been changed from food1 to food2. According to the results of the robustness tests, religious participation still reduces food consumption. The influence of religious participation on food consumption is analyzed in this study in terms of three sub-samples (the eastern, central, and western areas), which allows for a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between the two. When the empirical studies are re-undertaken, the results show that the heterogeneous impact does, in fact, take place.

The conclusions of this article have several implications for the sectors that are relevant to society as a whole. First, if there is an excessive amount of food waste in society, the government may implement regulations to encourage citizens to engage in religious activities in order to cut down on the excessive amount of food waste. Second, for consumers, individuals who participate in religious activities may be helpful in forming the practice of frugality and avoiding excessive expenditures on food consumption. Third, the conclusions that may be drawn from this study can be applied to countries other than China. As shown

in the evidence included in this article, the most prevalent form of religious devotees in China are those who follow the Buddhist faith. The conclusions of this article might also be applied to other countries with religious systems that are comparable to those of China. These countries include, among others, India, Japan, Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand, and Korea. There are a number of reasons why people behave the way they do, but one theory is that it might be due to the fact that religion is an informal institution. Additionally, the findings of this article are supported by the findings of Loy and Watts (1998) (a case of Japan), Filippini and Srinivasan (2019) (a case of India), Park et al. (1998) (a case of Korea), Assanangkornchai et al. (2002) (a case of Thailand), and Ngo et al. (2021) (a case of Vietnam).

In a nutshell, this study provides three significant contributions to the body of current knowledge. The first significant contribution made by this study was that, in comparison to Minton et al. (2018), who only examined the impact of religion on consumption, which captured all different types of consumption, this paper distinguished food consumption from total consumption and explored the impact of religious participation on food consumption. As for the second key contribution, following He et al. (2021a), who examined the influence of religious participation on sustainable culture and entertainment consumption, He et al. (2021a) made it possible for future researchers to examine the effect of religious participation on food consumption. This paper's results compensated for their lack of addition to the existing body of knowledge. The third key contribution was that empirical studies revealed that religious participation had a heterogeneous influence on food consumption in the eastern, central, and western areas of China. Participation in religious activities was the factor that had the smallest impact on the total amount of food consumed in the eastern region.

In conclusion, several limitations and goals for ongoing or future research are highlighted. Concerning the role that religious participation has in one's food consumption, all religious participation is taken into consideration simultaneously. China's religions consist of two categories. As a representative, Taoist beliefs are indigenous to China, and Buddhist beliefs and Christian beliefs are religious beliefs imported from other countries. It is probable that the consequences of religious participation on food consumption are different depending on where in the world a person practices their religion. This offers up a new avenue of study for future academics to pursue in order to address this knowledge gap. When the topic of consumption arises, food consumption is the only one brought up. The results may vary depending on whether we look at overall consumption or specific forms of consumption, such as the consumption of gifts and alcoholic beverages. When these new indicators are used to quantify consumption, it is possible that fresh discoveries might be made about the influence that religious participation has on consumption. This paves the way for future academics to address this knowledge gap with another fresh study focus. Consumption of food also has a "peer effect," which refers to a phenomenon in the realm of consumption in which an individual's consumption behavior is influenced not only by the motivation of their own economic interests but also by the behaviors of those around them who have the same status as they do. In the future, academics may choose to concentrate their attention on this topic in order to explore the peer influence of religious participation on consumption.

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Article

The Effect of Folk Belief on Social Trust: The Mediating Role of Social Support and the Sense of Identity

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Abstract: Although the influential factors of social trust have aroused heated discussion, the research on the influence of religious belief, especially Chinese folk belief, on social trust and the mechanism between the two is relatively insufficient. This study aims to explore the influence of folk beliefs on Chinese residents' social trust and the mediating role of social support and the sense of identity. The empirical analysis of 23,823 Chinese residents shows that there is a significant positive correlation between folk belief and social trust. Social support and a sense of identity play a mediating role between folk beliefs and residents' social trust. People with folk beliefs can significantly promote their social trust by improving their degree of social support and their sense of identity. In addition, the influence of folk belief on the social trust of residents in eastern, northern China and rural areas is more significant, showing regional and registered residence heterogeneity. Therefore, we should correctly interpret and popularize the core spirit and social and cultural significance of folk belief to form a bond of social trust. At the same time, folk beliefs can be returned to the people, which will help people find a sense of belonging and sense of identity and enhance their social trust.

Keywords: folk belief; social trust; social support; the sense of identity; heterogeneity

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, social scientists have put a lot of effort into the study of social trust (Cook 2001; Fukuyama 1995; Sztompka 1999). Social trust is defined as “a social expectation that arises from a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior based on common norms” (Francis 1996). It is the foundation of social life and an important promoter of social capital and support. Social trust is the fundamental basis of social interaction within a society, and it is also an informal rule that supplements formal institutions such as laws and regulations to maintain social order (Zak and Knack 2001). There is a lot of evidence to show that trust between people reduces transaction costs and promotes cooperation between people, so it is very important for economic and social development (Beugelsdijk et al. 2004; Knack and Keefer 1997). The existence of social trust in China is different from that in Western countries, which is manifested by a high degree of trust in “in-group” members except for family members, while a low degree of social trust in “out-of-group” members. Long-term honesty and reliability are the way to gain trust, so “in-group” members have a close and specific relationship (Feng et al. 2016). Social trust can be enhanced by the consensus formed by communication and sharing through social media (Kim 2015). Social trust is also affected by a variety of factors, including political trust (Tao et al. 2014), socioeconomic status (Brandt et al. 2015), social networks (Sherchan et al. 2013), and ethnic diversity (Dinesen and Sonderskov 2015).

Among various influencing factors, cultural consensus brought by NGOs can also enhance social trust. Among them, religious belief is an important resource of social cohesion, and its relationship with social trust has been studied a lot. An examination of the connection between these two variables can be established by going back to Durkheim's

concept of mechanical solidarity. Mechanical solidarity is to emphasize the collective consciousness or the similarity within the group (Durkheim 1893). From the perspective of folk belief, among the groups with the same belief or belief, they have the similarity of “belief.” This similarity enables them to form a collective consciousness under a certain belief, which is the basis of most religious beliefs. Most studies have also found, as noted, that religious affiliation is associated with greater social trust, and if one belongs to a religion that is mainstream and widely seen as legitimate or if one belongs to a religion that is practiced by almost all members of the community, this will favor increased social trust. If you belong to a radical or extreme religion, belonging can put you on the margins of society and make you an outcast, which can lead to a decrease in social trust. It can be said that the influence of religious belief on social trust is complex. Existing studies have discussed the relationship between religious belief, including folk belief, and social support (Keating 2013; Moxey et al. 2011). In fact, compared with the influencing factors of social support, the influencing factors of social trust are more worthy of study and will highlight their advantages. First, conceptually, social trust is an important driving force in achieving social support. Social support usually refers to the individual’s ability to consult and guide in connection with the social environment, which is achieved through extensive social interaction and communication (Vaux and Harrison 1985); social trust arises in an environment based on common norms and is the foundation of social life (Francis 1996). It promotes the realization of social support between people and between people and the environment. Second, the effect of religious belief on social support will ultimately affect the establishment of social trust. The ability of a member of a society to obtain social support, whether individual or institution, is based on trust and performs its basic social function. The prosocial value of religious belief can enhance social trust by increasing trust among people who share the same religious identity (Yilmaz 2021), but the increase in religious diversity will aggravate the negative effect of religious belief on social trust (Berggren and Bjornskov 2011). This can be explained by religious identity theory. In a pluralistic society, religion tends to make use of distinction, participation, conflict and threat in relation to others by defining that individuals involved are not in relation to others around them, thus developing a stronger sense of group boundaries in a pluralistic background. Under the influence of this sense of group boundaries, the level of social trust will not improve. Existing studies have shown that religious belief has an impact on people’s social trust. Adam Smith also noted in “The Wealth of Nations” that religious belief can be important in increasing trust and credibility in a group of people. Religious belief is an underlying determinant of social trust, and its teachings teach believers ethics, morals, and social behavior. In situations of social conflict and the emergence of social insecurity, religious belief is increasingly valued as a constructive force for building social trust at different levels of interaction (Ruben 2011). However, most existing studies focus on Western countries and do not examine the relative influence of different religious traditions on the formation of social trust in non-Western countries. In this study, we attempt to extend this line of research by assessing the influence of folk beliefs on the social trust of residents in China. This question is important because the effects of different types of religion on social trust among members of a society can vary. China is a good case study. As the basis of China’s traditional religious landscape, China’s folk belief is a highly integrated system, including elements of Buddhism, Taoism and other traditional religious beliefs. China’s folk beliefs originated from traditional religions. With the development of politics, economy and culture, diversified religions have adjusted the original objects of belief and worship ceremonies by adapting different local social production modes (Zhu and Li 2021). Belief objects and worship rituals have become part of local folk belief traditions and customs. Therefore, compared with Western countries, Chinese folk belief is more interdependent and collectivist. Even in foreign countries, Chinese people can gather together to establish social organizations because of folk beliefs (Xu and Hamamura 2014; Yang and Hu 2012). In addition, unlike the monotheism of other religious countries, China tends to be more polytheistic. China stresses harmony but diversity. In front of

folk beliefs, people can hold the idea of “believing is something, not believing is nothing.” Without formal rules, different people in the same community may have different religious beliefs (Yang and Hu 2012), and even worship and praying for good luck are not consistent. Research indicated that folk belief is indeed the mainstream of China’s religious market. About 70% of China’s population is a follower of a folk belief, while only five percent are members of an institutional religion, and 25% are not religious (Zhang et al. 2021). According to the World Values Survey (WVS), the proportion of Chinese residents who are religious has risen from 3% in 1990 to 15% in 2012. Therefore, the number of religious believers in contemporary China is growing rapidly (Yang 2010). However, the influence of religion in contemporary China has not been extensively studied, and given the increasing popularity of religion at present, China urgently needs more religion-based studies.

In conclusion, we take sample data from China as an example to study the relationship between folk belief and social trust, as well as the influencing mechanism of the relationship between the two, in order to fill the gap in existing research. First, we used data from 23,823 residents in China to verify the influence of folk beliefs on social trust through robustness tests to ensure that the conclusions obtained were representative. Then, the econometric model was used to investigate the mediating mechanism of the social support variable and the sense of identity variable on the relationship between folk belief and social trust. Finally, we examined whether the influence of folk belief on social trust was heterogeneous with one’s locality and registered residence.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

In the process of trust resource construction, the influencing factors of social trust have become a topic frequently discussed by scholars in recent years. As the product of combining regional characteristics and history, folk belief is not only the ideological and cultural sustenance independently chosen by individuals but also the way of building social relations. There are few research results on folk belief in related fields, but the influence of religious belief on social trust is mostly discussed. Domestic and foreign scholars have studied the relationship between religious belief and social trust through data from various countries. Although some researches indicate that religion has a negative impact on social trust (Berggren and Bjornskov 2011; Bjornskov 2007; La Porta et al. 1997), others believe that religion plays a vital role as a source of social networks and has a positive impact on social trust (Chuah et al. 2016; Delhey and Newton 2005). Religious beliefs and practices encourage individuals to develop values including morality, kindness and charity, which contribute to social trust (Hopkins 2011). For example, using the data from the third phase of China’s rural-urban migration project, some selected 13,732 eligible sample sizes. Through the ordered Probit regression, it was found that among Chinese migrant workers, religious believers had a stronger degree of social trust than non-believers, and religious participation could significantly improve the social trust of Chinese migrant workers. Some study estimated the impact of religious belief on the trust level of Turkish people by using the third-phase WVS survey data and found that religious belief and the frequency of participation in religious activities both had a positive and significant impact on social trust (Yilmaz 2021). Others conducted field laboratory experiments in Bangladesh and West Bengal, India, and randomly selected villagers to investigate the relationship between religion and relative status on social trust and credibility, and found that highly religious ethnic groups in the two places showed stronger intra-group social trust than those with a low religious degree. That is, the high-religious group trusts its members more (Gupta et al. 2018).

In addition, from the perspective of religious heterogeneity, some research compared the total sample and the group of highly religious believers and found that the degree of trust of Catholics and evangelical Protestants was significantly lower than that of mainline Protestants (Mencken et al. 2009). Isaac Addai et al. (2013) explored the relationship between Ghanaians’ religious affiliation, religious importance and social trust based on the personal data in the 2008 African Democracy Dynamics Survey. He adopted stratification

and multiple regression technology and found that the overall influence of religion on social trust was weak, and compared with non-belief and traditional religious belief, There is a positive correlation between Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Pentecostal/evangelical faith and social trust (Addai et al. 2013). R. Traunmuller (2011) used the survey data of the GSOEP wave in 2003 to conduct a multi-level analysis of 97 small-scale regions in Germany to explore the influence of different religious beliefs on social trust and found that Protestants were not only more likely to trust others but also that the social environment dominated by Protestants would increase social trust (Traunmuller 2011).

Research indicated that keeping religious commitments can be a means of building cooperation. Religious commitments create cooperation more effectively than other commitments based on secular networks. Rich religious ritual activities lead to the formation of various interreligious groups, which can facilitate cooperation and social trust formation on a larger scale (Irons 2004). At the same time, religious systems usually consist of eight core elements, namely authority, meaning, moral obligation, myth, ritual, sacred, supernatural, and taboo. While all elements may not interact directly, they all interact with the ritual. Based on the importance of ritual in the religious system, ritual performance can be understood as a barometer of social cooperation and trust (Sosis 2020). Studies have also shown that participation in religious services helps to build social support networks with fellow religious people and to receive more help from fellow religious people (Shaver et al. 2020). The religious beliefs and rituals of Christianity and other supernatural forces can unite people in a wider network and push people to constantly expand the scope of social interaction, which further emphasizes the interaction between religious beliefs and the content of cultural forms such as social-ecological environment (McNamara and Henrich 2018).

On the basis of the above conclusions, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Folk belief has a significant positive effect on residents' social trust. In addition, folk belief has a more significant positive effect on the social trust of people who have folk beliefs and are members of religious groups than people who have folk beliefs but are not members of religious groups.*

Social support refers to the perception of the availability of help or support from others in their social network. In a high-trust environment, social trust helps to expand the range of social support (Sendroiu and Upenieks 2020). According to the affective theory of social exchange (Lawler 2001), more social support generated by more frequent social interaction will trigger people's positive emotions, and these emotions, as reinforcement stimuli, will lead to primary and sustained interaction, thus enhancing people's perception of network cohesion (Emerson 1976), and thus generating stronger "in-group" social trust (Lawler and Yoon 1996). Thus, the longer one attends church, the more opportunities one has to interact with other church members, accumulate more social support, and in turn, generate positive feelings about the group. This positive feeling is reflected in the fact that we tend to trust people we know more than people we don't know well (Macy and Skvoretz 1998). As Coleman (Coleman 1988) theorizes, a closed network characterized by highly dense and overlapping sets of social relationships is an important factor in creating "in-group" trust in relationships.

Meanwhile, according to the social trust theory, individuals develop trusting attitudes when they interact with others in society (Daniels and von der Ruhr 2010). Religious activities can provide a platform, interactive network and communication resources between people, enhance their degree of social support, and thus enhance "in-group" social trust (Wuthnow 2002). For example, using survey data from the Portrait of American Life Study, research indicated that the positive relationship between religiosity and trust is driven not by religious belief or practice but by specific characteristics of the microscopic processes that take place in the church (e.g., closeness to religious leaders, the density of congregational relationships, and giving and receiving help from other parishioners) (Seymour et al. 2014).

