


# Religion From the Target's Perspective: A Portrait of Religious Threat and Its Consequences in the United States

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## Abstract

Little is known about social identity threat from religion or religiosity. We collected data from a diverse sample of Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Muslims across the United States ( $N = 970$ ) to test whether, and for whom, religion and religiosity, like other social identities, can be consequential sources of identity threat. Results suggest that religious threat is highest among religious minority groups (Muslims and Jews) and highly religious Protestants. Threat predicted (1) lower belonging, (2) a greater propensity to conceal one's religion, and (3) more intergroup bias, although these patterns varied somewhat by religion. Results illuminate how a broader social climate in which religion and specific religious groups are often the subject of heated rhetoric may trigger identity threat and exacerbate intergroup hostilities.

## Keywords

religion, social identity threat, belonging, concealment, prejudice

In 2010, Terry Jones, an evangelical pastor from Gainesville, FL, made headlines with his plan to burn Qurans on the 9th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Pastor Jones intended to take a stand against Islam, which some believed to propagate violence and threaten America's Christian identity (Goldman, 2010). Like Pastor Jones, many Americans believed Christianity was under attack. Others saw Pastor Jones as propagating blatant Islamophobia. These dueling interpretations (Pastor Jones as victim vs. perpetrator) exemplify how members of both majority and minority religions can feel targeted in the United States. This incident also highlights how groups that feel targeted because of their religion can become perpetrators of bias.

We investigate religion as a source of *social identity threat*—the psychological response experienced by individuals who feel stereotyped, discriminated against, or devalued because of a social group membership (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). We use *religious threat* to refer to social identity threat from religion (i.e., group membership) or religiosity (i.e., strength of religious beliefs). Although decades of research documents social identity threat among other groups (e.g., race/gender), little is known about whether, and for whom, religion evokes identity threat (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010) or the effects of such threat.

We address this with results from a national study of identity threat and its correlates among a diverse U.S. sample of Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Muslims. Results contribute to

theory on social identity threat and the psychology of religion and inform public discourse around religion. For instance, results contribute to the social identity threat literature (Branscombe et al., 1999; Steele et al., 2002) by identifying whether, and for whom, religion is a source of threat and by examining potential consequences of religious threat for psychological, behavioral, and interpersonal outcomes. Results also contribute to the psychology of religion, which has extensively examined religion's role in motivating prejudice but largely neglected whether and how religious individuals experience prejudice. By examining religion from the target's perspective and comparing religious threat experiences between members of minority and majority religious groups, this study addresses this gap in the literature. More broadly, results advance public discourse about religion in the United States by painting a portrait of how religious threat affects Americans from diverse religious backgrounds. This may illuminate psychological and intergroup consequences of the heated political rhetoric that often targets religion and members of specific religious groups.

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## Religion and Social Identity Threat

Nearly 80% of Americans consider religion to be important in their lives (Pew Research Center, 2015). Like other social groups, religion provides a sense of belonging and community, even if people are not particularly religious (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Religion additionally provides an epistemological belief system that imbues life with meaning (Park, 2007). This dual role makes religion an especially important social identity that often confers personal benefits (e.g., psychological security; Kinnvall, 2004; Ysseldyk et al., 2010). However, religion and religiosity can also be divisive forces (Putnam & Campbell, 2012) that evoke intergroup conflict (Haji, Lalonde, & Giles, 2012; Neuberg et al., 2013), and in contexts where a particular religion, or religiosity generally, is devalued, they may evoke psychological threat. We posit that individuals can experience religious threat from their religion or religiosity, potentially interacting factors.

The source of religious threat may differ across religions. For religious minorities, threat may primarily emanate from concerns about being a target of bias, whereas for religious majorities in the United States, threat may disproportionately stem from changing demographics that endanger their majority status. Once activated, the experiences of threat should be similar regardless of the initiating event.

**Religion as a source of threat.** Because religious minorities are disproportionately targeted by prejudice, they may experience more religious threat than religious majorities (i.e., Christians in the United States). The Federal Bureau of Investigation reports that religion is the second most targeted social category in bias-motivated crimes, trailing race (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). Notably, 74% of religious hate crimes target Jews and Muslims (52% and 22%, respectively; U.S. Department of Justice, 2016), even though they comprise just 3% of Americans (2% and 1%, respectively; Pew Research Center, 2015). Further, hate crimes targeting Muslims are rising (increasing 67% between 2014 and 2015; U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). Importantly, the accuracy of hate crime statistics depends on victims trusting authorities enough to disclose, which is less likely among Muslims than other religions (Sandholtz, Langton, & Planty, 2013; Tyler, Schulhofer, & Huq, 2010). Thus, hate crimes may be particularly underreported for Muslims.

Polling data verify that religious minorities frequently feel targeted and that the social climate in the United States is hostile, particularly for Muslims. For instance, 43% of Jews report facing a lot of discrimination (Pew Research Center, 2013), 28% of Muslims report being treated suspiciously (Pew Research Center, 2011), and 55% of Muslims in the United States report increasing life difficulty since September 11, 2001 (Pew Research Center, 2011). Even those who have not personally experienced bias are likely aware of its presence, which can have deleterious psychological consequences (Steele, 1997). Muslims in particular face increasing hostility in the United States (Ogan, Willnat, Pennington, & Bashir, 2013), exemplified by Islam being the nation's least-liked religion (Pew Research Center, 2014) and recent calls for an entry ban on citizens from

Muslim-majority countries. Following the 2016 election marked by divisive language targeting religious and other minority groups, hate crimes against both Muslims and Jews have been reported to increase (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016).

**Religiosity as a source of threat.** Religiosity, above group membership, can expose people to bias in secular contexts. A Protestant student may feel judged for praying before meals at school or a Catholic employee may fear bias for displaying a cross on her forehead on Ash Wednesday. These examples highlight how, for the highly religious (regardless of religion), negative stereotypes about religious people—for example, being unintelligent (Zuckerman, Silberman, & Hall, 2013), unscientific (Rios, Cheng, Totton, & Shariff, 2015), closed-minded (Saroglou, 2002), or militant/backward (Hood, Hill, & Williamson, 2005)—may induce religious threat.

