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Religious Affiliation and Hiring Discrimination in the American South: A Field Experiment

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Abstract

This article describes a field experiment in which we sent fictitious résumés to advertised job openings throughout the American South. We randomly altered the résumés to indicate affiliation in one of seven religious groups or a control group. We found that applicants who expressed a religious identity were 26 percent less likely to receive a response from employers. In general, Muslims, pagans, and atheists suffered the highest levels of discriminatory treatment from employers, a fictitious religious group and Catholics experienced moderate levels, evangelical Christians encountered little, and Jews received no discernible discrimination. We also found evidence suggesting the possibility that Jews received preferential treatment over other religious groups in employer responses. The results fit best with models of religious discrimination rooted in secularization theory and cultural distaste theory. We briefly discuss what our findings suggest for a more robust theory of prejudice and discrimination in society.

Keywords

religion, organizations, occupations, work, inequality, poverty, mobility

Introduction

Reports of religious discrimination in the American workplace are increasingly common. In the last 20 years, religious-based complaints filed by employees with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission increased from 1,388 in 1992 to 3,790 in 2010 (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2011). News reports documenting claims of religious discrimination in the workplace have also increased. Figure 1 shows results from a Lexus Nexus search of the number of print media articles on religious discrimination in the workplace and, as shown, they tripled from 1991 (397) to 2010 (1,197). While this increase in reports may not coincide exactly with increases in actual religious discrimination, it nevertheless signals increasing public awareness of the problem.

Despite increasing public awareness, religious discrimination in the workplace has

received surprisingly little scholarly attention, especially among sociologists. Recent reviews of the sociology of religion have made scarce mention of religion's influence in the workplace (Edgell 2012; Sherkat and Ellison 1999). Also, in a search of 16 major sociology journals from 1990 to 2012, we found only 15 articles that dealt with the intersection of "religion" and "work." Of these, only one study—in Greece—dealt with religious discrimination in the workplace (Drydakis 2010). Expanding our search, we found 5 more articles in non-sociology journals on religious discrimination at work, for a total of 6. Thus, our knowledge

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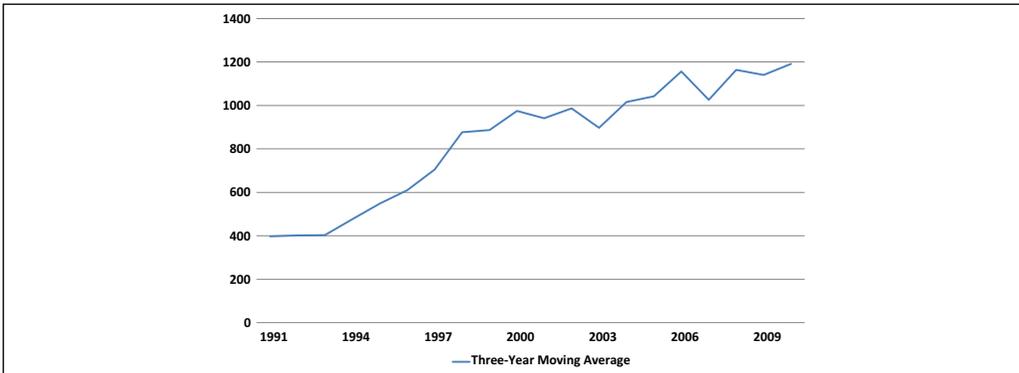


Figure 1. Print media counts for Lexus Nexus subject search of religious discrimination in the workplace, 1991-2010.

about religious discrimination in the U.S. workplace is scant.

This study helps fill this gap in the literature. Using an Internet-based field experiment in the Southern United States, we examine whether employers discriminate in hiring against various religious groups. We sent employers résumés from fictitious job applicants that reported one of seven different religious identities—atheist, Catholic, evangelical Christian, Jewish, Muslim, pagan, and a fictitious religious group—or a control group with no mention of religious affiliation, and then tested whether employers' response rates varied by religious group.

A Replication

This study replicates a recent field experiment on religion and hiring discrimination we conducted in the New England region (Wright et al. 2013). In the New England study, we sent out résumés that randomly assigned affiliation in seven religious groups and a control group, and recorded patterns of employer response. We found strong levels of employment discrimination against Muslims and lesser amounts of discrimination against atheists, pagans, and Catholics, but on the whole, the levels of discrimination were subdued owing largely to the relatively low levels of religiosity and the ethos of religious tolerance that characterize New England.

Replication is a key feature of experimental research, so in our study of the South conducted

about one year later, we followed nearly identical procedures as in the New England study. We replicate this study in the South for both substantive and methodological reasons. Substantively, different regions of the country have different religious climates. By several indicators, the American South is the most devout region, and New England is the least religious. The religious climate of a region might affect levels of discrimination in ways that are not obvious. Perhaps less religious regions such as New England are less accepting of overt religious expressions. Or, perhaps areas that are more religiously homogeneous, such as the American South, are less tolerant of those who practice other religions or no religion at all. As such, the results of this study can be interpreted on their own (is there religious discrimination in the American South?) as well as comparatively (how does the quantity and quality of religious discrimination in the South compare with that found in New England?). As such, this replication further documents the prevalence of religious discrimination in the United States, examines variations by region, and tests the reliability of résumé-based field experiments.

Previous Studies of Religious Discrimination in the Workplace

Field experiments are emerging as a new method for testing for workplace discrimination but are still fairly rare and underutilized

(Pager 2007; Pager and Quillian 2005; Pager, Western, and Bonikowski 2009). Their underuse is surprising since they offer a direct test for many forms of subtle, covert discrimination that may escape public awareness. As employers face legal and social pressure not to discriminate, they may use nondiscriminatory justifications to mask discriminatory behaviors (Pager 2007). Field experiments have helped uncover employment discrimination against blacks (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004), women with children (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007), gays and lesbians (Tilcsik 2011), obese people (King et al. 2006), pregnant women (Hebl et al. 2007), and ex-convicts (Pager 2003; Pager and Quillian 2005). Riach and Rich (2002:F515) argue for the use of this approach to study religious discrimination as well. They note that “in the investigation of economic discrimination, field experiments represent an important compliment to the conventional regression analysis approach. In the future we expect that field experiments will be applied more widely to age, disability, *religion*, and class” (emphasis added).