In contrast to in-group trust, studies have also shown that religious believers increase their trust in strangers through social support and participation in religious ritual activities, namely “out-of-group” social trust. Using data from about 5000 rural-urban migrant families in 15 Chinese cities, the research concluded that religious teachings and opportunities for social support contributed to increased “out-of-group” social trust (Niu and Zhao 2018). In addition, research indicated that religious participation also helps rural society break the restrictions of kinship networks, provide new networks and social support, and thus enhance their “out-of-group” social trust (Zhang et al. 2019). And social support is in place precisely to contend with concerns regarding the free rider.

On the basis of the above conclusions, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *The association between folk belief and strangers’ social trust is mediated by social support.*

Religion influences trust, and the way in which trustworthiness is achieved depends on people’s identity (Chuah et al. 2016). According to social identity theory, identity competition plays a central role in maintaining relationships between groups and is considered to be a byproduct of individuals’ efforts to satisfy basic human needs, including various psychological needs. In the process of achieving identity, religion is often more helpful than other factors in building and maintaining the cultural significance of individual and group identity and more effectively meeting these psychological needs (Seul 1999). As a system to understand primitive philosophical thoughts, religion can influence the construction of group identity and life meaning and ensure the function of social cohesion and legitimacy (Diaz 2008). Of the total number of Christian participants in Tan and Vogel’s study, the 44 people known to be highly religious received greater trust from others, especially from those who shared the same identity (Tan and Vogel 2008). On the other hand, some collected three samples of African American and Hispanic respondents from the United States, with a total sample size of 570, and conducted two experimental studies and a questionnaire study. Research has found that the sense of belonging to a minority group’s social identity itself leads, in turn, to an increase in social trust and social relationships (Valcke et al. 2020). The research examined the effect of the complexity of the trustor’s social identity on the degree of trust of others, out-group trust and in-group trust. The results showed that the complexity of the trustor’s social identity was positively correlated with its interpersonal trust and out-group trust. Activating the high complexity of the trustor’s social identity would produce a high level of interpersonal trust (Xin et al. 2016).

On the basis of the above conclusions, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *The association between folk belief and residents’ social trust is mediated by the sense of identity.*

3. Methodologies

3.1. Data and Study Sample

The data used in this study are from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS). The CFPS was carried out by China Center for Social Research at Peking University. The samples in the CFPS database are nationally representative. The survey team will constantly update the survey methods every year to ensure the authenticity and reliability of the survey results. Finally, the following databases are formed: family members, family economy, individual self-response, children’s parents’ surrogate response and individual surrogate response. The data covered 25 provinces (municipalities and autonomous regions) in China, reflecting the sociodemographic characteristics, way of life, and social opinions of Chinese citizens. In this study, data from CFPS in 2018 were used. Combined with the variables required by the research in this study, individual sample code is taken as the matching index to complete the horizontal data merger. The data contents include variables such as family size, family income at the family level and variables such as age, gender, marriage

and education at the individual level. The object of this study is the entire population. After deleting the missing values of the variables required for the study, a total of 23,823 effective samples were obtained.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study is social trust, which refers to out-of-group trust or generalized trust. The question to measure the dependent variable was “How much do you trust strangers?”. The answers to the question were the continuous variable, ranging from 0 to 10. The higher the number, the stronger the sense of social trust of residents.

3.2.2. Independent Variable

The independent variable in this study is folk belief. The questions to measure the independent variable included: “Do you believe in gods?”, “Do you believe in ancestors?”, and “Do you believe in Feng Shui?”. In this study, the above questions were summed up. People who believed in at least one of them were regarded as having folk beliefs, which made folk beliefs become categorical variables, namely “0 = no belief” and “1 = belief”.

3.2.3. Mediating Variables

The mediating variable in this study is social support and the sense of identity. Social support use was measured with the question, “How well connected do you think you are?”, The answers to the question were the continuous variable, ranging from 0 to 10. The higher the value, the more social support the residents receive. The sense of identity was measured by using the question, “How would you rate your local social class status?”. The answers to the question were the continuous variable, ranging from 0 to 10. The larger the value, the stronger the sense of social class identity of residents.

3.2.4. Control Variables

Based on the characteristics of residents gathered through CFPS surveys, we chose control variables. Gender is the categorical variable: female is 0, male is 1. Age is a continuous variable. Marriage is the categorical variable, unmarried is 0, and married is 1. The highest level of education is the ordinal variable, “0 = below primary school”, “1 = primary school”, “2 = middle school”, “3 = university and above”. Personal income is a continuous variable. The registered residence is the categorical variable, the rural account is 0, and the urban account is 1. Health level is the ordinal variable, coded as “1 = unhealthy”, “2 = average”, and “3 = healthy”. Family size is the continuous variable, measured by the number of family members. Working status is the categorical variable, not working is 0, and working is 1. The level of medical care is the ordinal variable, and the question for measuring it is, “How do you think the level of medical care there?”; the “very bad” and “bad” options in the answer are combined and coded as “1 = bad,” “average” options as “2 = average;” the “good” and “very good” options are combined and coded as “3 = good”. Medical insurance is the categorical variable; 0 is not participating and 1 is participating.

3.3. Statistical Analysis

In this study, Stata16.0 software was used to analyze the influence of folk beliefs on residents’ social trust. First of all, this study made a descriptive analysis of dependent variables, independent variables, mediating variables and control variables. Secondly, the OLS model was used to analyze the influence of folk beliefs on residents’ social trust, and the ordered Logistic model and PSM method were replaced to test the robustness of the baseline regression results. Finally, the step-up method and KHB method were used to verify the mediating role of social support and subjective class identity between folk belief and residents’ social trust.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

Tables 1 and 2 show the descriptive statistics of each variable. The mean value of social trust is 2.287, which means that the social trust level of the whole sample is low. Those who did not believe in folk beliefs account for 28.05%, and those who believed in folk beliefs account for 71.97%. The mean value of the sense of identity is 3.098, which means that the sense of identity of the whole sample is at a medium level. The mean value of social support is 7.115, which means that the social support of the whole sample is at an above-average level. Females account for 47.66%, and males 52.34%. The average age of the sample is 46. Among the marital status of the sample, 15.69% are unmarried, and 84.31% are married. In terms of the highest level of education, those who were below primary school account for 21.32%, 20.48% in primary school, 44.26% in middle school, and 13.94% in university or above. The rural samples account for 22.67%, and the urban samples account for 77.33%. In terms of health level, the proportion of unhealthy samples is 15.06%, the proportion of generally healthy samples is 12.98%, and the proportion of healthy samples is 71.96%. The mean household size is 4.245. The sample proportion of not working is 18.80%, and the sample proportion of working is 81.20%. 92.45% of the residents in the survey sample are covered by health insurance.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of ordinal/categorical variables.

Variable	Variable Type	Sort Percent
Folk belief	Categorical variable	0/unbelief 28.05%; 1/belief 71.95%
Gender	Categorical variable	0/female 47.66%; 1/male 52.34%
Marriage	Categorical variable	0/unmarried 15.69%; 1/married 84.31%
Highest level of Education	Ordinal variable	0/below primary school 21.32%; 1/primary school 20.48%; 2/middle school 44.26%; 3/university and above 13.94%
Registered residence	Categorical variable	0/rural 22.67%; 1/urban 77.33%
Health status	Ordinal variable	1/unhealthy 15.06%; 2/general 12.98%; 3/healthy 71.96%
Working status	Categorical variable	0/no 18.80%; 1/yes 81.20%
The level of medical care at the point of the visit	Ordinal variable	1/bad 12.78%; 2/general 33.90%; 3/good 53.32%
Medical insurance	Categorical variable	0/not participating 7.55%; 1/participating 92.45%

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of Continuous variables.

Continuous Variable	Mean Value	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Social trust	2.287	2.225	0	10
The sense of identity	3.098	1.079	1	5
Social support	7.115	1.942	0	10
Age	46.079	14.655	16	96
Personal income	4.822	5.146	0	13.641
Household size	4.245	2.053	1	21

4.2. Impact of Folk Belief on Social Trust

The dependent variable in this study is social trust, which ranges from 0 to 10. Therefore, the OLS model is used to analyze the influence of folk beliefs on residents' social trust. The specific regression results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. OLS model of the influence of folk beliefs on social trust.

	Model 1 Social Trust	Model 2 Social Trust	Model 3 Social Trust
Folk belief	0.047 ** (0.03224)	0.058 ** (0.03)	0.068 ** (0.032)
Gender (The control group was female)			
Male	0.496 *** (0.029)	0.497 *** (0.029)	0.508 *** (0.030)
Age	−0.000 *** (0.000)	−0.000 *** (0.000)	−0.000 *** (0.000)
Marriage (The control group was unmarried)			
Married	−0.093 ** (0.040)	−0.089 ** (0.040)	−0.087 ** (0.041)
Highest level of Education (The control group was below primary school)			
Primary school	−0.298 *** (0.045)	−0.299 *** (0.045)	−0.281 *** (0.045)
Middle school	−0.076 * (0.043)	−0.078 * (0.043)	−0.060 (0.043)
University and above	0.819 *** (0.062)	0.816 *** (0.062)	0.802 *** (0.062)
Personal income	0.012 *** (0.003)	0.012 *** (0.003)	0.012 *** (0.003)
Registered residence (The control group was urban)			
Rural	−0.097 *** (0.037)	−0.096 ** (0.037)	−0.110 *** (0.037)
Health status (The control group was unhealthy)			
General	0.027 (0.054)	0.028 (0.054)	0.061 (0.054)
Very healthy	0.237 *** (0.042)	0.238 *** (0.042)	0.217 *** (0.042)
Household size		−0.004 (0.007)	−0.004 (0.007)
Working status (The control group was no)			
Yes			0.062 * (0.037)
The level of medical care at the point of the visit (The control group was bad)			
General			0.032 (0.046)
Good			0.286 *** (0.044)
Medical insurance (The control group was not participating)			
Participating			0.087 (0.054)
Constant	1.994 *** (0.085)	2.008 *** (0.090)	1.734 *** (0.107)
N	23,823	23,823	23,823
R ²	0.052	0.052	0.056

Note: 1. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; 2. The value in brackets is the standard error.

Table 3 reports the results estimated using the OLS model. Model 1 is the regression result after only adding control variables at the level of individual characteristics; Model 2 is the regression result after both adding control variables at the level of individual characteristics and family characteristics; Model 3 is the regression result after both adding control variables at the level of individual characteristics, family characteristics and social characteristics. Through the regression results of Model 3, it can be found that folk belief positively affects residents' social trust at the significance level of 1%, indicating that the group with folk belief has a higher level of social trust than the group without folk belief. Among the control variables, gender positively affects residents' social trust at the significance level of 0.1%, and the level of social trust of males is higher than that of females.

Age negatively affects social trust at a significance level of 0.1%, meaning that people's level of social trust decreases as they age. Marriage negatively affects social trust at the 1% significance level, and unmarried people have higher levels of social trust than married people. In terms of the highest level of education, it is found that the group with a higher education level has a higher level of social trust. In personal income, the significance level of personal income at 0.1% positively affects residents' social trust. The higher the level of personal income, the higher the level of social trust. The significance level of registered residence at 0.1% negatively affects residents' social trust, and urban residents have higher social trust than rural residents. In terms of health level, the healthier the body, the higher the level of social trust. In terms of work status, work status positively affects social trust at the significance level of 5%, and the level of social trust is higher among those with jobs than those without jobs. In terms of medical treatment level, the higher the level of medical treatment, the higher the level of social trust of residents.

It can be seen from Table 4 that among members of religious communities, folk beliefs have a significant positive effect on their social trust. In the non-religious community, folk belief has no significant effect on their social trust. Whether he is a member of a religious community determines, to a certain extent, how often he participates in religious ceremonies and activities.

Table 4. Test results for members of a religious community.

Variables	Social Trust	
	Member of a Religious Community	Not Member of a Religious Community
Folk belief	0.134 ** (0.067)	0.174 (0.262)
Control variables	All control variables	All control variables
N	463	16,677
R ²	0.034	0.021

Note: 1. ** $p < 0.01$; 2. The value in brackets is the standard error.

As can be seen from Table 5, in specific types of folk beliefs, ancestor belief and feng shui have positive responses to their social trust at the significance level of 5% and 0.1%, respectively. Belief in God, on the other hand, had no significant effect on social trust. In addition, among those who believe in God, 27.3% are registered members of religious activities, while among those who believe in ancestry, 56.9% are registered members of religious activities, and among those who believe in Feng Shui, 42% are registered members of religious activities.

Table 5. Test results by specific folk belief.

	Social Trust
Believe in gods	0.125 (0.332)
Believe in ancestors	0.506 ** (0.253)
Believe in fengshui	0.987 *** (0.372)
Control variables	All control variables
N	23,823
LR Statistic	1512.36
Pseudo R ²	0.027

Note: 1. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$; 2. The value in brackets is the standard error.

4.3. Robustness Test

4.3.1. Replace the Model

The dependent variable in this study is social trust, which ranges from 0 to 10 and can be regarded as a discrete and ordered variable. Therefore, an ordered Logistic model is

constructed to test the robustness of the model results in Table 6 to verify the credibility of the regression results in Table 3. The robustness test results are shown in Table 6. The regression results in Table 6 are consistent with those in Table 3, showing a positive correlation between folk trust and the social trust level of the samples at the significance level of 0.1%. This illustrates the robustness of the findings.

Table 6. Robustness test.

	Social Trust
Folk belief	1.082 *** (0.028)
Control variables	All control variables
N	23,823
LR Statistic	1534.36
Pseudo R ²	0.017

Note: 1. *** $p < 0.001$; 2. The value in brackets is the standard error.

4.3.2. The Results of Propensity Score Matching

Due to confounding factors influencing the connection between folk belief and social trust, our results were affected by a sample selection bias. Consequently, propensity score matching was employed to rectify the results of the regression. First, given that the independent variable used for propensity score matching was a dummy variable, the sample was separated into two groups: those with folk belief and those without folk belief. Second, we matched the samples using the techniques outlined below: (1) we transformed the control variables into an indicator and determined the probability that each sample belonged to the experimental group. (2) To match the experimental and control groups, we used five matching methods: 1–1 nearest neighbor, 1–4 nearest neighbor, radius matching, kernel matching, and local linear regression matching, and divided individuals with similar values into the same group to ensure that group members had similar characteristics. (3) We determined the average treatment effect (ATT) of the participants, which measures the difference in happiness between the experimental and control groups.

Table 7 displays the ATT calculated using various matching strategies. In all models, the ATT value is more than zero, which is statistically significant, demonstrating that folk belief has a statistically significant beneficial effect on residents' social trust.

Table 7. Propensity score matching results (ATT).

		Dependent Variable: Social Trust		
		ATT	SE	t
Nearest Neighbor Matching	1–1 Matching	4.79 ***	0.13	4.28
	1–4 Matching	4.56 ***	0.14	4.35
	Radius Matching	4.27 ***	0.15	4.28
The whole Matching	Kernel Matching	4.43 ***	0.13	4.33
	Local Linear			
	Regression Matching	4.28 ***	0.14	4.32

Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

4.4. The Mechanism Analysis of the Influence of Folk Belief on Social Trust

In this study, the step-up method proposed by Baron and Kenny (Baron and Kenny 1986) and the KHB method were used to test the mediating effect of social support and the sense of identity on the relationship between folk belief and social trust. The results are shown in the table below.