**Religion and religiosity as interactive sources of threat.** Religiosity may predict threat more strongly for religious majority groups, for whom religiosity is the sole source of religious threat. Non-practicing Protestants, for example, should be low in threat because they are members of a majority religion and not religious. Practicing Protestants should experience more threat because of their greater religiosity (Hyers & Hyers, 2008; Rios et al., 2015). In contrast, membership in a stigmatized religion should lead even nonreligious minority group members to experience threat. Thus, religiosity may explain more variance in threat for members of majority religions.

## Potential Consequences of Religious Threat

Preliminary research suggests religious threat can erode protective benefits of religion (e.g., buffering against stress; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2011) and undermine interest and performance in intellectual domains (i.e., where negative stereotypes about religion are prevalent; Rios et al., 2015). People also may respond to religious threat by derogating out-group members and evaluating in-group members more favorably (Hunter et al., 2004; Ysseldyk, Haslam, Matheson, & Anisman, 2012). However, previous research has typically been conducted with small samples of religious minorities or exclusively with Christians. A small literature (e.g., Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007) focuses on Muslims but excludes other religions. Thus, previous research leaves gaps about between-religion consequences of religious threat. More generally, it remains unclear whether religious threat evokes outcomes similar to other types of identity threat.

We focused on three hypothesized outcomes of threat from the broader social identity threat literature that are associated with additional negative downstream consequences: (1) belonging, (2) concealment, and (3) intergroup bias. These represent psychological, behavioral, and interpersonal levels of analysis, respectively, that should apply to threat experiences across religions.

**Belonging.** Belonging—having strong and stable social connections (Baumeister & Leary, 1995)—is a core social motive strongly associated with well-being (Fiske, 2009). Lower levels

**Table 1.** Demographics and Religiosity for Total Sample and by Religion.

Measure	Total	Protestants <sup>P</sup>	Catholics <sup>C</sup>	Jews <sup>J</sup>	Muslims <sup>M</sup>
<b>Gender*</b>					
% Male	42	42	48 <sup>+</sup>	35 <sup>-</sup>	44
% Female	58	58	52 <sup>-</sup>	65 <sup>+</sup>	56
<b>Race**</b>					
% White	74	88 <sup>+</sup>	81 <sup>+</sup>	97 <sup>+</sup>	29 <sup>-</sup>
% Black/African American	4	4	2 <sup>-</sup>	0 <sup>-</sup>	12 <sup>+</sup>
% Hispanic	4	2 <sup>-</sup>	11 <sup>+</sup>	<1 <sup>-</sup>	1 <sup>-</sup>
% Asian	4	4	2	<1 <sup>-</sup>	9 <sup>+</sup>
% South Asian	5	0 <sup>-</sup>	0 <sup>-</sup>	<1 <sup>-</sup>	22 <sup>+</sup>
% Arab/Middle Eastern	5	<1 <sup>-</sup>	<1 <sup>-</sup>	0 <sup>-</sup>	19 <sup>+</sup>
% Multiple racial minority/other	4	2	2	1 <sup>-</sup>	9 <sup>+</sup>
<b>Education level**</b>					
% HS or less	14	17	17	6 <sup>-</sup>	16
% Some college or college	62	63	60	56 <sup>-</sup>	69 <sup>+</sup>
% Graduate degree	24	20	22	38 <sup>+</sup>	15 <sup>-</sup>
<b>Age**</b>					
M (SD)	51.52 (18.02)	57.43 <sup>MJC</sup> (14.68)	52.70 <sup>MJP</sup> (15.52)	61.48 <sup>MPC</sup> (13.97)	33.40 <sup>JPC</sup> (14.04)
<b>Religiosity**</b>					
M (SD)	3.44 (1.02)	3.66 <sup>JC</sup> (1.05)	3.34 <sup>MJP</sup> (0.97)	2.94 <sup>MPC</sup> (1.01)	3.83 <sup>JC</sup> (0.79)

Note. Gender, race, and education proportions were compared using  $\chi^2$  analyses. Superscripted +/– signs indicate cell proportions were > or < expected, based on adjusted standardized residuals < |2|. Group differences in age and religiosity were tested using one-way analysis of variances and post hoc tests. Superscripts next to age or religiosity means indicate a Bonferroni-adjusted difference at  $\alpha = .05$  between the religion in a given column and the first initial of the religion indicated by a superscript. Participants who reported being White and another racial group were coded as the other group.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

predict anxiety and depression (Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, & Early, 1996), negative affect, decreased self-regulation, impaired cognitive ability, and other deleterious outcomes (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002; Hagerty et al., 1996). Religion may foster belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ysseldyk et al., 2010) and well-being (Lim & Putnam, 2010) and buffer individuals from ostracism (Wesselmann & Williams, 2010). However, in everyday secular contexts (e.g., work/school), religious threat may undermine belonging, as racial threat does in contexts relevant to racial stereotypes (Cook, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, & Cohen, 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

**Identity concealment.** Most research on identity threat examines visible groups. For people with less-apparent identities, like religion, concealment can be a reaction to threat (Cook, Germano, & Stadler, 2016; Quinn, 2006). Concealment can prevent discrimination, but it can be psychologically costly. For instance, people who conceal sometimes present a superficial public persona that can be stressful and isolating to maintain (Sedlovskaya et al., 2013). Concealment can also be cognitively taxing (Smart & Wegner, 2000), undermine well-being (Cook, Salter, & Stadler, 2017), and increase health risks (e.g., of cancer and infections; Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, & Visscher, 1996). Given its potential importance, research is needed on concealment in response to religious threat.

**Intergroup bias.** People experiencing social identity threat often espouse negative out-group attitudes (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner,

2006) and positive in-group attitudes (Brewer, 1999). These responses preserve collective self-esteem (Branscombe & Wann, 1994). Religious threat may follow a similar pattern. Preliminary research finds in-group favoritism in response to religious threat, but mixed evidence of out-group prejudice (Hunter et al., 2004; Ysseldyk et al., 2012). Thus, we included attitudinal measures toward out-groups and individuals' religious in-group to collect additional evidence, among a large and diverse sample, of out-group bias and in-group favoritism in response to religious threat.