Several previous studies have conducted experimental studies of religious discrimination at work. Drydakis (2010) conducted a study in Athens, Greece, in which he applied for jobs using résumés that randomly assigned affiliation to Greece’s majority religion (Greek Orthodox) or one of its three largest minority religions (Pentecostal, evangelical, and Jehovah’s Witnesses). He found that the religious minorities were offered fewer interviews, especially for higher-status jobs. Banerjee et al. (2009) examined the role of caste and religion in employment discrimination in India. They sent out 3,160 fictitious résumés to 371 job openings in the IT sector in New Delhi. They found discrimination by caste for call center jobs, but not software jobs, and there was no discrimination against Muslims for either type of job.

In the United States, Jolson (1974) sent résumés to potential employers who were identical in all respects except that applicants were white Protestants, black Protestants, or white Jews. Jolson found evidence for racial, but not religious, discrimination. Employers

responded equally positively to the three résumés except those employers who advertised sales positions. From them, black applicants received only a quarter as many positive responses as did white applicants. There was no difference in response between the white Protestant and Jewish applicants.

More recently, Ghumman and Jackson (2008) used a laboratory experiment to test the influence of “religious identifiers” on employability. A sample of college students rated the employability of one of eight job applicants with identical résumés, and the résumés had pictures attached in which applicants wore items of religious attire that marked them as Christian, Muslim, or Jewish (along with a control group that had no religious identifiers). They found little difference in the treatment of applicants, except that Muslims were rated most employable for low-status jobs and least employable for high-status jobs. In another study, Ghumman and Jackson (2010) investigated the effect of wearing the Muslim headscarf. A sample of Muslim women rated their expectations for receiving offers for jobs that varied by job status and public contact. They found that women wearing the headscarf had lower expectations of receiving job offers than Muslim women who did not, and the difference increased as the amount of public contact associated with the occupation decreased and job status of the occupation increased. King and Ahmad (2010) conducted an audit study that yielded similar results. They directed three women confederates with differing ethnicities to apply for sales positions in retail stores. The women varied in the wearing of Muslim attire and the degree of warmth they expressed. They found no difference by ethnicity, but women who wore traditional attire and expressed less warmth were subject to discrimination.

While each of these studies has advanced our knowledge on religious discrimination, all have weaknesses that limit their generalizability. Jolson’s study lacks a control group to assess whether religious identifiers differed from nonidentifiers. Ghumman and Jackson’s (2008) experimental study lacks external and ecological validity since college students cannot approximate employers’ expertise in

evaluating job applicants. Ghumman and Jackson's survey of Muslim women merely measured subjects' perceptions of their own employability, not employers' actual decisions about hiring. King and Ahmad's (2010) in-person audit study recognized that small differences in self-presentation by auditors could bias the findings. Finally, the four U.S.-based studies investigate relatively few religious identities and disproportionately focus on Muslims. Our approach overcomes these limitations.

Theories of Religious Discrimination in the Workplace

Not only is there a paucity of research on religious discrimination, but also, the studies that have been done lack theoretical coherence. Absent an overarching framework, we draw upon four conceptual theories from the sociology of religion and the study of racial and ethnic discrimination to guide our research.

The first theory, secularization theory, considers reactions to religion as a whole. Secularization theory holds that modernization has led to the declining influence of religion on social institutions and individual consciousness (Berger 1983; Hadden 1987). While secularization does not necessarily equate with decline of religious belief, it uncouples religious expression from public life. This has led to the "privatization of religion" (Lechner 2003; Luckmann 1967), the belief that religion is properly confined to the private sphere and should be kept out of politics, academia, and the workplace (Carter 1993). Thus, expressions of religion that spill over into the public arena are viewed as inappropriate or even deviant. Even expressions of religious identity by majority religious groups can evoke a negative reaction, for the ethos of privatization forbids "wearing one's religion on one's sleeve." Overt religious expression in the workplace—regardless of the specific religion—may be perceived as potentially offensive to coworkers, clients, or customers, so we expect applicants who express a religious affiliation in the

hiring process to receive less interest from employers. Thus, based on secularization theory:

Hypothesis 1: Job applicants who mention any religious identity will experience more discrimination from employers than those who do not.

The next three theories provide competing hypotheses for which religious groups should encounter the most discrimination. First, religious stratification theory traces its origins to Weber's ([1905] 2002) classic study of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which maps out the economic implications of Calvinist theology. According to Weber, at the societal level, the worldly asceticism practiced by Calvinists provided the underlying value system for the development of capitalism. At the individual level, Calvinism steered its adherents' toward economic prosperity as an outward sign that they were predestined for heaven. Religious stratification theory starts from the premise that the propensity to accumulate worldly wealth is unevenly distributed among different religious groups; thus, religious groups vary widely on measures of socioeconomic status (SES) such as education, income, and wealth (Davidson 2008; Pyle and Davidson 2003). This premise has received wide support in research on religion (Burstein 2007; Keister 2003, 2008; Smith and Faris 2005). Those religious groups with greater status can use the corresponding power to protect their place in society, and they thus might discriminate against lower-status religions. Religious stratification theory would suggest that members of religious groups with low overall social standing suffer the most discrimination in the job application process. For instance, Davidson (2008:376) found that members of privileged religions "hired people who shared their religious affiliation." According to a recent study (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010), Jewish Americans have income and education levels substantially above those of the general population. Atheists are somewhat above average in both. Catholics and Muslims are near-average,

and evangelical Christians and pagans are significantly below average. Thus, based on religious stratification theory:

Hypothesis 2a: Compared with those expressing no religious identity, job applicants who identify as evangelical Christians and pagans should suffer the most hiring discrimination, followed by Muslims and Catholics, followed by atheists, and Jews should experience the least discrimination of all.