4.4.1. Testing the Moderating Effects of Social Support

In Model 1 of Table 8, folk belief positively affects residents' social trust at the significance level of 1%, and holding folk beliefs can improve residents' social trust level. In Model 2, folk belief positively affects residents' social support at the significance level of 0.1%, indicating that folk belief can improve residents' social support. In Model 3, folk belief positively affects residents' social trust at the significance level of 1%. Social support has a significant positive effect on residents' social trust at the level of 0.1%. The influence of folk belief on residents' social trust decreased from 6.8% in Model 1 to 6.2% in Model 3, indicating that social support is one of the mechanisms through which folk belief affects residents' social trust. Having folk beliefs can enhance residents' social trust by improving the level of social support.

Table 8. Folk belief and residents' social trust: The mediating role of social support.

	Model 1 Social Trust	Model 2 Social Support	Model 3 Social Trust
Folk belief	0.068 ** (0.032)	0.139 *** (0.028)	0.062 ** (0.032)
Social support			0.047 *** (0.007)
Gender (The control group was female)			
Male	0.508 *** (0.030)	−0.072 *** (0.026)	0.511 *** (0.030)
Age	−0.000 *** (0.000)	0.000 *** (0.000)	−0.000 *** (0.000)
Marriage (The control group was Unmarried)			
Marriage	−0.087 ** (0.041)	0.046 (0.036)	−0.089 ** (0.041)
Highest level of Education (The control group was below primary school)			
Primary school	−0.281 *** (0.045)	−0.007 (0.040)	−0.280 *** (0.045)
Middle school	−0.060 (0.043)	0.002 (0.039)	−0.060 (0.043)
University and above	0.802 *** (0.062)	0.247 *** (0.055)	0.790 *** (0.062)
Personal income	0.012 *** (0.003)	0.002 (0.003)	0.011 *** (0.003)
Registered residence (The control group was urban)			
Rural	−0.110 *** (0.037)	0.005 (0.033)	−0.110 *** (0.037)
Health status (The control group was unhealthy)			
General	0.061 (0.054)	0.006 (0.048)	0.061 (0.054)
Very healthy	0.217 *** (0.042)	0.364 *** (0.037)	0.200 *** (0.042)
Household size	−0.004 (0.007)	0.019 *** (0.006)	−0.004 (0.007)
Working status (The control group was no)			
Yes	0.062 * (0.037)	0.169 *** (0.033)	0.054 (0.037)
The level of medical care at the point of the visit (The control group was bad)			
General	0.032 (0.046)	0.023 (0.041)	0.031 (0.046)
Good	0.286 *** (0.044)	0.247 *** (0.039)	0.274 *** (0.044)

Table 8. *Cont.*

	Model 1 Social Trust	Model 2 Social Support	Model 3 Social Trust
Medical insurance (The control group was not participating)			
Participating	0.087 (0.054)	0.246 *** (0.048)	0.075 (0.054)
Constant	1.734 *** (0.107)	5.774 *** (0.095)	1.461 *** (0.115)
N	23,823	23,823	23,823
R ²	0.056	0.022	0.058

Note: 1. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; 2. The value in brackets is the standard error.

In order to test whether social support plays a mediating role in the influence of folk belief on residents' social trust, this study also uses the KHB method to test. In Table 9, the total effect of folk belief on residents' social trust is 0.068, passing the significance test of 5%. The direct effect was 0.062, which passed the significance test of 5%. The indirect effect of folk belief on residents' social trust through social support is 0.007, which passes the significance test of 1%, indicating the existence of the mediating effect of social support. In summary, both the stepwise method and the KHB test found that social support plays an intermediary role in the relationship between folk belief and residents' social trust, and social support is the mechanism influencing the relationship between folk belief and residents' social trust.

Table 9. Test results of the mediating effect of social support.

Mediating Variables	Effect of Type	Coefficient	Standard Error	Z	p
Social support	Total effect	0.068	0.032	2.17	0.030
	Direct effect	0.062	0.032	1.96	0.050
	Indirect effect	0.007	0.002	3.94	0.000

4.4.2. Testing the Moderating Effects of the Sense of Identity

In Model 1 of Table 10, folk belief positively affects residents' social trust at the significance level of 1%, and holding folk beliefs can improve residents' social trust level. In Model 2, folk belief positively affects residents' sense of identity at the significance level of 1%, indicating that folk belief can enhance residents' sense of identity. In Model 3, folk belief positively affects residents' social trust at the significance level of 1%. At the level of 0.1%, the sense of identity has a significant positive effect on residents' social trust. The influence of folk belief on residents' social trust decreased from 6.8% in Model 1 to 6.4% in Model 3, indicating that the sense of identity is one of the mechanisms through which folk belief affects residents' social trust. Having folk beliefs can improve residents' social trust by improving their sense of identity.

Table 10. Folk belief and residents' social trust: The mediating role of the sense of identity.

	Model 1 Social Trust	Model 2 The Sense of Identity	Model 3 Social Trust
Folk belief	0.068 ** (0.032)	0.032 ** (0.015)	0.064 ** (0.032)
The sense of identity			0.144 *** (0.014)
Gender (The control group was female)			
Male	0.508 *** (0.030)	−0.007 (0.014)	0.509 *** (0.030)
Age	−0.000 *** (0.000)	0.000 *** (0.000)	−0.000 *** (0.000)

Table 10. Cont.

	Model 1 Social Trust	Model 2 The Sense of Identity	Model 3 Social Trust
Marriage (The control group was unmarried)			
Married	−0.087 ** (0.041)	0.115 *** (0.019)	−0.103 ** (0.041)
Highest level of Education (The control group was below primary school)			
Primary school	−0.281 *** (0.045)	−0.119 *** (0.022)	−0.264 *** (0.045)
Middle school	−0.060 (0.043)	−0.176 *** (0.021)	−0.035 (0.043)
University and above	0.802 *** (0.062)	−0.040 (0.030)	0.808 *** (0.062)
Personal income	0.012 *** (0.003)	−0.010 *** (0.002)	0.013 *** (0.003)
Registered residence (The control group was urban)			
Rural	−0.110 *** (0.037)	0.130 *** (0.018)	−0.129 *** (0.037)
Health status (The control group was unhealthy)			
General	0.061 (0.054)	0.136 *** (0.026)	0.042 (0.054)
Very healthy	0.217 *** (0.042)	0.273 *** (0.020)	0.177 *** (0.042)
Household size	−0.004 (0.007)	0.010 *** (0.003)	−0.005 (0.007)
Working status (The control group was no)			
Yes	0.062 * (0.037)	0.072 *** (0.018)	0.052 (0.037)
The level of medical care at the point of the visit (The control group was bad)			
General	0.032 (0.046)	0.130 *** (0.022)	0.014 (0.046)
Good	0.286 *** (0.044)	0.295 *** (0.021)	0.243 *** (0.044)
Medical insurance (The control group was not participating)			
Participating	0.087 (0.054)	0.100 *** (0.026)	0.073 (0.054)
Constant	1.734 *** (0.107)	2.066 *** (0.051)	1.436 *** (0.110)
N	23,823	23,823	23,823
R ²	0.056	0.081	0.060

Note: 1. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; 2. The value in brackets is the standard error.

In order to test whether class identity plays a mediating role in the influence of folk belief on residents' social trust, this study uses the KHB method to test. In Table 11, the total effect of folk belief on residents' social trust is 0.068, passing the significance test of 5%. The direct effect was 0.064, which passed the significance test of 5%. The indirect effect of folk belief on residents' social trust through the sense of identity is 0.005, passing the significance test of 5%, indicating the existence of the mediating effect of the sense of identity. In summary, both the stepwise method and the KHB test found that the sense of identity played an intermediary role between folk belief and residents' social trust, and the sense of identity was the mechanism influencing the relationship between folk belief and residents' social trust.

Table 11. Test results of the mediating effect of the sense of identity.

Mediating Variables	Effect of Type	Coefficient	Standard Error	Z	p
class identity	Total effect	0.068	0.032	2.17	0.030
	Direct effect	0.064	0.032	2.03	0.042
	Indirect effect	0.005	0.002	2.06	0.039

4.5. Heterogeneity Analysis

Different empirical phenomena show that the relationship between residents' folk beliefs and their social trust is affected by their locality and registered residence. Therefore, this study attempts to analyze the heterogeneous effects of regional factors and residence factors on the relationship between residents' folk beliefs and social trust.

First, this study divides the samples into three parts based on the eastern, central and western regions, respectively, to investigate the influence of folk beliefs on residents' social trust in different regions. The sub-sample test results in Table 12 show that folk belief has a positive and significant impact on the population in the eastern region, and the eastern residents with folk belief have a higher level of social trust than those without folk belief. Folk belief had no significant effect on the social trust of middle and western residents. The difference in folk beliefs in social trust between East, middle, and West may be due to the influence of population size and economic development. Chinese folk belief includes the belief in ancestors and feng shui, which are the sustenance of people's smooth life or good wishes. Meanwhile, there are many kinds of folk beliefs in China, and people can choose more spiritual sustenance. The eastern region has a large population scale and high population density. Meanwhile, the economic development in the eastern region is fast. People have a higher pursuit of career and financial resources, so they have a stronger belief in folk religions. In many circumstances, religious societies provide a source of comfort for those who are in uncertain situations. People who attend religious communities experience a greater sense of spiritual comfort. In contrast, the middle and western region has a small population, sparse residence and a small scale of human interaction. At the same time, affected by economic development, the belief in folk religions is less than that of the eastern region, which lacks the desire for an economy of work and life. Therefore, the belief level may be affected, resulting in a lower level of social trust.

Table 12. Test results by region of East, Middle and West.

Variables	Social Trust		
	East	Middle	West
Folk belief	0.126 *** (0.045)	0.085 (0.061)	−0.098 (0.064)
Control variables	All control variables	All control variables	All control variables
N	10,743	6172	6908
R ²	0.070	0.060	0.039

Note: 1. *** $p < 0.001$; 2. The value in brackets is the standard error.

In addition, we divide the samples into two parts based on the north and south, respectively, to investigate the influence of folk beliefs on residents' social trust in different registered residences. The sub-sample test results in Table 13 show that folk belief has a positive and significant impact on the social trust of the population in the north, and the north residents with folk belief have a higher level of social trust than those without folk belief.

Table 13. Test results by region of North and South.

Variables	Social Trust	
	North	South
Folk belief	0.127 *** (0.04)	−0.091 (0.153)
Control variables	All control variables	All control variables
N	13,390	10,433
R ²	0.054	0.060

Note: 1. *** $p < 0.001$; 2. The value in brackets is the standard error.

Then, we divide the samples into two parts based on the rural and urban, respectively, to investigate the influence of folk beliefs on residents' social trust in different registered residences. The sub-sample test results in Table 14 show that folk belief has a positive and significant impact on the population in rural, and the rural residents with folk belief have a higher level of social trust than those without folk belief. In rural areas, the level of social trust of folk believers is 0.058 units higher than that of non-believers. Folk belief had no significant effect on the social trust of urban. Chinese religious believers in rural areas lack more opportunities for social interaction than those in urban areas. Religion-related activities can enhance their social trust by providing them with opportunities to exchange and share experiences in an atmosphere of equality. Furthermore, urban communities have robust institutions in place to police the free riders. This kind of perfect institutional system is conducive to the construction of a trusting environment in urban communities so as to mobilize community residents to really participate in community practice and finally achieve the goal of mutual supervision and mutual building of trust relationships.

Table 14. Test results by registered residence.

Variables	Social Trust	
	Rural	Urban
Folk belief	0.058 ** (0.028)	0.104 (0.162)
Control variables	All control variables	All control variables
N	18,422	5401
R ²	0.075	0.068

Note: 1. ** $p < 0.01$; 2. The value in brackets is the standard error.

5. Discussion

Folk belief, as the basis of Chinese traditional religion, is a highly integrated religious system. Therefore, China's religious characteristics are different from those of other religious countries in the world. Therefore, the study of Chinese folk beliefs is of great significance for understanding the diversity of world religions. However, in China, there are very few empirical studies on the influence of folk beliefs on residents' social trust. In addition, in China, there are few differences in the impact of folk beliefs on social trust based on specific beliefs of folk beliefs, social support and identity, as well as specific geographical and social backgrounds (such as different regions and registered residence, etc.). On this basis, it discusses the influence of folk belief on Chinese residents' social trust and the intermediary mechanism of the relationship between the two. In fact, in the process of folk belief's influence on social trust, the power of religious participation cannot be ignored. Belief is not as important as action. People tend to trust those who are willing to bear irrational short-term costs, such as religious sacrifices and rituals, for the long-term collective good. Irrational actions are more persuasive than irrational beliefs. Sam Harris argues that we cannot afford to pay lip service to a modest commitment to religious reconciliation, which only blinds us to the real dangers of fundamentalism, and that we should adopt secular humanistic approaches to the world's problems (Harris 2005).

Therefore, when we study the influence of folk beliefs on social trust, irrational behavior and participation also need to be paid attention to and explained.

5.1. Folk Belief Has a Significantly Positive Affect on Social Trust in China

In this study, we used data from 23,823 Chinese samples to examine the relationship between folk beliefs and residents' social trust. We tested the hypothesis with the OLS model and concluded that folk belief has a significant positive impact on Chinese residents' social trust. This conclusion is completely consistent with a large number of Western empirical studies on the relationship between religious belief and social trust (McCullough et al. 2016; Upenieks and Orfanidis 2022). In addition, among members of religious communities, folk belief has a significant positive effect on their social trust. In the non-religious community, folk belief has no significant effect on their social trust.

5.2. Social Support Plays a Mediating Role in the Influence of Folk Belief on Residents' Social Trust

We found that social support plays a mediating role in the influence of folk beliefs on residents' social trust; that is to say, folk beliefs have a significant positive impact on residents' social trust through the improvement of residents' social support degree. Folk belief has the cohesive advantage of strengthening social support. It comes from social members, serves social members, provides them with a place for communication, exchange and support, and promotes the generation of benign interpersonal bonds. Folk believers hold some activities and rituals of folk belief, such as weddings and funerals, offering sacrifices to ancestors, paying tribute to gods, building beams, farming and praying for rain, etc., so that various voluntary groups and networks are formed among each other to meet different needs. Through these groups or networks, social solidarity and social support are strengthened, and social trust between people is strengthened. Therefore, we should also emphasize that religious participation plays a significant role in promoting social support. In a study of 115 community seniors aged 65–90, research indicated that religious participation was more important in alleviating the distress of those with less social support (Dulin 2005).

5.3. The Sense of Identity Plays a Mediating Role in the Influence of Folk Belief on Residents' Social Trust

We found that the sense of identity plays a mediating role in the influence of folk belief on residents' social trust; that is to say, folk belief has a significant positive impact on residents' social trust through the improvement of the sense of identity of residents. The sense of identity refers to the recognition and emotional attachment of social members to a certain group, which is based on cultural identity. Hogg proposed a subjective identity theory based on his previous work on subjective uncertainty and group identification (Hogg 2001). He believes that subjective uncertainty makes people's identity become significant in highly substantive groups with ideological belief systems. The more ideological a belief system is, based on group membership, the better it will be at reducing uncertainty (Hogg 2005). Common ancestor worship, totem worship and festival ceremonies based on folk beliefs are all important cultural factors for the generation of the sense of identity. Through its unique forms of external expression, it makes its cultural ideas deeply rooted in the hearts of the people and forms deep-rooted cultural psychology and habits. By participating in ritual activities, social members with folk beliefs enhance their sense of identity, generate team centripetal force and cohesiveness, and enhance social trust for social members within the group in the process of contact with different cultures. Therefore, we should also emphasize that religious participation plays a significant role in the formation of social identity. The research analyzed the effect of religious participation on the social identity of 97 Istanbul immigrants. The results showed that religious participation improved the level of social identity. People with high attendance scored higher on social identity (Cetin 2019).