## Research Overview

To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate religious threat in the United States using a large sample of four different religions. We hypothesized religious threat would be higher among (1) religious minorities (e.g., Muslims and Jews) than Christians (e.g., Catholics and Protestants) and (2) Muslims compared to Jews. We further hypothesized religiosity would be associated with greater threat, but mostly for Christians; we expected religious threat to be higher regardless of religiosity for religious minorities. Finally, we hypothesized religious threat would predict (1) less felt belonging, (2) a greater propensity to conceal, and (3) more negative out-group and more positive in-group attitudes.

## Method

### Participants

By design, participants ( $N = 970$ ) were Protestant ( $n = 249$ ), Catholic ( $n = 243$ ), Jewish ( $n = 246$ ), or Muslim ( $n = 232$ ).<sup>1</sup> Participants

were 18–88 years old, represented 46 states and the District of Columbia, and were demographically diverse (see Table 1).

### Procedure

We aimed for a geographically and demographically diverse sample of 1,000 participants (250 per religion) to complete an online study. To facilitate recruitment, we hired Qualtrics, who subcontracted with two panel-recruiting companies—Survey Sampling International and Lightspeed GMI. We used panel companies for several reasons. First, and most importantly, they specialize in collecting data from hard-to-reach populations, like religious minorities. Second, they maintain diverse national samples of participants. Third, they provide higher quality control than common alternatives (e.g., Amazon Mechanical Turk) by monitoring survey responses and removing individuals who respond inappropriately (e.g., too fast or using response sets). Fourth, they limit participation frequency to prevent individuals from becoming too familiar with psychological theory, which could bias results (Smith, Roster, Golden, & Albaum, 2016).

Using their records, the panel companies randomly selected potential participants within each religion. E-mailed invitations provided information about compensation (US\$1.50–\$2.00 in incentive points) and study length (30 min). Participants learned the study purpose (about the beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes of Americans from diverse religious backgrounds) on the study home page. After consenting, participants completed study instruments and were debriefed. No identifying information was collected.

With little research to inform expected effect sizes, we aimed to be adequately powered within religion for a typical effect in psychology ( $r = .21$ ; Richard, Bond, & Stokes-Zoota, 2003), which can be stably detected with approximately 250 participants (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013). Our final sample of 970 is considerably larger than typical social psychology studies (Fraley & Vazire, 2014) and provides confidence in our ability to detect effects between- and within-religions. Post hoc analysis of primary hypotheses (e.g., Religion  $\times$  Religiosity predicting threat) verified high power ( $>.99$ ).

### Materials

**Religion.** Participants selected their religion (e.g., Christian, Jewish, Muslim) and subdenomination (e.g., for Christians: Protestant, Catholic).<sup>2</sup>

**Religiosity.** Religiosity was assessed with the 6-item Cohen's *R* scale (Malka, Soto, Cohen, & Miller, 2011), designed for cross-religion use (e.g., "How much do you practice the requirements of your religion?"). Response options ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*deeply/extremely* [depending on item]). Responses were averaged ( $\alpha = .93$ ), with higher scores indicating greater religiosity. Participants' mean religiosity ( $M = 3.44$ ) was just above the scale midpoint (see Table 1).

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics, Scale Reliabilities, and Factor Loadings for Religious Threat Measures.

Measure	Mean (SD)	Cronbach's $\alpha$	Loading
Stigma consciousness (10 items)	2.63 (0.75)	.79	.78
Experienced stigma (6 items)	1.62 (0.89)	.93	.79
Religious meta-stereotypes (2 items)	3.27 (1.10)	.78	.71
Religion is under attack (2 items)	2.81 (1.26)	.73	.70
Composite religious threat measure	2.58 (0.74)	.71	—

Note. Loading based on results of principal components analysis. Scale reliabilities and loadings were generally consistent across religious groups. See Supplemental Materials for means, Cronbach's  $\alpha$ , and loadings by religion.

**Religious threat.** Several conceptually distinct but related scales assessed dimensions of religious threat, as described below. All items were rated from 1 to 5, with anchors from *not at all true* to *very true*, except religious meta-stereotypes, which had an upper anchor of *very much*. Composites were created by averaging items in each scale. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics and scale reliabilities.

**Stigma consciousness.** The 10-item Stigma Consciousness Questionnaire (Pinel, 1999) assessed how much individuals worried about differential treatment because of negative stereotypes about their religion (e.g., "Most non-Muslims have a lot more anti-Muslim thoughts than they actually express"). Items were adapted by religion.

**Experienced stigma.** Six items adapted from the Stigma Scale for Chronic Illness (Rao et al., 2009) assessed perceptions of differential treatment because of religion (e.g., "Because of my religion, some people avoid me").

**Religious meta-stereotypes.** Two author-generated items asked participants "do you believe others have negative stereotypes about..." (1) "...people from your religion?" and (2) "...people who are religious (in general)?"

**Perception that religion is under attack.** Participants rated agreement with two author-generated items: "My religious freedom is often under attack" and "Religion is under attack in the U.S."

**Composite religious threat.** The four religious threat measures were moderately correlated ( $M = .41$ ) and a principal components analysis yielded a single component (based on scree plot and eigenvalues  $> 1$ ) that explained 56% of the variance (see Table 2). Thus, we formed a single, composite religious threat scale by averaging participant scores on the four religious threat measures ( $\alpha = .71$ ). Higher scores indicate greater threat.