Contact theory, from research on racial and ethnic discrimination, holds that prejudice is due to negative stereotypes based on limited information about minorities (Allport 1954). This theory claims that as majority members' contact with minorities moves from casual and impersonal to sustained and personal, misunderstandings and stereotypes break down, common values and goals are identified, and positive intergroup interactions emerge that ultimately reduce prejudice and discrimination (Pettigrew 1998). Thus, prejudice is inversely related to size of the subordinate group.¹ This perspective suggests that job candidates from the smallest religious groups would suffer the most discrimination. In the south, about 37 percent are evangelical Christians, 30 percent are other Protestants, 17 percent are Catholic, 11 percent are atheist or agnostic, and about 1.5 percent are Jews (although Jews are prominent in many aspects of Southern life) (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010). Muslims and pagans are each less than 1 percent of the population. Based on contact theory:

Hypothesis 2b: Compared with those expressing no religious identity, job applicants who identify as members of fictitious religious groups should suffer the most discrimination, followed by pagans and Muslims, followed by Jews, followed by atheists and Catholics, and evangelical Christians will experience the least discrimination of all.

Cultural distaste theory, also from the racial and ethnic discrimination literature,

posits that minority groups present challenges to the identities, cultural practices, and world-views of majority groups. Majority groups, in turn, are characterized as having rigid, parochial, or ethnocentric outlooks on life, and thus they develop negative views toward minority groups (Dixon and Rosenbaum 2004; Espenshade and Hempstead 1996; Vallas, Zimmerman, and Davis 2009). These negative views develop historically, become culturally embedded, and are transmitted through socialization. These views are relatively durable and are not easily overcome by contact with minorities (Huddy and Sears 1995; Sears 1988). Distinct differences in cultural attitudes toward various religions are well-established. For instance, a *USA Today/Gallup Poll* (2008) revealed that 45 percent of Americans expressed negative views of atheists, 34 percent had negative views of Muslims, 23 percent of evangelicals, 13 percent of Catholics, and 4 percent of Jews. Similarly, a Public Religion Research Institute (2011) poll found that 67 percent of Americans would be uncomfortable with an atheist serving as president, 64 percent with a Muslim, and 28 percent with an evangelical Christian.

Cultural distaste theory suggests regional differences in attitudes about different religions; therefore, we need to take into account the religious culture of the South. Given the evangelical Christian influence, we expect those groups most culturally different from that tradition to be most discriminated against. By this measure the irreligious (i.e., atheists) or non-Christians (i.e., Muslims, pagans) should be the targets of high rates of discrimination. Also, Catholics have historically been viewed with suspicion and as not "born again" by Southern evangelicals and, for reasons that will be developed more fully below, Jews have been viewed with favor. Based on the cultural distaste theory:

Hypothesis 2c: Compared with those expressing no religious identity, job applicants who identify as atheists, pagans, Muslims, or members of fictitious religious groups should suffer the most discrimination, followed by Catholics, followed by

Table 1. Summary of Hypotheses.

	Hypothesis 2a	Hypothesis 2b	Hypothesis 2c
	Religious stratification theory	Cultural contact theory	Distaste theory
Most discrimination	Evangelical Christians and Pagans Muslims and Catholics Atheists Jews	Wallonians Pagans and Muslims Jews Atheists and Catholics Evangelical Christians	Atheists, Pagans, Muslims, and Wallonians Catholics Jews Evangelical Christians
Least discrimination	No prediction for: Wallonians		

Jews, and evangelical Christians should experience the least discrimination of all.

We recognize that these three hypotheses are not entirely mutually exclusive; however, each yields different expectations and leads to a distinctive ordering in terms of the religious groups that are likely to experience most and least discrimination. Hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c are summarized in Table 1.

Religion in the American South

We situate our study in the American South, a region that stands apart from other regions of the United States in terms of its religious fervor. In general, Southern religion has three distinctive characteristics: relative religious homogeneity, the dominance of evangelicalism, and high levels of religiosity (Hill 2006). Compared with other regions and the nation, Protestants are overrepresented, and Catholics, Jews, atheists and agnostics, and other religious groups are underrepresented in the South (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010). Despite religious homogeneity, stereotypes of Southerners as “fundamentalist” or “born-again” Christians oversimplify the complexity and diversity of Southern religious life (Hill 2006). For example, Catholics are prevalent in some areas along the Gulf Coast, Jews have a longstanding presence in the South, particularly in the cities, and Muslims are not

uncommon but dispersed. Even Hindu and Buddhist populations are growing (Lippy 2005).

A higher percentage of people in the South identify as evangelical (37.0%) than do in the Northeast (14.0%), the Midwest (26.6%), the West (20.6%), and the country as a whole (26.6%) (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010). Only in the South do evangelical Protestants outnumber other Protestants. The prevalence of evangelicalism gives Southern religious life a distinctive character. While mainline denominations focus on societal reform and “the possibility of reconciling between Biblical and human understandings of the world and history” (Ownby 2005:32), evangelicals focus more on personal sin and salvation, the need to reform personal behavior, and relatively literal interpretations of the Bible. The cultural influence of evangelicalism in the South is matched only by its influence in the public sphere as evangelicals are overrepresented in politics and civic life (Wilson 2005).

Relative to other regions, Southerners rank highest on indicators of religious beliefs and practices including frequency of prayer, receiving answers to prayers, having an absolute certainty of belief in God, believing that the Bible is the literal word of God, and believing that their religion is the one true faith leading to eternal life (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010). This distinctive evangelical influence makes the South an ideal setting for testing religious discrimination in the workplace.

Data and Method

Our study uses an innovative variation of the traditional field experiment known as the Internet-based field experiment (IBFE) in which experimental subjects are contacted through the Internet (see Wallace et al. 2012). In our case, we submitted applications online for jobs that were advertised in the Southern United States on a popular employment Web site. Our IBFE design falls within the tradition of correspondence studies in which researchers send fictitious résumés to apply for advertised job openings (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004; Pager 2007; Riach and Rich 2002). These differ from in-person audit studies in which auditors apply for job openings face-to-face (e.g., Pager 2003). Like other correspondence studies, our Internet-based design involves non-face-to-face, “first contact” interactions with employers.