5.4. The Positive Effects of Folk Belief on Social Trust of Social Members in Rural and Eastern China Are More Significant

The influence of folk beliefs on Chinese residents' social trust is heterogeneous. Among them, the influence of folk belief on the social trust of rural residents is more significant than that of urban residents. This may be because China's social foundation is a rural society. The folk beliefs originating in rural society itself have a strong rural nature. It is based on the initial religious worship in rural society. It constantly absorbs the elements of other belief forms and accumulates and evolves to form a set of god worship concepts, behavior habits and corresponding ritual system and organization mode. People living in rural social fields are more likely to be affected by folk beliefs than those living in cities, and the degree of trust in social members is more different due to the influence of folk beliefs. In addition, compared with the central and western regions of China, folk belief has a more significant positive impact on the social trust of social members in eastern China.

5.5. Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. First of all, this paper focuses on the relationship between folk belief and social trust in the context of China. First of all, folk belief actually covers many types and dimensions and is not the only standard type summarized in this article. Second, there are different measures of the concept of social trust. However, due to limited data and questionnaire questions, this study did not study the impact of folk belief types on social trust in more detail. In addition, richer measures of social trust will be further improved in the future. Secondly, due to the limitation of public survey data, although this paper reveals the correlation between folk belief and residents' social trust at the individual level, it is unable to explore the psychological process behind their interaction at the more micro-cognitive level. In future studies, the relationship between the two can be studied from different dimensions through secondary data research supplemented by quantitative methods, such as original data surveys and experiments.

6. Conclusions

The results show that there is a significant positive correlation between folk belief and Chinese residents' social trust, and social support and a sense of identity play an intermediary role in the relationship between folk belief and social trust. Based on this, we propose the following suggestions: First, correctly interpret and popularize the core spirit and social and cultural significance of folk beliefs so that contemporary people can better understand and respect these traditional cultural elements, respect and fear the wisdom and character of ancestors, and form a bond of social trust; Second, we need to bring back folk beliefs. Some traditional practices based on folk beliefs have now become an important link between history and reality, and one of the key points is that it enables traditional folk culture to be passed on from generation to generation. The return of folk belief to the people will help people find a sense of belonging and identity and enhance their social trust.

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Article

Religion, Social Resources, and International Migrants' Volunteer Participation: Evidence from Yiwu City, China

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Abstract: A large body of research has explored various factors influencing volunteer participation, particularly revealing the association between religious beliefs and volunteer engagement. However, there was relatively limited research on volunteer participation among international immigrants in China, a newly emerging immigrant country. Further investigation was needed to identify the factors influencing the volunteer engagement of international immigrants in China and the underlying mechanisms. This study analyzed data from international immigrants in Yiwu, China and found that their volunteer behavior was significantly influenced by their religious beliefs. Additionally, social resources were closely related to their volunteer participation. Furthermore, although perceived discrimination among international immigrants in China was not directly associated with volunteer participation, it promoted their religious participation and frequency, consequently encouraging their volunteer engagement. Further analysis also revealed two mechanisms through which religion impacted volunteer participation. On the one hand, religious beliefs influenced volunteer participation through the mechanism of religious indoctrination. On the other hand, though perceived discrimination among international immigrants did not directly influence volunteer participation, it did encourage them to engage in religious meetings to establish social networks for support, thereby enriching their social resources and subsequently promoting volunteer engagement. We discussed the implications of our findings for encouraging volunteer participation and for promoting the social integration of international immigrants.

Keywords: religion; social resources; volunteer participation; international immigrants

1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening-up in 1978, China has developed its economy rapidly and increased its international influence significantly. Now, China is becoming a new destination country for transnational migrants, particularly for south-to-south migration, and a huge number of foreigners are attracted to China as employees of transnational corporations, self-employed traders, or international students. In China's 2010 census, there were 593,832 foreigners from 128 countries or regions (Census Office of the State Council, Population and Employment Statistics Department of the National Bureau of Statistics 2012), and a report from the UN showed that there were about 1 million foreigners in China in 2017 (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2017). Data showed that the number of foreigners in China was still on the rise (Ning 2021).

Compared to the abundant research on international migration in developed countries in Europe and the United States, only a small amount of academic work was being carried out on international immigrants in China. Prior research on international immigrants in

China mainly focused on broad topics: (1) International immigrants' integration. Despite their successful transnational businesses, these individuals often faced disparities and obstacles when accessing various urban services in China (Amoah et al. 2020; Adebayo 2020; Bodenstein 2021). They tried to build up new networks to attain social support from immigrant communities, immigrant organizations as well as business associations to cope with inequalities (Castillo 2014; Xu 2009); (2) Ethnic relations. China might have been economically ready for foreigners, but not culturally (Han 2017). A study showed that, although Chinese people appreciated Africans' presence in the economy and expressed openness to interact with them, they tended to perceive Africans negatively in general (Zhou et al. 2016). Another study on the perception structure of international immigrants in China found that, in Guangzhou, international immigrants were primarily engaged in business, but they did not enter the Chinese labor market. The attitudes of the local people towards them were mainly determined by the perceived threat. Their socio-economic status and group interactions did not significantly affect their attitudes towards international immigrants (Liang and Liu 2016); (3) Ethnic enclave and community. Based on the study of African associations such as the African Business Associations in Guangzhou, Niu introduced the concept of transient communities (Niu 2018). Other studies showed that the formation of transnational immigrant communities in Guangzhou was the result of differentiation and agglomeration evolving together (Xu 2016, 2012). Li and his colleagues discovered that the economic status of immigrant ethnic enclaves gradually declined after experiencing growth and prosperity (Li et al. 2009), while others argued that international migrants were not granted to form enclaves within the dominant cities of African residence in China, due to the state's urban regulation concerns (Jin et al. 2021; Niu et al. 2020). Recent research has focused on the impact of religion on the subjective adaptation of international immigrants (Du and Liang 2023), but there was little study on the religion of international immigrants and how religion fostered volunteer participation among them.

There is an inevitable impact on the target country with the flow of a large number of immigrants. While most studies have addressed how social participation contributes to social cohesion for international immigrants arriving in developed countries (Dustmann 1996; Martinovic et al. 2009; Şahin 2016), limited works have studied immigrants' volunteering in a new destination country in a south-to-south context. Using survey data from Yiwu City, a commercial hub for transnational commodity wholesale, the current study aims to examine the characteristics and mechanisms of volunteering of immigrants in China, paying special attention to the connection between discrimination and religious participation, the social resource behind religious involvement, and their relationship with volunteer participation. This shift allows us to examine whether immigrant volunteer participation in developing countries like China still aligns with that in developed countries and whether previous theories are still applicable. Moreover, China is currently committed to promoting social co-governance. The findings of this study have significant implications for encouraging volunteer behavior among the general population, especially international immigrants, and for promoting the social integration of international immigrants.

1.1. Religion and Volunteer Participation

Volunteering was commonly employed in everyday communication language and among policymakers in Western societies; ongoing academic debates persisted regarding the specific activities encompassed by this terminology (Musick and Wilson 2008). The vast majority of scholars believed that volunteers referred to individuals engaged in any activity in which they freely dedicated their time to benefit another person, group, or organization. However, volunteering was a complex and ambiguous phenomenon that was not delineated and spanned a wide variety of activities, organizations, and sectors. To some extent, it referred to any activity in which time was given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization (Wilson 2000), which placed volunteering within a civic engagement and, more broadly, an active citizenship paradigm. Adler and Goggin's conceptualization of civic engagement, for example, resonated with the definition of volunteering: an engaged

citizen actively involved themselves in the affairs of a community, to enhance the well-being of others or contribute to the community's long-term development (Adler and Goggin 2005).

In this article, we defined volunteering as unpaid activities that were performed out of free will for the benefit of others beyond kinship ties (Hustinx et al. 2014). This conceptualization aligned with the sociological volunteering framework put forth by Wilson and Musick (Wilson and Musick 1997). At the core of their volunteering theory lied a unique premise: the mere presence of human and social capital did not typically initiate one's inclination to volunteer; an ethical impulse or moral catalyst was often indispensable. Those who engaged in volunteer work often viewed it as a moral imperative, a demonstration of their commitment to being a virtuous and ethical individual. This ethos of goodwill served as a valuable reservoir from which to draw for volunteering efforts (Wilson and Musick 1997).

The topic of volunteer motivation (MTV) was extensively explored in the realm of volunteer research (Handy and Hustinx 2009). Despite the varied approaches to studying MTV, researchers consistently uncovered that MTV was a multifaceted interaction encompassing both altruistic and self-interested factors (Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen 1991; Wuthnow 1991).

When it came to elucidating the variations in motivations for volunteering, the inclination towards altruistic motives was predominantly linked with religious affiliations and beliefs. Altruism held a significant value in the teachings of numerous religions, emphasizing selflessness and a sense of duty towards the less fortunate. Essentially, this encouraged individuals who were religiously inclined to partake in social endeavors, such as volunteering (Batson et al. 1993; Ellison 1992; Graham and Haidt 2010). Wuthnow (Wuthnow 1991) observed a robust correlation between belief and engagement in acts of benevolence. Volunteering served as a significant avenue for the expression of religious beliefs and values (Wood and Hougland 1990).

Almost all major religions, despite differences in doctrine, advocate universal love, emphasize donation, and encourage participation in volunteer activities, thus promoting altruistic behavior. Charity, service, and helping those in need are central tenets of Christian denominations in the United States. Individuals who felt their religious beliefs were important to their identity were also likely to align with values central to religious congregational volunteers (Unruh and Sider 2005; Ammerman 2007). In Islam, charitable giving was exemplified through *Sadaka* (voluntary charity) and *Zakat* (mandatory almsgiving). These acts of charity promoted the welfare of the less fortunate. Charitable giving in Islam informed volunteering by inspiring Muslims to actively engage in community service, such as providing food, shelter, and medical care to those in need (Kayikci 2020; Peucker 2020; Peucker and Kayikci 2020; Hustinx et al. 2010). Muslims' engagement within their Islamic community context might also be viewed as self-isolation.

Religion is closely related to civic and social engagement, particularly with regard to voluntary participation. Research revealed that religious Americans were more inclined to participate in activities such as charitable donations, volunteer work, and community voting (Putnam and Campbell 2010). An increasing number of studies indicated that religious social networks were a key factor in connecting religion and volunteer services. People who regularly visited religious venues were more inclined to receive invitations to engage in volunteer activities compared to individuals with less frequent attendance (Lewis et al. 2013; Becker and Dhingra 2001; Paik and Navarre-Jackson 2011; Park and Smith 2000). According to the findings of a study, 45% of those who regularly attended religious services volunteer, while only 26% of non-attendees volunteer (Putnam and Campbell 2010).

Compared to the followers of other religions, Protestants were more actively involved in volunteer activities (Lam 2002; Ruiter and De Graaf 2006). The difference could be attributed to two main factors. Firstly, Protestant churches abolished the church's hierarchy system and often divided themselves into smaller parishes, which facilitated social accountability (Hart and Dekker 2005). Secondly, Protestantism placed a greater emphasis on en-

couraging its members to pursue social responsibility (Lam 2002). The positive relationship between religious beliefs and volunteer participation had been confirmed by a substantial body of research in Western countries (Wuthnow 2004; Vermeer and Scheepers 2012).

Religion was considered to be the most significant predictor variable for volunteer participation, as the greater the religious involvement, the higher the number of individuals engaged in volunteer service activities (Hustinx et al. 2014). Two main mechanisms explained the positive relationship between religion and volunteer participation: religious beliefs and religious practice. On the one hand, religious doctrine often conveyed values of altruism and concern for others, emphasizing the importance of helping and caring for those in need. Individuals with religious beliefs were more likely to internalize these behavioral norms, increasing their likelihood of becoming volunteers. Engaging in volunteer activities was a significant manifestation of internalizing and adhering to these principles. Theological beliefs played a pivotal role in shaping the level and destination of contributions. Individuals adhering to more conservative theological beliefs tended to allocate more of their donations to religious organizations, while those with more liberal beliefs tended to favor secular charitable entities (Lunn et al. 2001). Religiosity and religious orientation appeared to more directly influence religious giving than secular giving.

On the other hand, in religious practice, attendance at religious services has been found to be of crucial importance. Rather than religious conviction, religious networks emphasized the role of social connections among religious individuals. The frequency of attending religious services, which tended to vary among different age groups, stood out as a significant predictor of charitable giving within religious contexts (Wilhelm et al. 2007). Those who regularly participated in religious rituals and activities enhanced their connections with religious practitioners. They gained more information and encouragement regarding volunteer service from their religious community and were more likely to engage in volunteer activities (Ruiter and De Graaf 2006). Based on these findings, we propose two hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1. *There is a close connection between religious beliefs and volunteer participation among immigrants; different religious beliefs have varying impacts on volunteer participation.*

Hypothesis 2. *Religious service attendance has a positive impact on volunteering.*

1.2. Social Resources and Volunteer Participation

Social resources were essential for volunteering, as individuals with extensive social networks had a higher likelihood of engaging in volunteer work (Rossi 2001; Wilson and Musick 1997). Furthermore, more sociable individuals were more willing to volunteer. Additionally, there was a positive correlation between the time spent in socializing with friends and family and volunteering (Bowman 2004; Putnam 2000; Wilson and Musick 1997). Similarly, being a member of organizations and having associational ties encouraged volunteering. Engaging in organizational activities helped broaden one's social network, offered information regarding volunteering opportunities, and, in some cases, might even necessitate volunteering. Furthermore, consistently being approached and asked to volunteer was among the most influential factors predicting volunteer participation (Freeman 1997; Bowman 2004; Musick and Wilson 2008).

Many studies had found a positive association among attendance at religious services, congregational involvement, and the level of volunteering (Lam 2002; Wilson and Musick 1997). However, recent research indicated that social networks played a crucial role in the relationship between religious beliefs and volunteering. Social networks could moderate the effect of involvement and were more powerful predictors of volunteering than beliefs or values (Lewis et al. 2013; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Religious participation expanded an individual's social network, increased their exposure to volunteering opportunities, and ultimately increased their likelihood to participate in volunteer activities.

Social networks, rather than beliefs, dominated as the mechanism leading to volunteering, and it was the social networks formed within congregations that made congregation

members more likely to volunteer (Becker and Dhingra 2001). Putnam and Campbell demonstrated that individuals closely connected to religious networks were more likely to increase their level of civic engagement, while those with fewer connections to religious networks exhibited lower levels of civic participation (Putnam and Campbell 2010).

The social resource theory explained why individuals with higher socioeconomic status were more inclined to engage in social participation. People with higher socioeconomic status tended to participate in more social organizations and were more active within these organizations (Wilson and Musick 1997). Additionally, social networks helped us understand why extroverted individuals were more willing to engage in social participation. Extraverted individuals with more acquaintances participated in more clubs and organizations, which in turn provided them with more opportunities to engage in volunteer activities (Herzog and Morgan 1993).