**Outcomes.** See Table 3 for descriptive statistics, scale reliabilities, and intercorrelations.

**Belonging.** Seven items adapted from Walton and Cohen (2007) assessed local (e.g., "...in my community") and

**Table 3.** Correlations, Descriptive Statistics, and Scale Reliabilities for Outcome Measures.

Measure	1	2	3	4
1. Belonging (7 items)	—			
2. Concealment (10 items)	-.29**	—		
3. Out-group attitudes (7 items)	-.11**	-.02	—	
4. In-group attitudes (1 item)	.05	-.18**	.36**	—
Mean (SD), Cronbach's $\alpha$				
Total sample	4.15 (0.85), $\alpha = .88$	1.85 (0.84), $\alpha = .89$	5.79 (2.16)	8.43 (2.09)
Protestants	4.27 (0.77), $\alpha = .88$	1.71 (0.84), $\alpha = .91$	5.29 (1.98), $\alpha = .84$	8.16 (1.87)
Catholics	4.24 (0.76), $\alpha = .86$	1.84 (0.78), $\alpha = .87$	5.81 (1.92), $\alpha = .83$	7.99 (2.25)
Jews	4.38 (0.69), $\alpha = .86$	1.89 (0.83), $\alpha = .89$	6.49 (1.79), $\alpha = .81$	9.15 (1.31)
Muslims	3.68 (0.97), $\alpha = .88$	1.96 (0.89), $\alpha = .90$	5.53 (2.69), $\alpha = .90$	8.44 (2.56)

Note. Because out-group attitudes were differentially calculated for each religion, scale reliability was computed separately for each group and no overall reliability is calculated. Because in-group attitudes were single-item measures, no reliability can be computed.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

general (e.g., “. . . in the United States”) belonging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*very true*).

**Concealment.** Ten author-generated items assessed participants’ propensity to conceal their religion (e.g., “I would prefer that others don’t know my religion”) from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*very true*).

**Intergroup bias.** Participants completed eight feeling thermometers from *cold* (0) to *warm* (10) for Muslims, Jews, Protestants, Catholics, Mormons, atheists, gays/lesbians, and scientists.<sup>3</sup> Out-group attitudes were computed by averaging scores for the seven out-groups for each religion. Although seemingly different, out-group attitudes held together well ( $\alpha s > .80$ ). In-group attitudes were participants’ rating of their own religion.

**Demographics.** Participants indicated their age, gender, education level, and race.

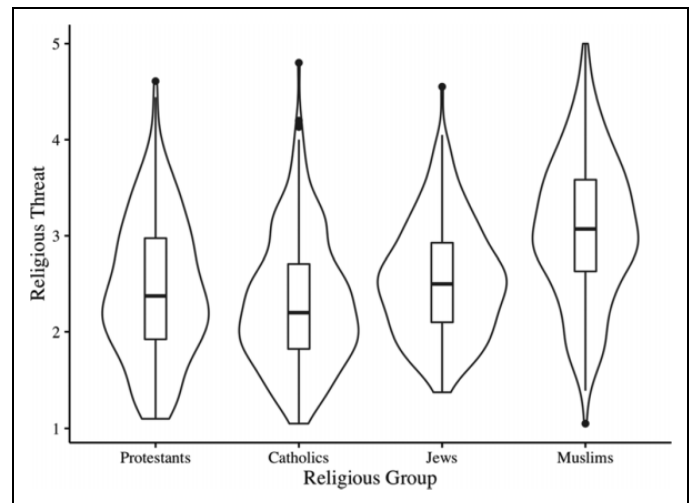
## Results

### Descriptive Data

Participants’ religious threat ratings were normally distributed (see Figure 1), with a mean slightly below the scale midpoint ( $M = 2.58$ ), suggesting moderate levels of religious threat. On 1–5 scales, participants were relatively high in belonging ( $M = 4.15$ ) and low in concealment ( $M = 1.85$ ). On 0–10 scales, participants rated out-groups neutrally ( $M = 5.79$ ) and their religious in-groups warmly ( $M = 8.43$ ; see Table 3).

### Who Perceives Religious Threat?

**Analytic strategy.** To test for differences in religious threat, we used hierarchical multiple regression, controlling for observed between-religion differences in age, gender, and education. Race was not controlled because it was partially confounded with religion (see Table 1). Religion was entered as a set of three planned orthogonal contrasts (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003; Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985). *Contrast 1* tested our primary hypothesis that religious minorities (Muslims/



**Figure 1.** Distribution of religious threat by religious group. Plot includes box-plot displaying median, first and third quartiles, minimum/maximum (without outliers), and outliers of religious threat by group. Plot also includes violin plot displaying distribution of religious threat by group. All figures were made using ggplot2 (Wickham, 2009) in R (R Core Team, 2016).

Jews; coded = +1) would experience more threat than religious majorities (Protestants/Catholics; coded = -1). The other two contrasts compared religions within the minority and majority categories. *Contrast 2* compared Muslims (+1) to Jews (-1; Protestants and Catholics coded as 0), while *Contrast 3* compared Protestants (+1) to Catholics (-1; Muslims and Jews coded as 0). Religiosity was group-mean centered (0 = average for each religion). In Step 1, we regressed religious threat on religion and religiosity, controlling for demographic covariates. In Step 2, we tested the Religion  $\times$  Religiosity interaction.<sup>4</sup> Table 4 displays results.

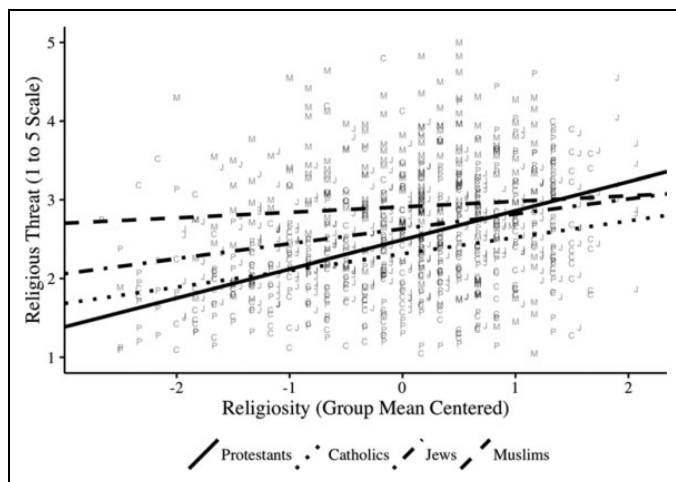
Step 1: As hypothesized, the four religions differed in religious threat,  $F(3, 961) = 30.75, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .088$  (see Figure 1). Muslims/Jews ( $M_{adjusted} = 2.77$ ) reported more threat than Protestants/Catholics ( $M_{adjusted} = 2.40$ ),  $b = .19$ ,