The Internet is increasingly important in the job application process. One job search service claims that 26 percent of successful job applications are made over the Internet (Gordon 2010). The Internet also potentially raises new opportunities for subtle forms of discriminatory treatment. Employers can simply not respond to employees who reveal undesirable status characteristics, making discrimination difficult to detect. The IBFE offers a reliable method for uncovering these subtle expressions of discrimination.

Experimental Design

We conducted our field experiment in the Southern United States between March and May of 2010. In response to ads placed on an Internet-based Web site, we submitted 3,200 résumés to 800 jobs within 150 miles of two major Southern cities. For each job posting, we sent four applications with varying biographical information but comparable job qualifications. We randomly assigned to each résumé one of seven experimental conditions—identification as atheist, Catholic, evangelical Christian, Jewish, pagan, Muslim, a fictitious religion we called “Wallonian,”² or a control group with no religious identification.

Unlike the in-person audit studies cited above (e.g., Ghumman and Jackson 2010; King and Ahmad 2010), correspondence tests give researchers complete control over how job applicants present themselves to employers (Pager 2007). They permit a simple but effective test of the treatment variable (religion) on the outcome variable (employer response) since other potentially relevant job-candidate variables, such as candidate’s race, education, age, and residence are implicitly controlled for in the design.

Correspondence tests are relatively inexpensive to administer, and the prevalence of online job search Web sites makes them straightforward to conduct. Compared with in-person audit studies, they do not require extensive training of auditors to reduce differences in interpersonal presentation (Heckman 1998). In addition, Internet-based designs typically permit larger sample sizes and wider geographic scope than in-person audits because of the ease of submitting applications. This permits an increased number of experimental conditions while maintaining adequate statistical power.

In correspondence studies, there are various ways of manipulating information about job applicants. For example, Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) sent out almost 5,000 résumés to jobs advertised in Boston and Chicago, and gave the applications either white- or African American-sounding names. Likewise, Riach and Rich (2002) altered names on résumés to study gender discrimination. This approach works well for studying discrimination by race, ethnicity, or gender but is less suitable for the study of religious discrimination. Instead, we incorporated religious information into the body of the job application.

Creating the Résumés

In our study, we sent out résumés ostensibly from fictional recent graduates of flagship state universities located in the South, and we signaled religious affiliation in the résumé by listing membership in campus religious organizations such as the “University of Alabama

Association,” where the blank is replaced with a religious identity (e.g., atheist, Catholic, evangelical Christian, Jewish, Muslim, pagan, Wallonian, or a nonreligious affiliation for the control group).³ This method of embedding experimental treatments in résumés has been used to signal sexual identity (Bailey, Wallace, and Wright 2013; Tilcsik 2011) and could easily be extended to other status characteristics such as political identification, disability, veteran status, or family status.

Including such religious information on résumés is realistic for recent college graduates because they generally lack extensive work histories and tend to compensate by listing involvement in extracurricular activities and volunteer experiences (Leape and Vacca 1995). These activities include participation in political, community, or identity-based organizations (Tilcsik 2011).

We created four basic résumé templates. Each template described a recent graduate from one of four major public universities in the South. We gave each template unique academic and job experiences, but the templates were comparable in overall qualifications. Each template described an applicant with a strong academic background, including a major or minor in a business-related field. Each template also reported a GPA of 3.7 or above and being on the Dean’s List. They also described involvement in campus organizations and activities as well as hobbies and interests. Two reported graduation in 2008 followed by a year of work, and two had graduated in the year before the study in 2009. The employment experiences listed on the templates were typical of college students, such as intermittent summer or academic-year jobs as restaurant wait staff, bank tellers, or interns. We varied the font, style, and graphical formatting of the four résumés to allay employer suspicions.

For each of the four templates, we created 4 distinctive résumé identities by assigning one of four separate names used in the study, two male and two female, for a total of 16 separate identities (i.e., four templates × four names). For each résumé identity, we then created eight

résumés by assigning one of the eight religious affiliations, for a total of 128 distinct résumés.

Each employer in the study was sent 4 separate résumés, each derived from one of the four templates, each with a unique, randomly assigned name and religious affiliation. Altogether, we sent out 4 résumés each to 800 employers resulting a total of 3,200 sent résumés. With eight experimental treatments, this resulted in 400 applications per treatment. To our knowledge, no employers became aware that the résumés were part of a research study.

We asked three experienced human resource officers to review the résumés for realism and balance. These experts judged the résumés as realistic and thought that the applicants’ qualifications would be competitive for positions in their organizations. When asked, all three human resource experts said they observed the religious affiliation on the résumés, indicating that the religious manipulation was noticeable. One of them queried us about the fictional Wallonian religious group, suggesting he had never heard of them; nevertheless, he did not question their authenticity as a religious identity (we told him at that point the Wallonians were a fictional group).

There is a tension in choosing applicant qualifications in this type of study. On one hand, if applicants are under-qualified, they might receive too few employer responses for adequate statistical testing of treatment effects. On the other hand, if applicants are over-qualified, this might override employers’ reticence in hiring that type of person (e.g., Dovidio and Gaertner 2000; Heckman 1998). Since we conducted our study during a time of high unemployment, we viewed insufficient employer response to be the greater danger, and so we created relatively strong résumés.

Applying for Jobs

We identified suitable job openings on a popular national employment Web site. This Web site allows applicants to select jobs using various filters, and we chose jobs that were within 150 miles of two Southern target cities. We identified jobs that would be suitable for recent

college graduates such as banking, customer service, finance, hospitality, and telecommunications, roughly in proportion to their occurrence on the Web site.

Recording Responses

Employers could respond to the job applications by phone, e-mail, or both. To record phone calls, we acquired eight separate voicemail boxes with the same area code and exchange and assigned one to each experimental treatment and the control. This allowed us to know with certainty the religion of the applicant being contacted. We used the same default answering message in each voicemail box. To record e-mails, we created separate e-mail accounts for each treatment and the control. Each account was with the same popular e-mail host, and the addresses were randomly named to avoid giving some treatments more attractive sounding e-mail addresses than others.