However, the likelihood of being asked to volunteer was not evenly distributed among individuals. Research suggested that individuals with higher levels of education and wealth were more likely to be approached for volunteering opportunities (Brady et al. 1999). Furthermore, women, homeowners, individuals with children at home, and those residing in rural areas were recruited more frequently for volunteer work (Bryant et al. 2003). It had been found that recruitment through close relationships or strong ties tended to be particularly effective. People were more inclined to decline or overlook volunteer requests from acquaintances with weaker connections. In contrast to individuals recruited through weak connections, those who were approached by close friends or family members tended to volunteer for a greater number of hours and engage in a wider range of volunteer activities (Musick and Wilson 2008). The recruitment process within religious networks deserved particular attention, as being personally asked to volunteer was identified as one of the most influential factors in predicting volunteer engagement (Freeman 1997; Musick and Wilson 2008).

How did religious networks foster volunteering? There were generally two main explanations. The first perspective emphasized the social resources and social capital that were generated within religious networks. The second explanation revolved around the influence of social norms and shared social identities. On the one hand, religious networks played a crucial role in generating social resources. Churches served as spaces where like-minded individuals, including friends and family members, came together and actively involved themselves in social and political issues. Regular churchgoers tended to have broader social networks and enjoy stronger social support compared to those who did not engage in religious activities. Moreover, religious networks served as effective channels for recruitment. By participating in religious congregations and engaging with the networks, individuals could expand their social resources, thereby enticing more people to become involved (Bradley 1995; Ellison and George 1994). On the other hand, religious networks might foster particularly strong norms of altruism and reciprocity (Smidt 2003; Lewis et al. 2013). Participation in religious networks fostered the creation of bonding social capital, increasing the likelihood of successful recruitment attempts (Paik and Navarre-Jackson 2011). The normative influence present in religious networks created peer pressure to accept volunteer requests (Bekkers and Schuyt 2008). As Putnam and Campbell suggested, “religiously based ties are morally freighted in a way that most secular ties are not, so that pleas for good works . . . seem more appropriate and weightier than comparable requests from a coworker or someone you know from the gym” (Putnam and Campbell 2010).

Hypothesis 3. *People with more social participation are more inclined to volunteer.*

2. Data, Variables, and Model

2.1. Yiwu as a New Host City for International Migrants

Yiwu was a county-level city in the middle of Zhejiang Province, with a strong commercial atmosphere in its history. International merchants initially arrived in Yiwu for the

purchase of small commodities under the guidance of Northwestern and Xinjiang Muslims. Since China entered the World Trade Organization, it has gradually evolved into a popular hub for the procurement of small commodities and has quickly become a global commodity trading center in just a few decades. Although Yiwu was only a small or medium-sized city, nearly 500,000 overseas merchants came to Yiwu to purchase goods every year, and more than 13,000 overseas merchants lived in Yiwu (Hu 2018). Currently, international migrants registered in Yiwu came from nearly 219 countries and regions around the world, mainly from the Middle East, Africa, India in South Asia, South Korea, and Japan in East Asia. There were also merchants from Europe, Latin America, North America, and Oceania. Most of them were Muslims, and, even though they were far away from their home country, they still devoutly engaged in religious worship activities. However, due to the restrictions imposed by Chinese law and the differences in ceremonial traditions, different religious groups had varying forms of participation in religious activities. Muslims, apart from attending the Friday congregational prayer at the mosque, also engaged in various collective activities at fixed religious venues within their residential communities at other times. On the other hand, Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, were required to attend formal religious services at designated places of worship on weekends. This difference to some extent influenced their engagement in social activities. Muslims, influenced more profoundly by their religious organizations, were more willing to participate in various internal organizational activities, including volunteering. In contrast, Christians, due to their higher degree of secularization, engaged in a wider array of social activities, both organized and individual. Therefore, Yiwu is a good place for research on international migrants, as immigration are highly diverse.

2.2. Data

Data used in this study are from the Survey of Foreigners Residing in China (SFRC2018) Yiwu sub-sample. The SFRC study was initiated by Sun Yat-Sen University in 2016, and a follow-up study was conducted in Yiwu in 2019 by Zhejiang Normal University. Lacking a sample frame of foreigners in China has always been a headache for quantitative researchers, so, instead of using random sampling, the SFRC Yiwu research team recruited respondents through convenience sampling. To be specific, in the summer of 2019, the research team spent a month in the reception hall of the Exit or Entry Administrations of Public Security in Yiwu City, conducting a questionnaire survey. They introduced the goals of the SFRC study to foreigners, and approximately one-third of the foreigners participated in the study. There were a total of 980 valid cases in the Yiwu sub-sample. Information on respondents' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, employment status, immigration experience, health status, and social life in China has been collected (Fan et al. 2020). The survey targeted respondents without Chinese citizenship or holding a Chinese visa valid for over 3 months. Since the major service that Exit or Entry Administrations of Public Security institutes offered to foreigners was visa extension, most of our respondents were international immigrants who had resided in China for at least 3 months.

2.3. Variables

2.3.1. Dependent Variable

Volunteer participation. In the questionnaire, there was a question asking about their volunteer participation, "whether a respondent participated in volunteer activities in Yiwu city". The answers were yes or no; we coded them 1 and 0 in the analysis.

2.3.2. Explanatory Variables

In this study, *religion* was measured by two variables, namely, *religious affiliation* and *religious meeting*. Social resources were also measured by two variables, including *associations in hometown* and *ethnic associations in Yiwu*.

Religious affiliation was measured by asking respondents to identify their religion; the available answers were Catholic, Protestantism, Islam, Buddhism, Daoism, other religion, and no religion.

Religious meeting was a dichotomous variable, asking immigrants whether they had attended a religious meeting in China. The alternative answers were yes or no.

Ethnic associations in Yiwu were represented as a dichotomous variable, determined by querying immigrants about their involvement in immigrant chambers of commerce or other immigrant associations. The alternative answers were yes or no.

Associations in hometown, as a dichotomous variable, was measured by asking immigrants whether they participated in any kinds of association in their hometown; the alternative answers were yes or no.

Discrimination was also a binary question, expecting either “yes” or “no”, by asking whether international immigrants in China perceived being discriminated against. The relevant variables are described in Table 1; see Table 1 for all descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics by Participation Status.

	Nonparticipant	Volunteer Participation Participant	Chi ² Test <i>p</i> -Value
Age groups			0.055
<21	3.20%	4.90%	
21–30	41.90%	45.90%	
31–40	35.90%	29.90%	
41–50	13.00%	15.10%	
>50	6.00%	4.10%	
Gender			0.155
Male	89.10%	91.70%	
Female	10.90%	8.30%	
Educational attainment			0.114
Illiteracy	0.80%	1.40%	
Elementary school	2.10%	1.90%	
Middle school	4.30%	3.30%	
High school	18.60%	13.60%	
College or above	74.30%	79.80%	
Chinese fluency			<0.001
Know nothing	13.6%	5.0%	
know a little	43.2%	31.7%	
Good, enough for daily life	28.7%	40.6%	
Fluent	14.6%	22.7%	
Marital status			0.029
Married	54.70%	47.80%	
With partner	3.80%	3.10%	
Single	41.50%	49.20%	
Attended associations in hometown			<0.001
No	75.70%	60.90%	
Yes	24.30%	39.10%	
Attended religious meetings in Yiwu			<0.001
No	87.30%	60.70%	
Yes	12.70%	39.30%	
Attended ethnic associations in Yiwu			<0.001
No	77.36%	54.55%	
Yes	22.64%	45.45%	
Perceived discrimination			0.866
No	61.60%	62.00%	
Yes	38.40%	38.00%	

2.3.3. Control Variables

The control variables included gender, age, education level, Chinese proficiency, and marital status. Sex was a dichotomous variable. Age was divided into 5 age groups based

on the respondents' answers. They were, respectively, under 21 years old, 21–30 years old, 31–40 years old, 41–50 years old, and above 50 years old. Educational level was an ordinal variable, which was divided into five ordinal groups: illiteracy, elementary school, middle school, high school, and college or above. Chinese proficiency was also an ordinal variable, which was categorized into four ordinal groups: fluent, good, know a little, and know nothing. Marital status was measured as a categorical variable; optional answers were arranged by married, single, and with a partner.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics of Participants and Nonparticipants

These international immigrants came from various regions such as Africa, the Middle East, Europe, the Americas, and Asia. Among them, 19.61% were from Africa, 42.24% from the Middle East, 8.51% from Europe and the Americas, and 29.63% from Asia. In terms of specific numbers, the top five countries from the Middle East were Yemen, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Palestine. Among the top African countries were Kenya, Mali, Somalia, and Sudan. The Asian countries with the highest numbers were India, Pakistan, and Nepal, while European and American countries had relatively fewer immigrants, with Russia and Switzerland being the top two (Supplementary Tables S1 and S2).

Before conducting regression analysis, we compared descriptive statistics of participants and nonparticipants in volunteer activities. From the categorical variables, we used cross-tabulation and chi-square tests to examine variation across groups. Age distribution and educational attainment did not vary significantly between participants and nonparticipants. Around 80% of all four groups of immigrants were 21 to 40 years old, and the educational attainment of over 70% of all four groups was college or above, indicating a high degree of migrant selectivity. This also implied that Yiwu was still in the early stages of immigration. According to the general patterns of immigration, during the early stages of immigration, it was typically only those who possessed more wealth, higher education levels, and higher socio-economic status who were more likely to successfully immigrate. While there were no significant variation between the gender proportion of participants and nonparticipants (around 90% of both groups were male), a higher proportion of ethnic association participants than nonparticipants were male (95.2% compared to 87.6%). The fluency in Chinese was positively associated with participation rates. Immigrants who participated in volunteer activities had a higher likelihood of being single than nonparticipants (49.2% compared to 41.5%), while participants and nonparticipants in activities organized by ethnic associations had a similar marital composition. Both association participation back in their hometown and religious meetings in Yiwu were positively associated with the social participation of immigrants. The chance of being discriminated against was about the same for participants and nonparticipants. Participants in ethnic association activities were more likely than nonparticipants to feel discriminated against in China.

3.2. Logistic Regression Results

The results of Model 1 showed that the different types of religious belief and religious participation significantly affected the volunteering participation of foreigners. In particular, when compared to Protestantism, there was a slightly lower likelihood of voluntary participation among followers of Islam and other religions, with no significant difference observed among adherents of Taoism, Buddhism, and other faiths. This indicated that Hypothesis 1 was confirmed.

In addition, religious participation could promote the participation of volunteers. When compared to individuals who did not attend religious ceremonies, those who frequently did so were 4.43 times more likely to engage in volunteer activities. This meant that Hypothesis 2 was confirmed.

The results of Model 2 showed that, after adding social resources variables, religious beliefs and participation still had significant impacts on their volunteering participation. Meanwhile, the results also showed that both the pre-migration and post-migration social

networks of foreigners had significant impacts on their volunteering participation. Specifically, if foreigners frequently participated in various community activities in their home country before migration, they would continue to participate in volunteering activities after coming to China. Participation in hometown community activities before migration could promote their volunteering participation. At the same time, after migrating to China, if they continued to participate in various ethnic association activities, it would still positively promote their volunteering activities in China. This indicated that participation in social activities by foreigners could positively promote their volunteering participation in China.

The results of Models 3 and 4 showed that, after adding the variable of immigrant perception of discrimination in the destination society, previous religious beliefs, religious participation activities, social networks, and social resources variables still had significant impacts on immigrants' volunteering participation in China. At the same time, we also found that there was no direct correlation between the social discrimination variable itself and volunteering participation, but social discrimination could promote immigrants' participation in religious activities, and the development of religious activities promoted their volunteering participation. While social discrimination might not have a direct impact on volunteering participation, it did exert an indirect influence on volunteering to some extent. This indicated that Hypothesis 3 was confirmed. See Table 2 below.

Table 2. Logit Regression Models Predicting Volunteering.

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Religious affiliation (Protestantism = 0)				
Catholic	−0.801 (0.519)	−0.830 (0.533)	−0.844 (0.534)	−0.844 (0.534)
Islam	−1.267 *** (0.450)	−1.319 *** (0.461)	−1.303 *** (0.461)	−1.303 *** (0.461)
Taoism	1.513 (1.030)	1.449 (1.109)	1.465 (1.119)	1.465 (1.119)
Buddhism	−0.977 (0.951)	−1.172 (0.968)	−1.179 (0.966)	−1.179 (0.966)
Other religions	−0.691 (0.543)	−0.734 (0.554)	−0.731 (0.553)	−0.731 (0.553)
Associations in hometown (No = 0)		0.629 *** (0.234)	0.615 *** (0.235)	0.615 *** (0.235)
Religious meeting (No = 0)	1.488 *** (0.237)	1.010 *** (0.257)		
Ethnic associations (No = 0)		1.029 *** (0.237)	1.015 *** (0.238)	1.015 *** (0.238)
Discrimination (No = 0)				0.179 (0.316)
1.Discrimination × 1.Attended religious meetings			1.161 *** (0.372)	0.982 ** (0.434)
0.Discrimination × 1.Attended religious meetings			0.989 *** (0.309)	0.989 *** (0.309)
1.Discrimination × 0.Attended religious meetings			0.179 (0.316)	
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	−2.598 * (1.503)	−2.986 * (1.600)	−3.064 * (1.621)	−3.064 * (1.621)
N	720	720	720	720

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

4.1. Discussion

4.1.1. Association between Religion, Social Resource, and International Immigrants' Volunteering

Through analyzing empirical data from a survey conducted in Yiwu, this study revealed the relationships between religion, social capital, and volunteer participation. The study found that there was a strong connection between various aspects of religion, such as religious beliefs and the organization of religious activities, and volunteer participation.

Social capital and social networks also had a positive influence on immigrant volunteer participation. The specific conclusions were as follows:

Firstly, religion had a significant influence on immigrant volunteer participation. Specifically, not only did religious belief promote immigrant volunteering, but participation in religious activities also positively affected immigrant volunteering in China. On the one hand, although there was a close connection between religious beliefs and immigrant volunteer activities, different religious beliefs had different effects on volunteer activities. In relative terms, Muslims and Catholics were less likely to participate in volunteer activities than Protestants. This conclusion was consistent with previous research in the United States, which showed that different religious types had different impacts on volunteer activities. Some studies showed that Protestants were more willing to participate in volunteer activities than other believers because the Protestant Church had no hierarchy and usually divided itself into smaller parishes, which were more suitable for social control and sanctions. However, it also encouraged its members to fulfill social responsibilities more than other religions (Wuthnow 2004; Lam 2002). Other studies had shown that the members of conservative churches were more likely to participate in volunteer activities than those of liberal churches. Yeung found that Lutheran members had the lowest probability of participating in volunteer activities through religious participation and that volunteer activities had little help in linking and bonding social capital accumulation. Conversely, the members of Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses obtained the most social capital by participating in volunteer activities (Yeung 2004). However, this conclusion contradicted the numerous previous findings in Europe that suggested a positive association between Islam and volunteer activities (Day 2016; Peucker 2020; Peucker and Kayikci 2020; Hustinx et al. 2010; Kayikci 2020; Handy and Hustinx 2009). To delve into the reasons, apart from the unique forms of donation associated with Islam and the closed characteristics of volunteer activities, as indicated in previous research (Kayikci 2016, 2020), which might lead to misunderstandings in Western societies, this might also involve the measurement and misinterpretation of the variable of volunteer behavior in this study. In this study, we merely conducted a comparative survey asking whether individuals in Yiwu engaged in volunteer activities. Concerning this general question, many Muslims might consider it as inquiring about organized collective volunteer activities rather than individual volunteer activities. Consequently, many Muslims might choose "No," even though they were involved in some volunteer activities. However, individuals from other religions with a higher degree of secularization did not tend to have similar misunderstandings about their participation in volunteer activities.