**Table 4.** Hierarchical Regression Predicting Religious Threat.

Variable	Model 1				Model 2			
	B	95% CI	F	$\eta_p^2$	B	95% CI	F	$\eta_p^2$
Age	-.01	[-.01, -.01]	35.55**	.036	-.01	[-.01, -.01]	34.77**	.035
Education 1	.01	[-.04, .04]	0.06	<.001	-.00	[-.04, .04]	0.00	<.001
Education 2	.00	[-.05, .05]	0.03	<.001	.01	[-.04, .06]	0.09	<.001
Gender	-.01	[-.05, .04]	0.05	<.001	-.01	[-.05, .03]	0.32	<.001
Religion 1: Minority versus Majority	.19	[.14, .23]	73.86**	.071	.19	[.14, .23]	76.03**	.074
Religion 2: Muslim versus Jew	.14	[.07, .21]	14.39**	.015	.14	[.07, .21]	15.14**	.016
Religion 3: Protestant versus Catholic	.09	[.03, .15]	9.01*	.009	.09	[.03, .15]	9.20*	.010
Religiosity	.23	[.19, .27]	111.79**	.104	.21	[.17, .25]	89.19**	.085
Religion 1 $\times$ Religiosity					-.08	[-.13, -.04]	14.03**	.014
Religion 2 $\times$ Religiosity					-.06	[-.12, .01]	3.07	.003
Religion 3 $\times$ Religiosity					.08	[.03, .14]	8.00**	.008
$R^2$			.257				.276	
F for change in $R^2$			41.63**				8.01**	

Note.  $N = 970$ . Age is centered. Education 1 compares high school or less (+2) to college or some college and graduate degree (-1). Education 2 compares college or some college (+1) to graduate degree (-1). Gender compares females (+1) to males (-1). Religion 1 compares Muslims and Jews (+1) to Protestants and Catholics (-1). Religion 2 compares Muslims (+1) to Jews (-1). Religion 3 compares Protestants (+1) to Catholics (-1). Religiosity is group mean centered. CI = confidence interval.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .



**Figure 2.** Model predicted means and slopes of religious threat as a function of religiosity and religion. Displayed points correspond to observed data. Letters indicate the corresponding religion for each data point. Regression lines are from an analysis that also includes participants' age (centered), gender (contrast coded), and education level (contrast coded).

$F(1, 961) = 73.86, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.14, .23], \eta_p^2 = .071$ . Also, Muslims ( $M_{\text{adjusted}} = 2.91$ ) reported more threat than Jews ( $M_{\text{adjusted}} = 2.63$ ),  $b = .14, F(1, 961) = 14.39, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.07, .21], \eta_p^2 = .015$ , and Protestants ( $M_{\text{adjusted}} = 2.49$ ) reported more threat than Catholics ( $M_{\text{adjusted}} = 2.31$ ),  $b = .09, F(1, 961) = 9.01, p = .003, 95\% \text{ CI } [.03, .15], \eta_p^2 = .009$ . As expected, religiosity predicted greater threat,  $b = .23, F(1, 961) = 111.79, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.19, .27], \eta_p^2 = .104$ .

Step 2: The Religion  $\times$  Religiosity interaction improved model fit,  $R^2_{\text{change}} = .018, F(3, 958) = 8.01, p < .001$ ,

$\eta_p^2 = .024$ . Figure 2 displays model-predicted means and slopes. As hypothesized, religiosity predicted religious threat more weakly for Muslims/Jews than Protestants/Catholics,  $b = -.08, F(1, 958) = 14.03, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.13, -.04], \eta_p^2 = .014$ . Religiosity predicted threat marginally stronger for Jews than Muslims,  $b = -.06, F(1, 958) = 3.07, p = .080, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.12, .01], \eta_p^2 = .003$ , and significantly stronger for Protestants than Catholics,  $b = .08, F(1, 958) = 8.00, p = .005, 95\% \text{ CI } [.03, .14], \eta_p^2 = .008$ . Muslims were the only group for whom religiosity and threat were unrelated ( $p = .205$ ).

Interestingly, ancillary analyses with post hoc orthogonal contrasts revealed religiosity predicted threat more strongly for Protestants (+3) than the other religions (-1),  $b = .06, F(1, 958) = 21.50, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.03, .08], \eta_p^2 = .022$  (see Figure 2). This relation was so strong that among highly religious participants (+1  $SD$ ), Protestants reported statistically equivalent threat to Jews/Muslims ( $p = .853$ ), who did not differ from each other ( $p = .110$ ).

### What Outcomes Are Related to Religious Threat?

Our goal for this set of analyses was to quantify the association between religious threat and (1) belonging, (2) concealment, and (3) intergroup attitudes. Our analytic strategy followed the same general regression approach as above. In Step 1, we regressed each outcome on religious threat, controlling for religion and demographic covariates. To improve the precision of statistical estimates, we also controlled for religiosity, since religiosity predicted threat and previous research suggests it predicts well-being (Lim & Putnam, 2010) and intergroup attitudes (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005). In Step 2, we tested the Threat  $\times$  Religion interaction. Because we had no strong a

**Table 5.** Covariate Adjusted Means by Religion for Outcome Measures.

Measure	Protestants <sup>P</sup>	Catholics <sup>C</sup>	Jews <sup>J</sup>	Muslims <sup>M</sup>
Belonging	4.16 (.05)	4.12 (.05)	4.26 (.05)	4.06(.06)
Concealment	1.78 (.05)	1.90 (.06)	1.94 (.06)	1.78(.07)
Out-group Attitudes	5.23 <sup>CJ</sup> (.14)	5.76 <sup>PJ</sup> (.14)	6.36 <sup>PC</sup> (.14)	5.80(.17)
In-group Attitudes	8.15 <sup>J</sup> (.13)	8.08 <sup>J</sup> (.13)	9.01 <sup>PC</sup> (.14)	8.50(.16)

Note. Group means (standard errors) are estimated from models that also include age (centered), gender (contrast coded), education (contrast coded), religiosity (group mean centered), and religious threat (centered). Superscripts next to means indicate a Bonferroni-adjusted difference at  $\alpha = .05$  between the religion in a given column and the first initial of the religion indicated by a superscript.

priori hypotheses about differences by religion in each outcome (Step 1) or how the association between threat and each outcome might differ by religion (Step 2), we tested religion as an omnibus effect. In Step 1, Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons were used to deconstruct significant main effects of religion. In Step 2, statistically significant omnibus interaction effects (i.e., Threat  $\times$  Religion) were clarified with post hoc orthogonal contrasts testing religious-group differences in the association between threat and each outcome based on observed patterns (Davis, 2010; Thompson, 2006).