From employers' responses, we created four outcome variables—two measuring the rate of employer response and two measuring the strength of employer preference. The first outcome variable is a dichotomous variable measuring whether an employer responded to an application, and, if so, whether they responded by phone and/or e-mail. The second outcome variable was a simple count of how many times the employer contacted the applicant, whether by phone or e-mail.

The third outcome variable is one we devised for this study that we call the "employer preference scale." We assume that employers display preference for an applicant by contacting that applicant sooner and to the exclusion of other candidates. We first create a continuous-level index that allocates 10 points to each batch of four applications sent to an employer and divide those points proportionate to the distribution and timing of employer responses. For example, if an employer responded to only one of the four applications, that applicant received all 10 points, and the other three applicants received 0 points. If an employer responded to two applicants on the same day, both were given 5 points. If an employer responded to an applicant on one day and to a

second applicant a day later, the first applicant received 6.67 points and the second, 3.33 points. The resulting index, which ranges from 0 to 10, is shown in Table 2, Panel A.

As one thoughtful reviewer noted, this index provides a reasonable rank ordering of employer preferences, but it is questionable whether the assumption of a constant difference between units at different points on the scale can be justified. We thus converted the continuous-level index into the ordinal-level employer preference scale with values from 0 to 12. The conversion of the index to the employer preference scale is shown in Table 2, Panel B.

The fourth outcome variable is a dichotomous variable measuring whether employers responded to only one of the applicants from the four that they received (no matter how many times they contacted that applicant). This "solo" response variable indicates a clear preference for one applicant over the other three and corresponds to a score of 12 on the employer preference scale.

In our analyses, we created multivariate models estimating the outcome variable as a function of the seven religious treatments with the control group as the reference category. We used logit models to predict whether employers made a contact and if they made a solo contact, negative binomial models to predict how many contacts they made, and ordered logit to predict the employer preference scale. Because each employer received four résumés, the responses are not independent and identically distributed. To adjust standard errors, we use cluster-adjusted standard errors. Because our hypotheses are directional, we use one-tailed tests of significance.

Results

In Table 3, we test our first hypothesis that employers will respond less frequently to résumés that mention a religious affiliation than those that do not. In Panel A, we present employer responses to the control group, the seven religious identities, and the religious identities plus the control group. Out of 3,200 job applications, 14.0 percent received at least

Table 2. Measurement of Strength of Employer Response with the Employer Preference Index/Scale.

Panel A. Employer preference index				
Pattern of employer responses	Points assigned to Job Applications A, B, C, and D			
	A	B	C	D
A only	10			
A&B	5	5		
A&B&C	3.33	3.33	3.33	
A&B&C&D	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50
A, then B	6.67	3.33		
A, then B, then C	5.33	3.33	1.33	
A, then B, then C, then D	4	3	2	1
A, then B&C	5	2.50	2.50	
A, then B&C&D	4	2	2	2
A, then B, then C&D	4	3	1.50	1.50
A, then B&C, then D	4	2.50	2.50	1
A&B, then C	4	4	2	
A&B, then C, then D	3.50	3.50	2	1
A&B&C, then D	3	3	3	1

Panel B. Conversion of continuous-level employer preference index to ordinal-level employer preference scale	
Index	Scale
0	0
1	1
1.33	2
1.50	3
2	4
2.50	5
3.33	6
3.50	7
4	8
5	9
5.33	10
6.67	11
10	12

one contact from employers, 7.9 percent received an e-mail, and 8.7 percent received a phone call. These percentages are similar to other correspondence studies of employment discrimination (e.g., Tilcsik 2011). In columns 1 to 3, applicants who express a religious identity are 26 percent less likely to receive contacts of any kind (13.5% vs. 18.2%), 24 percent

less likely to receive e-mails (7.6% vs. 10.0%), and 30 percent less likely to receive phone calls (8.3% vs. 11.8%) than those who do not. In columns 4 to 6, those expressing a religious identity received 31 percent fewer contacts (0.228 vs. 0.331), 29 percent fewer e-mails (0.125 vs. 0.177), and 33 percent fewer phone calls (0.103 vs. 0.154). The results strongly support the secularization hypothesis that employers penalize those who indicate any overt expression of religion.

Panel B addresses the strength of employer preference. Here we restrict the analysis to first contacts by employers. We find no significant difference between religious identifiers and the control group in the likelihood of solo responses. However, the employer preference scale is significantly lower for religious identifiers than the control group (0.95 vs. 1.27). Thus, the results in Panel B are mixed, but overall, the results in Table 3 support the secularization hypothesis that employers favor religious nonidentifiers.

In Table 4, we show employer responses by religious treatment. Columns 1 to 3 show results of logistic regression analyses of whether responses were received by any means, by e-mail only, and by phone only; columns 4 to 6 show results of negative binomial regression analyses of the number of contacts received in the same manner. For ease of interpretation, we show percentages and mean contacts by religion in the table.⁴ Again, 14.0 percent received at least one response, 7.9 percent received at least one e-mail, and 8.7 percent received at least one phone call. On average, each application received 0.241 contacts, with the typical applicant receiving slightly more e-mails (0.132) than phone calls (0.109).

Hypotheses 2a through 2c express different expectations about which of the treatment groups should encounter the most discriminatory treatment from employers. That discrimination occurs is clear from the results in Table 4. Compared with the control group, who received responses 18.2 percent of the time, Muslims (10.7%), atheists (12.0%), Wallonians (13.0%), Catholics (13.0%), and pagans (13.3%) received significantly fewer responses. While 10.0 percent of the control

Table 3. Mean Differences in Employer Contacts (All Religions Compared with Control Group).