On the other hand, religious activities significantly promoted immigrant volunteer participation. Immigrants who frequently participated in religious rituals or activities were more likely to participate in volunteer activities. This conclusion was also consistent with previous research, which suggested that volunteering was not driven by church members themselves, but by religious rituals and activities (Bowman 2004; Rossi 2001; Wilson and Musick 1997; Ruiter and De Graaf 2006). Frequent participation in religious rituals and activities increased contact among religious people, thus increasing the likelihood of obtaining information about volunteer services and being asked to participate in volunteer services. In addition, people who frequently went to religious places were more willing to participate in volunteer activities than those who did not go often (Becker and Dhingra 2001; Lewis et al. 2013; Paik and Navarre-Jackson 2011; Park and Smith 2000; Putnam and Campbell 2010).

Secondly, there was a close connection between social resources (social networks) and volunteer activities, and social networks promoted immigrant volunteer activities. The analysis of this study showed that the social networks of immigrants, regardless of whether they were formed before or after migration, helped promote their volunteer activities in China. Specifically, if immigrants frequently participated in various community activities in their home country before migration, they were more likely to be enthusiastic about participating in volunteer activities even after coming to China. Those who frequently

participated in their ethnic or interest groups in China were also more enthusiastic about participating in volunteer activities. Immigrants who participated in various social activities or organizations might have two possibilities. First, people who participated in more social activities were more likely to meet more people, thereby expanding their social networks. Previous research had shown that people with wider social networks usually had more social resources and were more likely to participate in social participation activities such as volunteering (Bowman 2004; Rossi 2001; Wilson and Musick 1997). Second, more participation in social activities indicated that they were good at social communication. People who were good at social communication were usually more willing to participate in volunteer activities because volunteering could also meet their social interaction needs (Janoski et al. 1998; Smidt et al. 2008; Robert Wuthnow 2012). In the meantime, outgoing people could make acquaintances with more people and participated in more clubs and organizations; they, in turn, had more opportunities to participate in volunteer activities (Herzog and Morgan 1993).

Additionally, although social discrimination against immigrants in China was not directly related to volunteer activities, it could promote their participation in religious activities in China, and participation in religious activities could significantly promote their volunteer activities. Many previous studies had shown that social networks could provide immigrants with certain social support, including material and spiritual support, especially when immigrants encountered discrimination in the host country. They would seek support from their own ethnic group (Szaflarski and Bauldry 2019; Chuatico and Haan 2020; Zhou et al. 2016). This study revealed that, when immigrants faced social discrimination, they would seek social support from religious organizations, which could provide them with material or spiritual social support. However, at the same time, an unexpected consequence was that they also participated more in volunteer activities, due to the frequent participation of immigrants in religious and other activities and the influence of religious indoctrination or practice mechanisms.

4.1.2. Mechanism of Religion and Social Resources

The influence of religion, social resources, and social discrimination on volunteer activities might be attributed to several different mechanisms. Behind the influence of religious beliefs on volunteer activities lied the role of religious indoctrination. Religious doctrines typically conveyed values of altruism and concern for others, emphasizing the importance of helping others and those in need. Individuals with religious beliefs were more likely to internalize these behavioral norms, thus increasing their likelihood of becoming volunteers. Engaging in volunteer activities was the most prominent manifestation of internalizing and adhering to these principles.

The promotion of religious participation by social capital revealed the practical mechanism of how religion influences volunteer activities. In religious practices, the religious network emphasized the role of social connections among religious individuals. People who regularly participated in religious ceremonies and activities increased their contacts with fellow religious individuals, gaining more information and appeals related to volunteer services, as well as inspiration and group pressure from the religious community. As a result, they were more likely to participate in volunteer activities frequently (Ruiter and De Graaf 2006).

Why did people with larger social networks tended to have higher levels of social participation? Researchers in social capital have found that individuals who were more involved in social networks were seen as capable of developing more civic skills, enhancing a sense of political efficacy and general trust, and encouraging civic spirit, volunteerism, and other forms of civic engagement. On the one hand, an individual's social network status influenced their mobilization and utilization of social information and resources. Being in a central position within a social network provided access to a greater amount of information and interpersonal pathways, as well as more channels to connect with others within the network. This advantage of network centrality might increase an individual's

sense of autonomous participation and strengthen their confidence in self-control and autonomy, leading to a higher degree of reliance placed on them by others. On the other hand, social networks facilitated trust and solidarity within organizations, leading to shared expectations and social cohesion, which in turn generated a sense of collective efficacy. As a result, members within the network increased their emotional dependence on the organization, thereby promoting frequent participation in civic activities.

Social networks, rather than beliefs, dominated as the primary mechanism leading to volunteer service, and it was the social networks formed within congregations that made congregational members more likely to volunteer. Putnam and Campbell demonstrated that individuals closely connected to religious networks were more likely to increase their level of civic engagement, while those with fewer connections to religious networks exhibited lower levels of civic participation (Putnam and Campbell 2010).

It should be noted that, in Western societies like the United States, there has been a trend of secularization in recent decades, with the declining influence of religion in people's lives. Furthermore, as the influence of religion weakened, the participation rate in volunteer activities actually increased, with the proportion of non-church members among volunteers multiplying. Although scholars have focused on the spillover effect of religion, which suggested that individuals participating in church activities could bring friends who did not participate in religious activities into volunteer activities, and have pointed out that contemporary religion still played a strong role in promoting volunteer participation even as the number of religious organization members decreased, the impact of religious participation on volunteer participation has weakened significantly compared to the past (Lim and MacGregor 2012).

In China, as a society with relatively low religiousness and high secularism, we could observe that, although different types of religious beliefs had different influences on volunteer activities, the presence or absence of religious beliefs did not bring about substantial differences in volunteer activities. Theoretically, in a society with a high degree of secularization, the participation of immigrant volunteers might be influenced by both the religious influences in their home country and the influences in the host country. However, the results of this study showed that deeply ingrained religious values and behaviors among immigrants might not shift with changes in their place of residence or living.

The conclusion of this study once again confirmed that both religious beliefs and religious practices significantly influenced the volunteer participation of international immigrants in China. It also contributed to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between perceived discrimination among international immigrants in the Chinese context, religious practices, and social resources, as well as the mechanisms of how their interactions affected volunteer participation. The study revealed that, while perceived discrimination among international immigrants did not directly influence volunteer participation, it did encourage them to engage in religious activities to establish social networks for support, thereby enriching their social resources and, subsequently, promoting volunteer participation.

This study also had some limitations: certain variables such as the measurement of volunteer activities and religious activities were overly general and need further refinement in future research. Additionally, due to policy and practical constraints, the data used in this study were derived from a single typical city in China. If larger-scale survey data could be obtained in the future, this would not only contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the social integration of international immigrants in China, but also facilitated international comparisons, thereby revealing unique behavioral characteristics and integration mechanisms of international immigrants in Chinese society.

4.2. Conclusions

Based on an analysis of survey data from foreigners in Yiwu, China, it was found that the types of religious beliefs and the frequency of participation in religious meetings significantly influenced immigrants' volunteering. Furthermore, there was a strong connection

between social resources (social capital/social networks) and volunteer activities—social networks facilitated immigrant volunteer activities. Additionally, although social discrimination against immigrants in China was not directly related to volunteer activities, it could promote immigrant participation in religious activities in China. In turn, participation in religious activities significantly promoted their volunteer participation.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/rel14101262/s1>, Table S1: Countries of origin for international immigrants; Table S2: Regions of origin for international immigrants.

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Article

Religious Ideology and Clientelist Linkage in the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract: The literature on clientelism, the informal exchange of benefits for political support, has proliferated over the last three decades. However, the existing literature largely ignores the role of religion in shaping clientelism in contemporary politics. In particular, few attempts have been made to explore the relationship between religious ideology and clientelism at the party level: How does political parties' religious ideology impact their clientelist linkages with citizens? This study uses cross-national data of parties in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) from the V-Party database (1970–2019) to answer this question. Our findings reveal that religious parties are more clientelist than secular parties in the MENA. Particularly, parties' ties with social organizations mediate the relationship between religious ideology and clientelism. This study extends the literature on the impact of religion on informal political institutions by focusing on the ideology and linkage strategy of political parties in the MENA.

Keywords: religious ideology; clientelism; party–voter linkage; Middle East and North Africa

1. Introduction

The literature on clientelism has burgeoned over the last three decades. In swiftly evolving societies, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, political decay has occurred to varying degrees (Huntington 1968), with clientelism emerging as one of the most notable expressions. This phenomenon is closely related to the weakness of political institutions and a political culture characterized by strong traditional hierarchies. The concept of clientelism has roots in the pre-modern informal patron–client relationship as a mechanism for exchanging benefits (Scott 1972). In contemporary politics, clientelism is defined as a form of linkage strategy through which political parties distribute targeted benefits in exchange for electoral support (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Hicken 2011; Stokes et al. 2013). The existing literature explains the variations in clientelism mainly from two theoretical perspectives: the state and party levels. State-level factors primarily emphasize the impacts of economic development, democratic experience, and election competitiveness on clientelism (Bustikova and Corduneanu-Huci 2011; Robinson and Verdier 2013; Keefer 2007; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Schady 2000). Some scholars have examined the influence of various features of party organizations on clientelist linkages at the party level. Parties' share of power in national decision-making institutions is correlated with their ability to use clientelist linkages, with centralized parties being more likely to employ clientelist strategies (Yıldırım and Kitschelt 2020; Kitschelt and Wang 2014).

In addition to the factors mentioned above, political culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, and norms about politics within a society, which also plays a crucial role in shaping the nature of political institutions and practices (Huntington 1968), including the prevalence of clientelism. In particular, an increasing number of scholars have focused on the influence of religion on clientelism, given that religion forms deep-rooted values that underlie more

ephemeral political norms (Laitin 1978; Williams 1996). Some studies have highlighted religion as a cultural attribute that affects the prevalence of clientelism in societies (Paldam 2001; Ko and Moon 2014). Religion plays a legitimizing role in employing clientelist strategies in Christian Mediterranean countries and Latin American countries, thereby facilitating such exchanges within society. Religious sources are invoked to declare moral judgments while administering civil affairs of government (Graziano 1973; Markoviti and Molokotos-Liederman 2017; Marangudakis 2019; Blancarte 2023). In addition, clientelism is particularly prevalent in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and Islamism, as one of the major political cultures in the region, has had a profound effect on clientelism (Langohr 2001; Clark 2004; Lust 2009). However, the most recent work by Corstange and York (2021) compared Muslim and non-Muslim countries and showed that clientelism is not linked to cultural characteristics, but rather to its pervasiveness in Muslim society. Other studies have examined the impact of clientelism through the lens of the relationship between religion and state (Sommer et al. 2013; Tusalem 2015; Patrikios and Xezonakis 2019). Among them, Patrikios and Xezonakis (2019) explored the relationship between government intervention in religious competition and clientelism and concluded that uncompetitive religious markets were more likely to favor clientelism.

Despite the growing literature on the impacts of religion on clientelism, the majority of research regarding the role of religion in explaining variations in clientelism focuses on the state level, largely neglecting the party-level dimension of religion and its effects on clientelism. Specifically, comparative studies across countries that examine the influence of Islamic ideology on clientelism are notably lacking. Religion as a political resource is both a culture and an ideology (Williams 1996). In the modern political system, political parties are important actors in the exchange of clientelism. Therefore, a more detailed study on the impact of parties' religious ideology on clientelism is warranted. Religious ideology takes a crucial place in party competition across regions, from Evangelicalism and Protestantism in the United States and Latin America to Christianity in Mediterranean countries and Western Europe (Woodberry and Smith 1998; Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Reich and Dos Santos 2013; Delehanty et al. 2019). Islamism, as a religious ideology, is a constant and prominent feature of party politics in the MENA (Sarfati 2013; Mohseni and Wilcox 2016). Due to the region's long colonial history and top-down modernization movement, the Islamist-secular divide has become an important dimension of party ideology in the MENA (Hashemi 2009). Furthermore, clientelism is prevalent in the functioning of society in MENA countries with weak democratic institutions and a lack of electoral accountability (De Elvira et al. 2018). Therefore, the MENA region has become one of the most representative regions for studying the impacts of religious ideology, particularly Islamism, on clientelism. However, scholars of MENA studies have not paid sufficient attention to the association between the party's Islamist ideology and clientelism across countries. The following question remains unanswered: How does parties' religious ideology impact their clientelist linkages with citizens in the MENA? We approach the question from a functionalist perspective, emphasizing the social role of religion, wherein religious ideology serves as an important social tool in clientelistic exchanges (Berger 1974; Durkheim 1995; Schilbrack 2013). Here, religious ideology can be defined as a set of beliefs and values rooted in religious traditions that shape a party's policy positions and organizational behaviors (Williams 1996). We employ the concept of "religious parties" as encompassing parties that hold an ideology or a worldview based on religion and mobilize support based on citizens' religious identity (Brocker and Künkler 2013).

Therefore, this paper aims to examine whether religious ideology explains the variations in clientelism at the party level in the Middle East from 1970 to 2019. We investigate the unanswered research question with data from the Varieties of Party Identity and Organization (V-party) dataset, which is the most comprehensive database covering cross-national data of political parties in the MENA. We find that political parties with stronger religious ideologies are more likely to employ clientelist linkages in the Middle East. Additionally, the association between parties' religious ideology and clientelistic practices is mediated

by their ties to social organizations. The remainder of this article is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical background and develops testable hypotheses about the impacts of parties' religious ideology on clientelism. Section 3 introduces the data, variables, and models used in this study. Section 4 provides a statistical analysis and key findings. In the final section, we conclude with the findings, limitations, and future research directions.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

During party competitions, parties typically rely on a variety of linkage strategies to attract voters. Most models of party competition in advanced democracies assume that parties attract voters through programmatic linkages, in which they can offer broad policy packages and ideologies (Kitschelt 2000; Calvo and Murillo 2013). In programmatic politics, the policy and ideological positions provided by political parties are directed to all citizens, regardless of a citizen's voting decision in the election. In contrast to programmatic linkages, citizens can cast their votes based on the targeted benefits they receive in exchange for electoral support. Clientelist linkages involve an exchange between politicians and citizens, characterized by contingency, hierarchy, and iteration (Hicken 2011). The particularistic benefits delivered by clientelist parties can be in the form of cash transfers, consumer goods, and public jobs (Albertus 2013; Stokes et al. 2013).

Some scholars argue that parties that attempt to diversify their linkage strategies and simultaneously pursue different types of linkage will face more trade-offs. The main reason for this is that programmatic politics is based on universalistic principles, while clientelism emphasizes particularism and informal distribution, causing significant conflicts in the purpose and nature between the two (Kitschelt 2000). However, increasing research indicates that parties' ideological appeal and clientelist linkages are not mutually exclusive (Weghorst and Lindberg 2013). Political parties and politicians are rational actors that simultaneously utilize both ideological appeal and clientelist material benefits to maximize their votes in election competitions. Ideology serves as a shortcut for political parties to communicate with voters and is an important "information product" provided by political parties to voters. Voters need to rely on the ideology of political parties to understand their positions and save time in voting based on their own interests (Downs 1959). Moreover, ideology acts as a facilitator of clientelistic transactions, as ideological affinity enables parties to effectively target core voters (Schady 2000; Nichter 2010). Empirical evidence from the existing literature demonstrates that right-wing ideologies significantly influence the use of clientelism (Tzelgov and Wang 2016).