Step 1: No significant differences emerged in belonging or concealment, but religions differed on intergroup attitudes (see Table 5 for adjusted means by religion). Jews had the most favorable attitudes toward out-groups and their in-group.

More germane to hypotheses, religious threat predicted lower belonging,  $b = -.40$ ,  $F(1, 960) = 119.78$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[-.47, -.33]$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .111$ , a greater propensity to conceal,  $b = .21$ ,  $F(1, 960) = 30.63$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[.14, .29]$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .031$ , more negative out-group attitudes,  $b = -.34$ ,  $F(1, 958) = 45.05$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[-.54, -.13]$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .011$ , and more positive in-group attitudes,  $b = .20$ ,  $F(1, 946) = 15.29$ ,  $p = .049$ , 95% CI  $[.00, .40]$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .004$ .

Step 2: As shown in Table 6 and described below, a religious Threat  $\times$  Religion interaction emerged for every outcome.

**Belonging.** Religious threat predicted lower belonging for all religions, but this relation was stronger for religious minorities (see Figure 3).<sup>5</sup> After accounting for the more negative association between threat and belonging for Muslims/Jews (+1) than Protestants/Catholics (-1),  $b = -.09$ ,  $F(1, 957) = 7.05$ ,  $p = .008$ , 95% CI  $[-.16, -.02]$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .007$ , no residual interaction variance remained,  $F(2, 957) = 1.21$ ,  $p = .300$ .

**Concealment.** Religious threat predicted concealment for Catholics, Jews, and Muslims, but not for Protestants (see Figure 4).

After accounting for the difference between Protestants (+3) and Catholics/Jews/Muslims (-1) in the association between threat and concealment,  $b = -.06$ ,  $F(1, 957) = 7.96$ ,  $p = .005$ , 95% CI  $[-.10, -.02]$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .008$ , no residual interaction variance remained,  $F(2, 957) = 0.89$ ,  $p = .409$ . For Protestants only, threat and concealment were unrelated ( $p = .481$ ).

**Out-group attitudes.** Religious threat predicted more negative out-group attitudes for Protestants/Catholics/Jews (+3) than for Muslims (-1),  $b = -.19$ ,  $F(1, 955) = 12.11$ ,  $p = .001$ , 95% CI  $[.08, .30]$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .013$  (see Figure 5). After accounting for this difference in the association between threat and out-group attitudes, no residual interaction variance remained,  $F(2, 955) = 2.47$ ,  $p = .085$ . For Muslims only, threat trended (nonsignificantly) to predict more positive out-group attitudes ( $p = .307$ ).<sup>6</sup>

**In-group attitudes.** Religious threat predicted positive in-group attitudes for Muslims only (see Figure 6). After accounting for the difference between Muslims (+3) and Protestants/Catholics/Jews (-1) in the association between threat and in-group attitudes,  $b = .32$ ,  $F(1, 943) = 37.99$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[.22, .42]$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .039$ , no residual interaction variance remained,  $F(2, 943) = 2.22$ ,  $p = .109$ . Threat was associated with more favorable in-group attitudes for Muslims,  $b = 1.09$ ,  $F(1, 943) = 39.67$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[.75, 1.42]$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .040$ , but not associated with in-group attitudes for Catholics ( $p = .776$ ) or Jews ( $p = .407$ ). Surprisingly, threat predicted more *negative* in-group attitudes for Protestants,  $b = -.48$ ,  $F(1, 943) = 7.18$ ,  $p = .007$ , 95% CI  $[-.84, -.13]$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .008$ .

## Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first large study examining social identity threat and religion in the United States. We recruited a demographically diverse national sample from four religions and found that despite religion and religiosity's benefits (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Kinnvall, 2004; Park, 2007; Ysseldyk et al., 2010), both can be associated with religious threat. In our sample, 28% of participants and 52% of Muslims reported threat at or above the scale midpoint, indicating threat was commonly experienced. Although religion has been understudied in social psychological research on group identity, it has been of interest to intergroup theorists dating back to Allport's (1954) seminal treatise on prejudice. Our results bring needed empirical focus and we join others (Ysseldyk et al., 2010) in calling for further investigation into religion as a social identity.

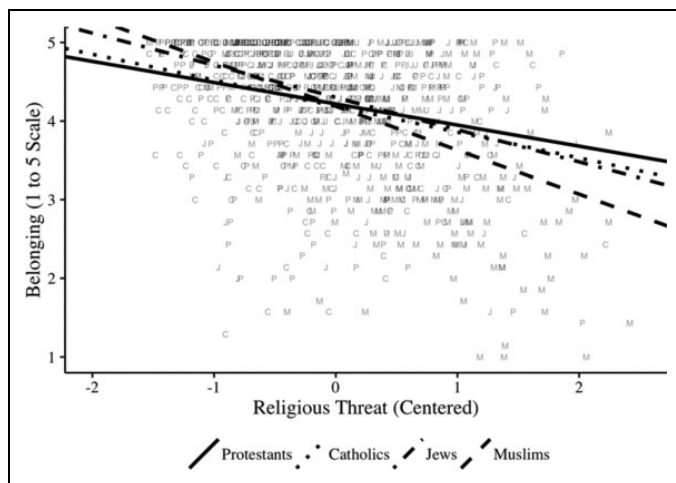
Religious threat was higher among religious minorities than Christians, suggesting that Muslims and Jews, like members of other stigmatized groups, are psychologically vulnerable to negative societal messages about religion. That religious threat was high among Muslims, regardless of religiosity, likely reflects an increasingly antagonistic social climate. Recent calls for a ban on citizens from Muslim-majority countries and new waves of religiously motivated hate crimes (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016) highlight how intergroup attitudes about religion are

**Table 6.** Summary of Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Belonging, Concealment, Out-Group Attitudes, and In-Group Attitudes.