Panel A. All employer contacts, by e-mail and phone

Religion	Received at least one contact			Contacts per application			N
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	
	Phone call or e-mail	e-mail	Phone call	Phone call or e-mail	e-mail	Phone call	
Control	18.2%	10.0%	11.8%	.331	.177	.154	400
All religions	13.5%**	7.6%*	8.3%**	.228**	.125**	.103**	2,800
All religions plus control	14.0%	7.9%	8.7%	.241	.132	.109	3,200
Estimation technique	Logit	Logit	Logit	Negative binomial	Negative binomial	Negative binomial	

Panel B. Strength of employer preference in first employer contacts

	(1)	(2)
	Solo	Employer Preference Scale
Control	2.31%	1.27
All religions	1.92%	0.95**
All religions plus control	1.97%	0.98
Estimation technique	Logit	Ordered logit

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, † $p < .10$, one-tailed tests of difference between religious treatments and the control group.

group received at least one e-mail response, this was true for significantly fewer Muslims (6.3%), atheists (6.3%), Catholics (6.8%), and at less conventional rates of significance ($p < .10$) for evangelicals (7.5%) and pagans (8.0%). A similar picture of discrimination emerged for phone calls where 11.8 percent of the control group received a phone call compared with significantly fewer calls for Muslims (6.1%), Wallonians (6.3%) atheists (8.0%), pagans (8.0%), and Catholics (8.5%).

The analysis of the mean number of contacts per applicant (columns 4–6) yields similar results. Compared with the control group who received 0.331 responses per applicant, atheists (0.178), Muslims (0.180), Wallonians (0.213), Catholics (0.233), evangelicals (0.250), and pagans (0.258) received significantly fewer responses. For e-mail responses, compared with the control group who received 0.177 e-mails per applicant, atheists (0.090), Muslims (0.110), evangelicals (0.115) and at less conventional rates of significance ($p < .10$)

Wallonians (0.135) and pagans (0.143) received significantly fewer e-mails. Finally, for phone contacts, compared with the control group who received 0.154 calls per applicant, Muslims (0.071), Wallonians (0.078), atheists (0.088), Catholics (0.105) and at less conventional rates of significance ($p < .10$) pagans (0.115) received significantly fewer phone calls; however, the difference between the controls and evangelicals in phone calls is not significant.

On balance, the results show strong evidence of discriminatory treatment by employers. Their views are consistently prejudicial against atheists, Muslims, and pagans, who received significantly lower results in all six models, and to a lesser extent, Wallonians, Catholics, and evangelicals, who received significantly lower results in from three to five models. Curiously, employers do not seem less reluctant to contact Wallonians by e-mail, but they are loath to contact them by phone. Oddly, also, evangelicals receive significantly fewer

Table 4. Employer Responses to Résumés Varying by Religious Treatment ($N = 3,200$).

Religion	Received at least one contact			Contacts per application		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Phone call or e-mail	e-mail	Phone call	Phone call or e-mail	e-mail	Phone call
Control	18.2%	10.0%	11.8%	.331	.177	.154
Atheist	12.0%**	6.3%*	8.0%*	.178**	.090**	.088**
Catholic	13.0%**	6.8%*	8.5%*	.233*	.128	.105*
Evangelical	15.8%	7.5%†	10.5%	.250*	.115*	.135
Jewish	16.5%	9.3%	10.5%	.290	.158	.133
Muslim	10.7%**	6.3%*	6.1%**	.180**	.110*	.071**
Pagan	13.3%**	8.0%†	8.0%*	.258*	.143†	.115†
Wallonian	13.0%**	9.0%	6.3%**	.213**	.135†	.078**
All religions plus control	14.0%	7.9%	8.7%	.241	.132	.109
Estimation technique	Logit	Logit	Logit	Negative binomial	Negative binomial	Negative binomial

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, † $p < .10$, one-tailed tests of difference between religious treatments and the control group.

e-mails but not phone calls. Employers' least prejudicial views were reserved for Jews who failed to show significantly lower results on any indicator.

Table 5 examines the strength of employer preference as measured by solo responses and the employer preference scale. Column 1 shows that about 2.31 percent of control group applicants received the only employer response, that is, a solo response. Two religious groups had higher rates of solo response and five had lower rates, but none were significantly different from the control group. Curiously, atheists receive almost identical rates of solo response as the control group, indicating perhaps that some employers preferred atheists as much as others abhorred them.

The employer preference scale shows somewhat different results that mirror those in Table 4. Recall that the employer preference scale ranges from 0 to 12. Muslims (0.69), atheists (0.86), pagans (0.89), Wallonians (0.90), and Catholics (0.94) show significantly lower preference rates than the control group (1.27). Evangelicals and Jews show no significant differences compared with the control group. The employer preference scale provides the single most revealing measure of discrimination as it takes into account both the

frequency and strength of preference. Thus, for example, although atheists had nearly identical rates of solo responses as the control group, their employer preference scores indicate that, on balance, they experience strong discriminatory treatment.

In separate analyses footnoted in Table 5, we find some evidence that Jews receive favorable treatment from employers compared with other religions. Although not statistically significant, Jews receive more solo responses than, and their employer preference rates were nearly as high as, the control group. Further, there is suggestive evidence that, compared with the other six religious treatments combined, Jewish applicants showed higher rates of solo responses (2.75% vs. 1.78%, $p < .199$) as well as higher employer preference rates (1.20 vs. 0.90, $p < .035$).⁵ Although only the second of these differences achieves conventional standards of statistical significance, they suggest that some employers may favor Jewish applicants by giving them the first or, in some cases, the only opportunity for employment.

Discussion and Conclusion

Religious discrimination in the workplace is a growing problem, but only a handful of studies

Table 5. Strength of Employer Response to Job Applicants by Religious Treatment (N = 3,200).

Religion	(1)	(2)
	Solo responses	Employer Preference Scale
Control	2.31%	1.27
Atheist	2.25%	0.86**
Catholic	1.75%	0.94**
Evangelical	2.50%	1.15
Jewish	2.75% ^a	1.20 ^b
Muslim	1.22%	0.69**
Pagan	1.50%	0.89**
Wallonian	1.50%	0.90**
All religions plus control	1.97%	0.98
Estimation technique	Logit	Ordered logit

^aJewish applicants received significantly more solo responses than all other religious treatments, $p < .199$, two-tailed test.