In addition to the left–right ideological spectrum, it is noteworthy that religious ideologies likewise exert influence on clientelism. In contrast to the dominance of left–right ideologies in developed democracies, the religious–secular divide has become a prominent dimension of the ideological spectrum for political parties in low- and middle-income countries, especially in the MENA countries with a long colonial history and top–down modernization processes (Hashemi 2009). The character of left–right political dynamics in the Middle East departs from the conventional framework observed in developed democracies, exhibiting a degree of inversion in traditional left–right ideological positioning. In the MENA, right-wing parties by Western political norms may advocate left-wing ideology in terms of economic intervention by the state, social welfare expenditure, and other issues (Aydoğan and Slapin 2013). Thus, the role of left–right wing ideologies in party behaviors in the region has some limits of explanatory power. In addition to this, nationalism has a significant influence on the ideological cleavage of Middle Eastern political parties. Nationalist ideology germinated after the invasion of Western colonizers and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In the MENA, nationalism has evolved in party politics into reactionary nationalism, characterized by a desire to return to a perceived previous state of national strength, and progressive nationalism, which seeks to reconcile national identity with progressive values such as emancipation and social justice (Razi 1990; Kramer 1993; Dawisha 2003).

However, despite the complex political and cultural context of the MENA, the religious–secular cleavage dominates the ideological spectrum, with even some global comparative studies supporting the unique importance of the religion–secular dimension in party competition in MENA countries (Benoit and Laver 2006). The dominance of the Islamist–secular divide in party competition in the region can be traced back to the 1970s. In the ideological spectrum dominated by the religious–secular divide in the MENA, the ideologies of most parties located at the ends of the spectrum can be labeled as “conservative/Islamist” and “secular” (Wegner and Cavatorta 2018). It is important to note that the ideological divide between the religious and the secular is not simply mapped as a linear adjustment of right-conservative and left-secular appropriation. Middle Eastern political parties sometimes espouse left-wing conservatism, melding religious principles with socialist or Marxist ideals to champion socio-economic equality and wealth redistribution under a religious framework (Walzer 2015; Fischer 2018). The Islamist parties in the MENA countries are not passively bound by religious doctrines and historical institutional legacies, but actively construct religious discourse and narratives (Hinnebusch 2017). Islamic parties strategically leverage religious ideology, frequently employing Islam as a powerful tool and symbol, in order to mobilize constituencies and establish legitimacy for their governance. Morocco’s Islamist party, the Party for Justice and Development, became the largest parliamentary party and was in power from 2012 to 2016 (Casani 2020); in Tunisia, the Islamist party, the Ennahda, became the most prominent party in parliament in the October 2011 election (Cavatorta and Merone 2013); and the Justice and Development Party in Turkey, by leveraging its strong Islamist ideological narrative, has maintained its position in power for more than two decades (Dagi 2008; Yilmaz et al. 2020).

A party’s religious ideology bolsters its use of clientelism. Firstly, the religious ideology of political parties amplifies the benefits of clientelist linkage, serving as an incentive for parties to use such strategies. Specifically, the religious ideology of a party strengthens its ability to sway voters within a specific group by offering particularistic benefits (Dixit and Londregan 1996). Religious ideology, to a certain extent, determines the types of voters that political parties target, making it more effective to deliver material benefits to specific voter groups. According to the “core voter” theory, voter party loyalty is closely related to how parties distribute resources, and parties must favor their core voters to maintain long-term electoral coalitions (Cox and McCubbins 1986). Compared to socially and economically advantaged citizens, religious ideology, especially Islamic conservatism, has a stronger appeal to voters in economically disadvantaged positions (Grewal et al. 2019). Parties with strong religious ideologies have a greater advantage in establishing clientelist linkages with lower-income voters than secular parties. They can more effectively convert material benefits into political support. Therefore, religious ideology strengthens the incentive for parties to employ clientelism tactics.

Second, religious ideology mitigates the commitment problem in the exchange process, thereby reducing the transaction costs of the clientelist linkage strategy, consequently fostering the use of clientelism. In the process of parties exchanging specific benefits for votes, parties must ensure that voters make voting decisions that favor them after receiving the benefits (Stokes 2005). To overcome this commitment issue, parties need to use various monitoring methods to evaluate whether voters fulfill their commitments and use the collected information to further reward and punish constituencies. However, the cost of monitoring is undoubtedly high (Brusco et al. 2004). Within Muslim-majority countries in the MENA, Islamism has a certain ideological hegemony in citizens’ daily lives. Here, ideological hegemony can be understood as “the ability of one group to define reality for the majority” (Cammett and Luong 2014). From the functionalist viewpoint, Islamist ideology is an essential legitimizing tool for political parties in the MENA, which provides voters with a “credible slogan” that enables political parties to justify their solutions to current social and political problems (Tessler 2011). Its functionality primarily lies in enabling political parties to portray their socio-political agendas as correct or morally grounded by invoking Islamism, such as in response to colonialism or incompetent governments.

Therefore, religious ideology enhances voters' trust in political parties, making them more likely to keep their promises after receiving material benefits. This greatly reduces the need for parties to monitor voters and the transaction costs of clientelism.

Based on the above reasoning, the first hypothesis of this paper is proposed:

Hypothesis 1. *The party's religious ideology has a significant positive effect on its clientelistic practices.*

Clientelist linkages between political parties and voters are not always established directly. These often rely on specific intermediaries to target and transfer benefits to voters. These intermediaries, often referred to as "brokers", play a pivotal role in facilitating the coordination between political parties and voters, helping the parties to embed into society. Intermediaries in the clientelistic network include party workers, government employees, businesses, and local elites, etc. Political parties can provide various benefits, such as cash, goods, and social services, to voters through different intermediaries in exchange for their electoral support (Hicken and Nathan 2020).

Social organizations also function as important intermediaries in the establishment of clientelistic networks. The distinguishing features of social organizations compared to other intermediaries are the presence of relatively unified ideological consensus and organized network structures. Social organizations can coordinate members' interest preferences and establish a collective consensus. Their preferences for specific interests make them more willing to engage with political parties that have a certain ideological orientation. In addition, social organizations have higher levels of organizational network structures, which allow them to reach a broader range of voters. Social organizations undertake the responsibility of delivering benefits to target constituencies and better monitoring citizens' voting behaviors (Holland and Palmer-Rubin 2015; Cornell and Grimes 2022).

Religious parties establish close ties with prominent social organizations through their religious ideological affinity, helping them to better employ clientelist linkages to gain political support. Specifically, parties use religious ideology to attract social organizations with similar ideological characteristics. These faith-based social organizations have a stronger ideological and interest consensus compared to other intermediaries, making them more easily attracted by the religious ideology promised by political parties. In the process of clientelist exchange, faith-based organizations take on the responsibility of channeling targeted interests to core voters and attracting votes for politicians. In the Middle East, religious organizations and Islamic business associations with strong organizational capabilities provide religious parties with a nationwide network, helping them to distribute extensive material benefits to voters and engage in clientelistic exchanges (Cammett and Issar 2010; Brooke 2019; Freedman 2020). For example, Turkey's Justice Development Party (AKP) is one of the most successful Islamist parties in the region, for which religious organizations and business associations have been important tools in establishing a wide clientelist network within the country (Arslantaş and Arslantaş 2023). The Deniz Feneri Solidarity Association is a representative Islamic charitable organization in Turkey with strong ties to the AKP as a social welfare provider and a broad popular appeal due to its Islamist faith base. The organization provided AKP funds and charitable donations to voters in the form of cash subsidies, household goods and medical services to better exchange votes for AKP in the election (Morvaridi 2013). In addition, by leveraging its ideological proximity, the AKP has formed an alliance with the Islamic business association Müstakil Sanayici ve İşadamları Derneği (MÜSİAD), which has benefited Islamic businesses through the favorable allocation of contracts and economic resources in exchange for the political support of the MÜSİAD and its employees (Ocaklı 2015; Gürakar 2016).

On the basis of the above theoretical propositions and empirical research, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. *The association between a party's religious ideology and clientelistic practices is mediated by their linkages to social organizations.*

3. Methodology

3.1. Data and Sample

This paper primarily relies on data from the Variety of Party Identity and Organization (V-party) database. This novel database provides expert-coded data on party organizations and identities for most parties in most countries from 1970 to 2019, which is gradually being widely used by scholars of party politics (Lührmann 2021; Düpont et al. 2022; Reuter 2022). Following the methodology developed by V-Dem, a panel of 711 experts assessed the policy orientations and the organizational capacity of political parties across elections in a given country in January for both 2020 and 2021. Specifically, the experts coded data for all parties that received more than 5 percent of the vote in a given election. The collated data, as provided by these experts, were then synthesized within the database utilizing the Bayesian Item Response Theory measurement model that is integral to V-Dem's approach. The database consists of data on 3467 political parties in 3151 elections in 178 countries. There are 11,898 party-election year units in 178 countries. Typically, at least four coders assessed each observation.

At present, there are limited data on political parties in the MENA. The V-party database used in this study is one of the most comprehensive databases covering political party characteristics in the MENA. We extracted data from the database of regional codes corresponding to the MENA region, obtaining unbalanced panel data covering 14 countries in the Middle East from 1970 to 2019. Hence, our study focuses on the MENA countries, comprising seven Arab republics (Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, Algeria, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen), four Arab monarchies (Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, and Morocco), and three non-Arab republics (Iran, Israel, and Turkey). Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, where political party activities are prohibited, are excluded from the samples of this study. The dataset includes 153 political parties from the aforementioned countries. The unit of analysis is "party-election-year".

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Dependent Variable

Clientelism is the dependent variable of this study. As an informal institution, clientelism operates with a certain level of opacity. There are multiple ways to measure clientelism in academia. In comparative studies at the national level, scholars often use measures such as the level of corruption and the quality of the bureaucratic system as proxies for clientelism. Expert survey ratings are currently the most used cross-national measure of clientelism at the party level. For example, the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project also uses expert ratings to measure the level of clientelism of political parties across countries, but this database does not cover most political parties in the Middle East and fails to capture long-term dynamics. The measurement of the dependent variable used in this study is based on the question in the V-party database: "To what extent do the party and its candidates provide targeted and excludable (clientelistic) goods and benefits—such as consumer goods, cash or preferential access to government services—in an effort to keep and gain votes?" The original expert rating for this measurement ranges from 0 = "Not at all" to 4 = "As its main effort" to indicate the degree, and the database converts it into a continuous variable, where higher values indicate stronger partisan clientelism.

3.2.2. Independent Variable

Religious ideology is the core independent variable in this study. Measuring party ideology in the MENA poses certain difficulties. Citizens lack relevant information about the positions of different ideological parties, and the information provided by political elites may contain significant social desirability bias. Therefore, public opinion surveys and elite surveys have a low accuracy. In addition, cross-national political text analysis

and roll-call voting analysis also have high costs and lack institutional conditions. The measurement of party ideology in the MENA using expert survey analysis has relative advantages (Aydoğan 2021). In this study, the religious ideology of political parties is measured based on the question in the V-party database: “To what extent does this party invoke God, religion, or sacred/religious texts to justify its positions?” The original expert rating ranges from 0 = “Always, or almost always” to 4 = “Never” to indicate the degree, and the variable is transformed into a continuous variable. To ensure logical consistency, the variable is reverse-adjusted, with higher values indicating a stronger religious ideology of political parties.

3.2.3. Mediating Variable

The mediating variable in this study is the ties between political parties and social organizations. The ties between political parties and social organizations are measured based on the question: “To what extent does this party maintain ties to prominent social organizations?” In the expert rating criteria, it is stated, “When evaluating the strength of ties between the party and social organizations please consider the degree to which social organizations contribute to party operations by providing material and personnel resources, propagating the party’s message to its members and beyond, as well as by directly participating in the party’s electoral campaign and/or mobilization efforts. Social organizations include: Religious organizations, trade unions/syndical organizations or cooperatives, cultural and social associations, political associations and professional and business associations”. The responses range from 0 = “does not maintain ties with prominent social organizations” to 4 = “controls prominent social organizations”, and the variable is transformed into a continuous variable.

3.2.4. Control Variables

Drawing on the existing literature, we control for indicators of other party-level factors that might influence the use of clientelist linkages. Previous studies have suggested that the party’s share of power, left–right ideology, and party centralization have impacts on its clientelistic practices. We incorporate the party’s vote share and seat share in the observed election year. We also include control for left–right ideology, given its potential impact on clientelism (Shefter 1994; Tzelgov and Wang 2016). Left–right ideology is measured based on the question: “Please locate the party in terms of its overall ideological stance on economic issues”. The original rating ranges from 0 to 6, representing the change from extreme left to center to extreme right, and is transformed into a continuous variable. This analysis controls for party centralization using the proxy variables of candidate nomination and internal cohesion. Candidate nomination is measured via the question: “Which of the following options best describes the process by which the party decides on candidates for the national legislative elections?”. The continuous variable ranges from low to high, indicating a decrease in the concentration of candidate nominations. The question for measuring internal cohesion is “To what extent do the elites in this party display disagreement over party strategies?”. The original rating ranges from 0 = “Almost complete disagreement” to 4 = “virtually no visible disagreement” and is transformed into a continuous variable. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the variables in this study.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of variables.

Variable	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Dependent Variable					
Clientelism	416	0.30	1.34	−2.29	3.15
Independent Variable					
Religious Ideology	416	1.13	1.58	−1.73	3.67
Mediating Variable					
Ties with Social Organizations	416	0.51	1.36	−2.61	3.38
Control Variables					
Vote Share	416	13.72	19.47	2.50	100
Candidate Nomination	416	−0.16	1.46	−2.84	3.36
Left–Right Ideology	416	0.23	1.34	−3.47	2.82
Seat Share	416	24.91	24.49	0	100
Internal Cohesion	416	0.47	1.22	−3.85	2.79

3.3. Model Specification

According to the research hypotheses of this article, multiple estimation models are selected for hypothesis testing. Ordinary least squares regression (OLS) is used for modeling. Considering that the sample unit is “party-election year” and the core theoretical concern of this article is variables at the party level, a fixed effects model is used in the empirical analysis to control for political, economic, and cultural differences among countries in the MENA region. The regression model is as follows:

$$\text{Clientelism} = \alpha + \beta * \text{Religious Ideology} + \theta * X + \gamma + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

In Equation (1), β is the coefficient of religious ideology, which is the unknown parameter of interest in this article. α is the intercept term, X is a set of control variables, θ is the coefficient of the control variables, γ represents country-level fixed effects, and ε is the error term.

Second, the step-up method (Baron and Kenny 1986) is used to further explore the mechanism through which religious ideology influences clientelism. In recent years, causal mediation analysis based on causal inference has been widely applied. However, due to the dependent variable being a continuous variable, this study still uses traditional mediation analysis methods (Imai et al. 2010). To test the mediating role of party–social organization ties, the model used in this paper is specified as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Ties with social organizations} = \\ \alpha_0 + \beta_0 * \text{Religious Ideology} + \theta_0 * X + \gamma_0 + \varepsilon_0 \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Clientelism} = \alpha_1 + \beta_1 * \text{Religious ideology} \\ + \lambda_0 * \text{Ties with social organizations} + \theta_1 * X + \gamma_1 + \varepsilon_1 \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

Equation (2) represents the positive effect of the party’s religious ideology on its ties with social organizations. Equation (3) represents the positive effect of ties with social organizations on clientelism. If the variable of ties with social organizations is acting as a mediator, then β_0 should be significant, and under the control of β_1 , λ_0 should also be significant. $\beta_0\lambda_0$ represents the mediating effect of the variable of ties with social organizations on clientelism.