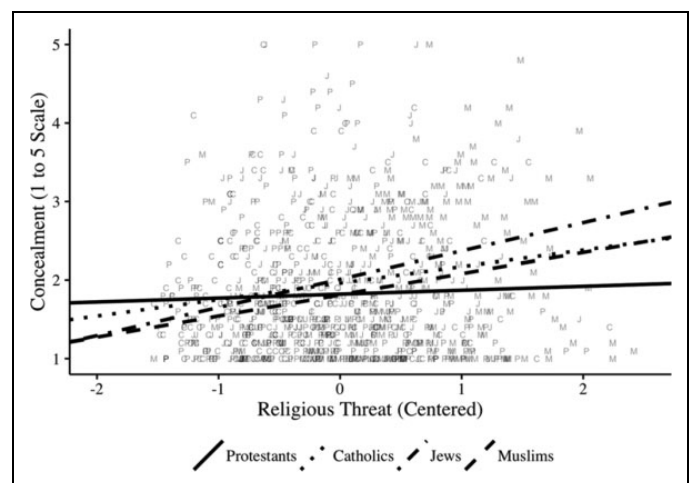
Variable	Belonging (N = 970)			Concealment (N = 970)			Out-Group Attitudes (N = 968)			In-Group Attitudes (N = 955)		
	B	95% CI	$\eta_p^2$	B	95% CI	$\eta_p^2$	B	95% CI	$\eta_p^2$	B	95% CI	$\eta_p^2$
Age	.01	[.01, .01]	.040**	-.01	[-.01, -.00]	.008**	.00	[-.01, .01]	.001	.03	[-.00, .02]	.002
Education 1	-.04	[-.08, .01]	.003	-.03	[-.08, .02]	.002	-.12	[-.25, .02]	.003	-.05	[-.17, .07]	.001
Education 2	.01	[-.05, .06]	<.001	-.02	[-.08, .04]	.001	-.07	[-.23, .09]	.001	-.16	[-.32, -.01]	.005
Gender	.02	[-.03, .07]	.001	-.05	[-.10, .00]	.004	.21	[.07, .35]	.009**	.20	[.07, .33]	.009**
Religiosity	.11	[-.06, .17]	.019**	-.32	[-.37, -.26]	.120**	-.15	[-.30, .00]	.004*	.49	[.35, .63]	.047**
Religious threat (RT)	-.39	[-.47, -.32]	.105**	.22	[.15, .30]	.032**	-.39	[-.60, -.18]	.014**	.12	[-.08, .32]	.002
Religion			.003			.011*			.038**			.036**
RT × Religion			.011*			.010*			.018**			.044**
R <sup>2</sup>	.264**			.172**			.098**			.149**		

Note. Results are from full model (Step 2). Age is centered. Education 1 compares high school or less (+2) to college or some college and graduate degree (-1). Education 2 compares college or some college (+1) to graduate degree (-1). Gender compares females (+1) to males (-1). Religiosity is group-mean centered. Religious threat is centered. Religion is an omnibus measure (*df* = 3). CI = confidence interval.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.



**Figure 3.** Model predicted means and slopes of belonging as a function of religious threat and religion. Displayed points correspond to observed data. Letters indicate the corresponding religion for each data point. Regression lines are from an analysis that also includes participants' age (centered), gender (contrast coded), education level (contrast coded), and religiosity (group-mean centered).



**Figure 4.** Model predicted means and slopes of concealment as a function of religious threat and religion. Displayed points correspond to observed data. Letters indicate the corresponding religion for each data point. Regression lines are from an analysis that also includes participants' age (centered), gender (contrast coded), education level (contrast coded), and religiosity (group-mean centered).

at the forefront of public discourse. For many Muslims, religious threat may be compounded by racial threat, given the higher proportion of Muslims who are not White, both in the current sample and nationally (Pew Research Center, 2015). For both Jews and Muslims, ethnicity and other cultural indicators may also make religion less concealable in some situations, increasing vulnerability to religious discrimination.

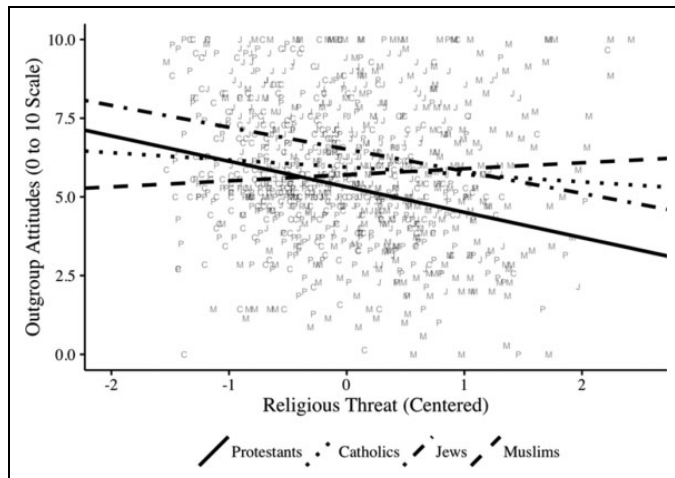
Religiosity predicted greater threat, which is noteworthy since religiosity is generally thought to be protective. However, this differed by religion. Religiosity was unassociated with threat for Muslims, who reported uniformly higher threat. However, religiosity predicted threat so strongly for Protestants that threat levels were indistinguishable between highly religious Protestants, Muslims, and Jews. Religious Protestants—the traditionally dominant religious group in the

United States—may perceive religious diversity and secularism to threaten Christianity's majority role in American society (Craig & Richeson, 2014; Jones, 2016).