^bJewish applicants received significantly higher employer preference rates than all other religious treatments, $p < .035$, two-tailed test.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, † $p < .10$, one-tailed tests of difference between religious treatments and the control group.

have examined this topic. Most U.S. studies focus primarily on discrimination against Muslims, so they do not offer a broad treatment of this topic. In this study we sent 3,200 fictitious résumés to employers in the Southern United States. These résumés ostensibly came from recent graduates from flagship state universities located in the South, and they listed membership in various student organizations, including religious ones. Each résumé was assigned one of seven treatments—atheist, Catholic, evangelical Christian, Jewish, Muslim, pagan, Wallonian (a fictitious religion)—or a nonreligious student organization as the control group.

We interpret our findings in light of four theories. First, following secularization theory, we hypothesized that overt statements of religious identity or beliefs on résumés would lead to fewer responses from employers. We found strong support for this hypothesis as résumés that mentioned any religious affiliation received 29 percent fewer e-mails and 33

percent fewer phone calls than the control group. This antireligious bias was not isolated to specific religions, for it applied to a fictitious religion as well—the Wallonians. Importantly, the secularization thesis does not require the absence of religion because, as the U.S. demonstrates, a secularized nation can still have a high rate of belief in God. Rather, secularization implies the declining influence of religion in everyday life and its disappearance from the public sphere. In the context of the workplace, it is possible that employers would view overt religious expression of any kind as potentially offensive to coworkers, clients, or customers and disruptive to the workplace. Thus, from the perspective of secularization theory, even atheists are penalized. Whether one professes overtly to be religious or irreligious, it violates the secular norm that one should not publicly display one's religious preferences for all to see.

Specific religions encountered varying amounts of employer discrimination. Muslims faced the most consistent and severe discrimination as they received 38 percent fewer e-mails and 54 percent fewer phone calls than the control group and ranked lowest in the employer preference scale. Considering that the Muslim résumés did not contain Arab-sounding names or Islamic cultural references, this finding is probably a conservative estimate of the prejudice against Muslims. These findings are consistent with popular media accounts that have documented severe discrimination against Muslims (Greenhouse 2010; Pledger 2011; Walzer 2010).

Atheists also faced considerable discrimination from employers, a finding consistent with the perception of them as “others” in American society (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). They received 49 percent fewer e-mails and 43 percent fewer phone calls than the controls. They were equally as likely to receive an e-mail response as Muslims but received slightly fewer e-mail contacts than Muslims. Atheists were second lowest overall in the employer preference scale despite the puzzling fact that they ranked relatively high in solo responses, indicating that a few

employers actually preferred atheists over religious believers.

Next to the nonexistent Wallonians, pagans are the least familiar religious minority and sparsely represented in the South. They received 19 percent fewer e-mail contacts and 25 percent fewer phone calls than the controls. Despite faring better than other groups on some indicators, they were third lowest on the employer preference scale. As with the Wallonians, the low rating of pagans suggests that lack of familiarity breeds intolerance and contempt.

The fictitious Wallonians were reviled almost as much as Muslims, atheists, and pagans. They received only 24 percent fewer e-mails but 49 percent fewer phone calls than the controls. Employers were particularly reluctant to contact them by phone as they ranked second lowest (to Muslims) in being contacted by phone and phone contacts per application. Like the college students in Hartley and Mintz's (1946) study who ranked the fictitious Wallonian ethnic group low among 30 different nationalities, employers in our sample displayed similar intolerance for their religious namesakes. This suggests that religious discrimination stems in part from ignorance since people tend to fear the unfamiliar.

Catholics were disparaged almost as much as Wallonians and pagans. They received 28 percent fewer e-mails and 32 percent fewer phone calls than the controls. While they consistently experienced discrimination across all indicators except solo responses, they ranked only fifth lowest on the employer preference scale. Thus, despite being the closest theologically to evangelical Christians, the largest group in the South, they face significant discrimination. This antipathy toward Catholics in the South is likely due to several factors—the fact that Catholics barely constitute one-sixth of the citizenry and that much of the recent growth of Catholicism is due to the influx of Hispanic immigrants. Equally likely, this friction represents lingering effects of cultural misunderstanding between evangelicals where historically “many Southerners regarded Catholics as unsaved and Catholicism as a

non-Christian mystery religion” (Lorelle 2012:1).

Almost two-thirds of Southerners adhere to Protestantism and over one-third are evangelicals, so it is not surprising that evangelicals experience less employer prejudice than other groups. For instance, they received slightly more solo responses than the control group. Oddly, however, they received 35 percent fewer e-mails than the controls but only 12 percent fewer phone calls (not significant). Employers' reluctance to contact evangelicals by e-mail is perplexing, but perhaps because of comfort levels with evangelicals, some employers shift their mode of contact from e-mail to phone. In any event, evangelicals' employer preference rating was just slightly below the control group and not statistically different.

Only Jews escaped totally unscathed as we found no statistically significant evidence of hiring discrimination against this group across all eight indicators in the study. Not only did Jewish applicants not face discrimination but they also actually may have received preferential treatment by some employers—that is, they were more likely to receive an early, exclusive, or solo response from employers, compared with all other religious groups combined. This suggests there is a subset of employers who show a preference for Jewish applicants.

We turn to three additional theories to explain this pattern of results. These theories share the premise that marginalized religious groups will be targeted for discrimination, but they disagree over the basis of marginalization. Religious stratification theory suggests that more marginalized groups are those that rank lowest on socioeconomic dimensions like education, income, and wealth. Intergroup contact theory contends that more marginalized groups are those that are smaller in size and provide fewer opportunities for contact with majority groups. Cultural distaste theory argues that more marginalized groups are those that are most culturally different from the dominant group, in this case evangelical Protestants. Each of these theories achieves some success, but on balance, cultural distaste theory best

explains religious discrimination in the workplace in the South.

Religious stratification theory accurately predicts that Jews, who are highly educated and have higher incomes, would experience the least discrimination, and pagans, who rate low on each dimension, would experience relatively high rates of discrimination. But the theory does poorly in other respects. By this theory, atheists should fare rather well, but they are highly discriminated against. Muslims, who are near the middle socioeconomically, encounter extremely high rates of discrimination and evangelicals, who rank low on the socioeconomic scale, face relatively little discrimination.