4. Results

4.1. The Impact of Religious Ideology on Clientelism

Table 2 presents the results of the baseline regression analysis in this study. First, Model 1 adopts a pooled regression model, which shows a significant positive effect of the party’s religious ideology on clientelism. However, the pooled regression model

could potentially overlook the unobserved heterogeneity at the country level, and this heterogeneity may be correlated with the explanatory variables, leading to inconsistent estimates. Therefore, this paper adopts the fixed effects model and conducts an F-test for both models. The F-test results demonstrate that the fixed effects model, accounting for individual heterogeneity, outperforms the pooled regression model. Model 2 demonstrates that, even after controlling for other relevant variables and incorporating country-fixed effects, the party's religious ideology continues to exert a positive effect on clientelism, significantly at the 0.1% level. Specifically, holding the other conditions constant, a 1% rise in a party's religious ideology increases clientelism by 0.275%. Therefore, parties with a stronger religious ideology tend to have higher levels of clientelism, which supports Hypothesis 1. Among the control variables, vote share positively affects clientelism at the significance level of 5%. Right-wing ideology increases a party's use of clientelist linkages at the significance level of 0.1%. Candidate nomination affects clientelism at the significance level of 0.1%, indicating that parties with a higher level of power centralization in the candidate nomination process have a higher level of clientelism. A party's seat share and internal cohesion also positively affect clientelism, but they are not statistically significant.

Table 2. Results of the effect of religious ideology on clientelism.

Variables	DV: Clientelism	
	Model 1	Model 2
Religious Ideology	0.307 *** (0.037)	0.275 *** (0.034)
Vote Share	−0.008 * (0.004)	0.008 * (0.003)
Left–Right Ideology	0.146 ** (0.046)	0.161 *** (0.037)
Candidate Nomination	−0.111 ** (0.040)	−0.176 *** (0.0398)
Seat Share	0.158 *** (0.003)	0.005 (0.003)
Internal Cohesion	0.148 ** (0.048)	0.050 (0.044)
Country Fixed Effects	No	Yes
N	416	416
Adj.R ²	0.295	0.263

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$; the value in brackets is the standard error.

4.2. The Mediating Effects of Parties' Ties with Social Organizations

In Model 3 of Table 3, religious ideology positively affects a party's ties with social organizations at the significance level of 0.1%, indicating that religious ideology can strengthen a party's ties with social organizations. Similarly, in Model 4, religious ideology shows a positive effect on the party's ties with social organizations at the significance level of 0.1%. At the significance level of 1%, a party's ties with social organizations have a significant positive effect on clientelism. The influence of religious ideology on clientelism decreased from 27.5% in Model 2 to 22.6% in Model 4, indicating that a party's ties with social organizations mediate the association between religious ideology and clientelism.

Figure 1 illustrates the impact of the independent variable on the mediator, the effect of the mediator on the dependent variable, and the direct effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable. The direct effect of religious ideology on clientelism is 0.226 at the significance level of 0.1%, suggesting that religious ideology itself positively influences clientelism. The mediating effect of ties with social organizations is 0.049, which transmits 17.8% of the total impacts of a party's religious ideology on clientelism. Furthermore, the significance of the mediating effect is assessed using the Sobel test. The result indicates that

the mediating effect of ties with social organizations is significant ($p < 0.001$). Therefore, Hypothesis 2, which states that a party's ties with social organizations mediate the influence of a party's religious ideology on the use of clientelism, receives statistical support.

Table 3. Results of the mediating effects of parties' ties with social organizations.

Variables	DV: Ties with Social Organizations	DV: Clientelism
	Model 3	Model 4
Religious Ideology	0.434 *** (0.040)	0.226 *** (0.038)
Ties with Social Organizations		0.113 ** (0.042)
Vote Share	0.02 * (0.004)	0.07 * (0.003)
Left–Right Ideology	−0.196 *** (0.044)	0.183 *** (0.037)
Candidate Nomination	0.121 * (0.032)	−0.190 *** (0.040)
Seat Share	0.014 *** (0.003)	0.003 (0.003)
Internal Cohesion	0.185 *** (0.053)	0.029 (0.045)
Country Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
N	416	416
Adj.R ²	0.326	0.274

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$; the value in brackets is the standard error.

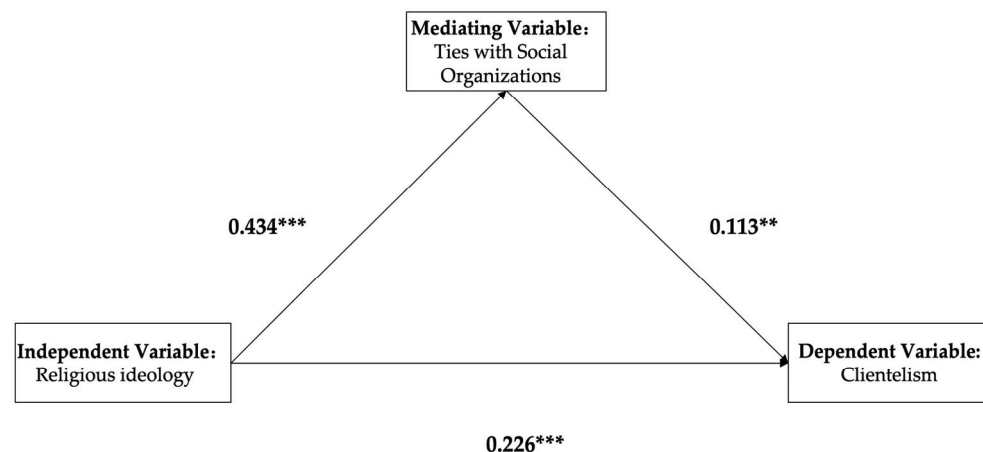


Figure 1. Mediation analysis. ** $p < 0.05$, and *** $p < 0.01$.

4.3. Heterogeneity Analysis

4.3.1. Country Heterogeneity: Dominant Religion and Economic Development

First, the dominant religion of a country may have an impact on the results of this study. Unlike most Middle Eastern countries where Islam is the dominant religion, Lebanon and Israel have certain special characteristics among the samples covered in this study. Lebanon has a distinct religious diversity, with 18 officially recognized sects, which mostly belong to Muslims and Christians (Faour 2007). It is the country with the most complex sectarian composition in the MENA, implementing a unique sectarian power-sharing system (Geha 2019). Israel is also a religiously divided country, with more than 70% of the population being Jewish and 18% Muslim. Judaism dominates in Israel, and Jewish

religious parties have a strong influence on religious, economic, and diplomatic issues (Cohen and Susser 2000; Porat and Filc 2022). Therefore, this study divides Islamic countries into one group and non-Islamic countries into another group to investigate the influence of religious ideology on clientelism. The sub-sample test results in Table 4 show that the coefficients of religious ideology are both statistically significant in Islamic countries and non-Islamic countries.

Table 4. Results by dominant religion (Islamic or not).

Variables	DV: Clientelism	
	Model 5: Islamic	Model 6: Non-Islamic
Religious Ideology	0.215 *** (0.049)	0.306 *** (0.036)
Vote Share	0.0005 (0.004)	0.016 (0.013)
Left–Right Ideology	0.347 *** (0.055)	0.052 (0.037)
Candidate Nomination	−0.298 *** (0.053)	−0.002 (0.044)
Seat Share	0.011 *** (0.003)	−0.003 (0.010)
Internal Cohesion	−0.019 (0.057)	0.113 (0.048)
Country Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
N	308	108
Adj.R ²	0.358	0.416

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; the value in brackets is the standard error.

Secondly, we divide the samples into two groups based on per capita GDP (in 2011 USD) data from the Maddison Project Database, considering the significant variations in economic development in the MENA (Wilson 1995). As shown in Table 5, religious ideology positively impacts clientelism in countries with both low-level and high-level economic development, at the significance levels of 0.1% and 0.01%, respectively. The influence of religious ideology on clientelism is higher in countries with high levels of economic development. A 1% increase in religious ideology leads to an increase in clientelism of 0.163% in lower-income countries, and 0.339% in countries with more developed economies. This may be because, in countries with lower levels of economic development, where the cost of exchanging material benefits for voter support is lower, parties of different ideologies generally employ clientelistic linkage strategies. As a result, religious ideologies have a weaker role in enhancing clientelism.

Table 5. Results by level of economic development.

Variables	DV: Clientelism	
	Model 7: Low Level	Model 8: High Level
Religious Ideology	0.163 ** (0.059)	0.339 *** (0.034)
Vote Share	0.007 (0.004)	0.012 (0.007)
Left–Right Ideology	0.293 *** (0.067)	0.121 ** (0.036)
Candidate Nomination	−0.257 *** (0.071)	−0.144 *** (0.038)

Table 5. Cont.

Variables	DV: Clientelism	
	Model 7: Low Level	Model 8: High Level
Seat Share	0.003 (0.003)	0.010 * (0.005)
Internal Cohesion	0.094 (0.071)	0.007 (0.043)
Country Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
N	269	147
Adj.R ²	0.195	0.545

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$; The value in brackets is the standard error.

4.3.2. Time Heterogeneity: Before and after the 9/11 Terrorist Attack and the Arab Uprisings

Considering the longitudinal space of our study, international and regional circumstances may fluctuate, making religious ideology more or less important to the usage of clientelist linkage. Entering the 21st century, the occurrence of the 9/11 terrorist attack led to an intensified crackdown by the United States on terrorism and extremist Islamic forces. On the one hand, anti-American sentiment in the region and secular parties's poor governance performance increased the appeal of Islamism to the public (Rabasa et al. 2004; Liu and Li 2014). On the other hand, in the post-9/11 context, religious parties derived from religious movements began to participate in party politics with a more pragmatic attitude, attempting to expand their influence through a combination of ideology and material interest delivery to gain electoral support. This enhanced the positive effects of religious ideology on the use of clientelistic linkage strategies. Therefore, this study uses 2001 as a time dummy variable to identify the impact of the 9/11 terrorist attack. According to Table 6, the estimated coefficient of the 2001 dummy variable is positive at the significance level of 0.01%. The interaction coefficient between the 2001 dummy variable and religious ideology is positive at the significance level of 0.5%, indicating that the influence of religious ideology on clientelism increased after 2001.

Table 6. Results adding dummy variable for the year 2001.

Variables	DV: Clientelism	
	Model 9	Model 10
Religious Ideology	0.276 *** (0.034)	0.193 *** (0.046)
Vote Share	0.008 * (0.034)	0.007 * (0.003)
Left-Right Ideology	0.151 *** (0.036)	0.163 *** (0.036)
Candidate Nomination	−0.173 *** (0.0393)	−0.163 *** (0.039)
Seat Share	0.006 * (0.044)	0.006 * (0.003)
Internal Cohesion	0.067 (0.044)	0.076 (0.044)
Dummy Variable: 2001 Year	0.298 ** (0.091)	0.135 (0.110)
2001 Year * Religious Ideology		0.142 ** (0.055)
Country Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
N	416	416
Adj.R ²	0.280	0.290

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$; The value in brackets is the standard error.

Similarly, the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011 had far-reaching consequences for countries in the MENA. Although it did not bring about long-term democratic transformation and consolidation, it profoundly impacted party politics in the region (Strom 2017). This study uses a time dummy variable for 2011 to identify the impact of the Arab uprisings. According to Table 7, the coefficient of the time dummy variable is positive but not statistically significant. After adding the interaction term between the time dummy variable and religious ideology, the coefficient of the interaction term is positive at the significance level of 0.5%. In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, religious parties in the Middle East have become more active in electoral politics under democratic institutions. Consequently, parties' religious ideology has a greater impact on clientelist tactics.

Table 7. Results adding dummy variable for the year 2011.

Variables	DV: Clientelism	
	Model 11	Model 12
Religious Ideology	0.271 *** (0.034)	0.211 *** (0.039)
Vote Share	0.008 * (0.003)	0.007 * (0.003)
Left–Right Ideology	0.162 *** (0.037)	0.171 *** (0.037)
Candidate Nomination	−0.174 *** (0.040)	−0.155 *** (0.040)
Seat Share	0.005 (0.003)	0.006 * (0.003)
Internal Cohesion	0.054 (0.044)	0.078 (0.045)
Dummy Variable: 2011 Year	0.162 (0.103)	−0.047 (0.124)
2011 Year * Religious Ideology		0.185 ** (0.062)
Country Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
N	416	416
Adj.R ²	0.265	0.280

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$; The value in brackets is the standard error.

5. Conclusions

Despite the mounting interest in the systematic study of clientelism over the last three decades, few attempts have been made to empirically examine the role of religion in explaining the prevalence of clientelism, especially at the party level. Hence, a lingering question in the literature remains unanswered: how does political parties' religious ideology impact their clientelist linkages with citizens? This study aimed to fill the gap by examining the association between a party's religious ideology and clientelist practice in the Middle East and North Africa from 1970 to 2019. To address this research question, we analyzed data from the Varieties of Party Identity and Organization (V-party) database, one of the most comprehensive databases containing cross-national data on political parties in the MENA region.

First, our main finding suggests that political parties with stronger religious ideologies are more likely to use clientelistic tactics in the MENA region. While prior research has pointed out the prevalence of Islamist parties in the MENA adopting clientelistic strategies, it has mainly focused on qualitative case studies (Hamzeh 2001; Clark 2004; Arslantaş and Arslantaş 2023). Our findings provide cross-national empirical evidence of the relationship between religious ideology and clientelism in the region, drawing from a novel database.

Second, we found that religious ideology, per se, leads to clientelism. Additionally, our mediation analysis highlighted the mediating role of social organizations in the relationship between a party's religious ideology and clientelism. This finding is consistent with the literature on clientelism that has paid attention to the role of brokers and the organizations that they represent (Holland and Palmer-Rubin 2015; Garay et al. 2020). Furthermore, additional analysis revealed that the reinforcing effect of religious ideology on clientelism was intensified following the 9/11 terrorist attack and the Arab uprising. Although more research is needed to uncover the mechanism of this, this finding provides additional insight into the relationship between international/regional situations and party politics in the MENA region.

However, this study also has some limitations. First, we measured the religious ideologies of parties using expert survey analysis. Although this is a widely accepted method for measuring political party ideology, future research can employ more direct measurement methods such as political text analysis and opinion surveys to enhance the validity of the conclusions. In addition, in our research, we adopted a broad concept of religious ideology for both the theoretical and empirical analysis. Given that religious ideologies manifest differently in the MENA region, from utilizing Islamism as a legitimating tool to advocating for the imposition of sharia as a social and political agenda, scholars can further refine the measurement of religious ideology and investigate its impacts on clientelism. Second, in the MENA region, some secularist and nationalist political parties are also extensively employing clientelist tactics to reach out to the general population. More detailed case studies in the future can be used to explore the impact of nationalist and secularist ideologies on clientelism in the region. Third, this study focused on the association between religious ideology and clientelism in the context of the MENA. Future research might further study mechanisms linking religious ideology and clientelism in a broader context. A more detailed classification of different religious ideologies could yield new theoretical and empirical insights.

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