We also examined potential consequences of religious threat, focusing on belonging, concealment, and intergroup bias, three outcomes associated with social identity threat and previously linked to meaningful downstream consequences (e.g., mental and physical health). Although participants were generally high in belonging, religious threat predicted lower levels. Future research should examine specific contexts in which religious threat might undermine belonging.

Identity concealment has been understudied with respect to social identity threat and the psychology of religion. Results here help to address this. Reported concealment was relatively low overall, but higher among Muslims, Jews, and Catholics



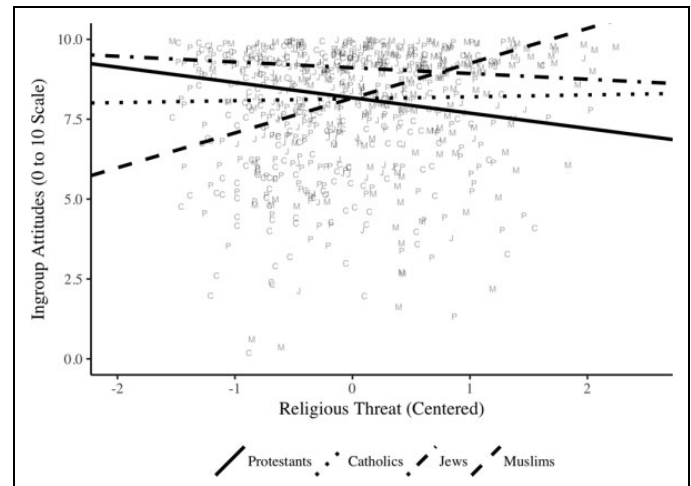


**Figure 5.** Model predicted means and slopes of out-group attitudes as a function of religious threat and religion. Displayed points correspond to observed data. Letters indicate the corresponding religion for each data point. Regression lines are from an analysis that also includes participants' age (centered), gender (contrast coded), education level (contrast coded), and religiosity (group-mean centered).

experiencing religious threat. Concealment can be an adaptive reaction to threatening social environments (Cook et al., 2017; Pasek, Filip-Crawford, & Cook, 2017), but it ultimately represents a fear of discrimination.

Interestingly, threat did not predict concealment for Protestants. This may reflect Protestants' majority status. Even in threat-evoking situations, Protestants may see concealment as unnecessary—they will usually still be in the majority. Research shows that majority groups can be more reactive to group-based categorization (Cook, Arrow, & Malle, 2011). Both the spike in threat for highly religious Protestants and the corresponding absence of concealment efforts in response to threat are consistent with this. That religiosity predicted threat more strongly for Protestants than Catholics, and that religious threat predicted concealment among Catholics, is also consistent with this. Although Christian, Catholics have historically experienced discrimination in the United States and may pattern like non-Christians in being less surprised by anti-religious sentiment and more apt to conceal.

Replicating previous work (Riek et al., 2006), religious threat predicted out-group bias in general, but surprisingly, not for Muslims. In contrast, while threat has been shown to predict in-group favoritism in other groups (Brewer, 1999), we only found this pattern with Muslims. Social identity theory suggests out-group derogation and in-group favoritism are social-posturing tools that help preserve collective self-esteem under threat (Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000; Branscombe & Wann, 1994). As a highly stigmatized minority, Muslims may see out-group derogation as a less effective coping strategy than in-group affirmation. Future research should investigate the absence of in-group favoritism among Christians and Jews and the surprising finding that threat was associated with less in-group favoritism among Protestants. Despite



**Figure 6.** Model predicted means and slopes of in-group attitudes as a function of religious threat and religion. Displayed points correspond to observed data. Because of a ceiling effect, data points are slightly jittered to increase visual clarity. Letters indicate the corresponding religion for each data point. Regression lines are from an analysis that also includes participants' age (centered), gender (contrast coded), education level (contrast coded), and religiosity (group-mean centered).

differences by religion, results support the idea that religious threat may contribute to intergroup hostility.

Although we went to considerable lengths to collect a diverse and representative sample, a potential limitation is the use of a nonprobability sample. We urge caution in extrapolating mean differences between groups to necessarily be representative. We also cannot rule out alternative directions of predicted associations, something we hope to rectify in future longitudinal research. Like any portrait, our findings represent a snapshot in time. Results are likely reflections of the current social status of religions in the United States rather than anything essential about the religions under investigation. Future research should compare threat experiences between religious individuals and atheists (Cowgill, Rios, & Simpson, 2017) and investigate how different sources of threat affect religious minorities and majorities. Future research should also investigate how religion can intersect with other identities to create unique vulnerabilities and strengths.

In closing, we emphasize that our findings should be considered along research highlighting religion's protective qualities. Future research should investigate when and how religion's protective qualities can buffer people from religious threat. As religious diversity increases, research on this topic will be increasingly important.

### Authors' Note

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation or APA Division 36.

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## Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

## Notes

1. Excluding participants who failed predefined data integrity checks (see Supplemental Materials).
2. Complete materials at <https://osf.io/bhvt3/>. Not reported is an embedded manipulation (see complete materials) designed to experimentally induce threat and replicate Rios et al.'s (2015) finding of reduced performance under stereotype threat for Christians. The instantiation of a threat manipulation in an online sample, designed to apply equally across religions, is unprecedented and was unsuccessful. See Supplemental Materials for ancillary analyses of self-reported threat and cognitive performance. To maximize power, we report results from the full sample; results in the control condition alone are substantively unchanged.
3. Two participants rated no out-groups. Fourteen omitted in-group ratings. Author-generated vignettes produced similar results (see Supplemental Materials).
4. Across analyses, we identified between 1 and 17 potential outliers (studentized deleted residuals > |3|) at Step 2. Removing them did not affect the pattern of results, so they were retained.
5. Religious threat predicted both general and local belonging, but the interaction with religion only manifested for general belonging (see Supplemental Materials).
6. This pattern of effects remained generally consistent using disaggregated out-group measures and removing sexual minority participants ( $n = 47$ ; see Supplemental Materials).

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