Intergroup contact theory correctly predicts that the largest group in the South, evangelicals, should experience relatively low rates of discrimination. It also explains why the smallest groups—Wallonians, Muslims, and pagans—are victims of high discrimination. But contact theory does not adequately explain why Catholics, the second largest group, encounter significant amounts of discrimination, and Jews, one of the smallest groups, experience none. It also does not explain why atheists, who are larger than many of the smaller groups, should be so reviled.

Cultural distaste theory contends that groups that are most different from the culturally dominant evangelicals—atheists, Muslims, Wallonians, and pagans—should suffer the highest rates of discrimination and for the most part they do. It also correctly predicts that the culturally dominant group, evangelical Protestants, should encounter very little discrimination. Also, Catholics, who are most religiously similar to Protestants, are still not embraced in Southern evangelical culture and accordingly are targets of rather strong discrimination—in some cases at similar levels to Wallonians or pagans.

The one possible exception, the lack of discrimination against Jews, is not so exceptional upon closer inspection. Jews, and especially the Jewish state of Israel, feature prominently in evangelical Christian theology; in fact, evangelicals express stronger support for Israel than any other ethnic or religious group except

Jews themselves (Schrag 2005). Also, as Schmier (1989) points out, despite constituting barely 1 percent of the Southern population, Jews have had a disproportionate influence on Southern culture. While Jews are culturally different from evangelicals in many respects, Southern Jews have deep historical roots in the South and have more successfully assimilated into mainstream culture than Jews in other regions. Southern Jews did not form residential enclaves to the same extent as Northern Jews, and they attained positions of influence and leadership in civic and philanthropic associations. As Schmier (1989:1290) notes, “few phases of the Southern experience and few places in the South escaped their influence.” In short, Jews thrived in the South, not by brandishing their religious differences but by embracing key aspects of Southern evangelical culture.

Thus, a more nuanced version of cultural distaste theory can explain the apparent lack of hiring discrimination against Jews and the tendency for some employers to show preferential treatment toward them compared with other religious treatments. Cultural distaste theory may also encompass the finding from secularization theory that overt religious expression is penalized in certain public settings. While religion is central to Southern life and Southerners more openly display their religious beliefs than citizens in other parts of the country, they also embrace the secular notion that there is a proper time and place for religious expression. Thus, even in the Deep South, most employers draw the line against overt expressions of religious belief in the workplace.

It is instructive to compare our current study of hiring discrimination in the American South with the study we conducted in New England (Wright et al. 2013). In contrast to the citizens of the South, New Englanders express lower levels of religiosity than other regions of the country: Only 29 percent attend church frequently, compared with 49 percent in the South and 42 percent in the United States as a whole (*USA Today/Gallup Poll* 2010). New Englanders also have lower rates of religious affiliation, are less certain that there is a God, and view religion as less important in their

lives than citizens in any other region of the country (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010). Our New England study was identical in almost every detail with the current study in the South, but there were important differences in the findings. First, in New England we observed almost no statistically significant discrimination against any group in e-mail responses from employers; there was more variability in phone responses, particularly for the variable receiving at least one phone contact. Second, Muslims suffered the strongest expressions of discrimination; discrimination against other groups, when it occurred, was only significant at unconventional levels ($p < .10$). Moreover, Muslims were the only group that was discriminated against according to the employer preference index; among the other groups, atheists received scores on the index that were closest to the control group. Third, there was no discrimination at all against Wallonians, but every other group including Jews received at least one expression of significant discrimination. Overall, while there is evidence of religious discrimination in New England, with the exception of Muslims, it is much less pronounced than in the South. This suggests, ironically, that religious discrimination in hiring is most prevalent in regions of the country where religion is most passionately practiced. The results also suggest that the particular expression of religious discrimination in a region stems largely from the cultural context.

We believe these two studies of religious discrimination have broader implications for theories of prejudice and discrimination in society. For instance, our findings show some similarities to the more well-developed literature on prejudice against racial and immigrant minorities. In that literature, scholars have found mixed evidence for contact theory, group threat theory, and cultural theory, but various versions of cultural theory are emerging as a leading explanation for discrimination. This is consistent with our findings that cultural distaste theory offers the best explanation for religious discrimination. We thus believe that future research on religious discrimination should build upon and contribute toward a

more robust theory of prejudice and discrimination in society.

We hope our work encourages future research on religious discrimination in the workplace. While our research is limited to the early stages of the hiring process, future research should explore other aspects of religious discrimination on the job such as differential work assignments, discipline, promotion opportunities, and benefits. Researchers also need to analyze instances where employees do not receive adequate accommodations at work for their religious beliefs, attire, or practices to understand the influence of privatization of religion. Also, as suggested by differences in our Southern and New England studies, we need more studies that examine religious discrimination in other regions of the country. Most of all, we simply need to conduct more basic research on religious discrimination, in general and in the workplace specifically, to advance theoretical understanding.

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Notes

1. Contact theory emerged as a counterpoint to group threat theory (Blalock 1967; Blumer 1958) that argues that majority groups develop prejudicial views toward subordinate groups, which they perceive to be a threat to their privileged position in society. Since larger minority groups pose a greater threat to scarce resources, prejudice is directed toward groups in direct proportion to their size.
2. We borrowed the name Wallonian from Hartley and Mintz (1946) who used it as a fictitious ethnic identity in testing the social distance between college student respondents and various ethnic groups. We use it here to test for an antireligious bias toward an "unknown" religion.
3. In the case of the Wallonians, we used labels such as "University of Alabama Wallonian

- Religious Association” to make sure it was recognized as a religious identity. Also, for the control group, we deliberately used vague, fictional organizational names such as “University of Alabama Student Association” that would not signal any particular interest group identity.
4. Tables with model coefficients are available from the authors upon request.
 5. In these tests, we use two-tailed tests because there is no theoretical anticipation of this result.
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