

# Do Religious People Have to Be Prejudiced?

By Roger L. Dudley

**P**rejudice. It's an ugly word—an attitude that we can easily discern and usually recoil from in other people but find very difficult to admit to in ourselves. Clifford T. Morgan explains the dynamics: "A prejudice is really a strong tendency to *overcategorize* people. It lumps many individuals together on the basis of some common, and largely irrelevant, characteristic. . . . Every member of the group is then regarded as having the same characteristic."<sup>1</sup>

We tend to feel prejudice toward members of groups that differ from the one in which we feel comfortable: other races, the other gender, other religions, other socioeconomic groups, etc.

If prejudice does not manifest itself in outright discrimination, it is often revealed in exclusiveness or lack of

social compassion. Prejudiced people do not favor providing help to "outgroups," especially when such help is likely to incur personal sacrifice. If they don't actively dislike these outgroups, they are at least suspicious of them and unsympathetic with their plight. They are likely to consider the misfortunes those in the out groups suffer as self-inflicted.

## Prejudice and religion

Because prejudice is ugly, we generally do not want to admit to perpetrating it. And in-

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deed Christians should be the most prejudice-free people of any group. Our God is defined as love (1 John 4:8), and the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves lies at the foundation of our religion (see Matt. 22:37-39). In the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), Jesus extended the concept of neighbor to include groups outside of our own. The early church had to learn that the gospel must bridge the divisions like Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (Gal. 3:28). They were to discover that God is not partial to any group of people (Acts 10:34, 35) and that favoritism in dealing with social classes is a sin (James 2:1-9).

So much for the ideal. What is the reality? Here we find a paradox. More than 25 years ago Gordon Allport pointed out that social and psychological scientists have observed that, "on the average, churchgoers are more intolerant than nonchurchgoers."<sup>2</sup> A dozen years later Andrew Greeley noted: "The research findings on the connection between religion and prejudice are overwhelming."<sup>3</sup>

About the same time J. D. Davidson was reporting on a study of Baptist and Methodist congregations in Indiana. He found that lay members who scored high on a measure of vertical beliefs (i.e., beliefs about God) tended to score low on a measure of "social consequences" (participation in various forms of religiously motivated social activism), while those who scored high on a measure of horizontal beliefs (i.e., beliefs about the importance of people) scored high on social consequences.<sup>4</sup> More recently, Daniel Batson and Larry Ventis have concluded: "At least for White, middle-class Christians in the United States, religion is not associated with increased love and acceptance but with increased intolerance, prejudice, and bigotry."<sup>5</sup>

How can this be? At first glance the situation seems incongruous and incredible. One Christian scholar sets forth the contrasts we would expect to find: "Christian faith proclaims the oneness of mankind; prejudice separates men. Christian faith seeks to make life fuller and richer; prejudice narrows and constricts men's lives, both those who are the objects of prejudice and those who are prejudiced. Christian faith proclaims the sovereignty of God over all men's lives; prejudice sets some men up to be sovereign over others. Christian faith casts out fear; and prejudice breeds on fear."<sup>6</sup>

## Why the relationship?

Students of religion and behavior have identified a number of factors that may incline many religious people toward prejudice. I will briefly discuss seven of them.

*The Doctrine of Revelation.* If God has given us truth, we must be right. If we are right, others must be wrong. Possession of "truth" presents a real minefield for those of us who embrace a revealed religion. It will take a fine sense of balance to traverse this field without stepping on the explosives. "A paradox exists where, on the one hand, religion teaches love, respect, and equality; but, on the other, it teaches particularism—only a selected religion has the truth and can offer salvation."<sup>7</sup> This belief, combined with certain other psychological needs, opens the door wide to prejudice.

*Chosen people.* Closely related to the doctrine of revelation is the doctrine of election: God has chosen my group (church, race, gender) in some special way. "Whatever theological justification the doctrine may have, the view that one's group is chosen (and other groups are not) leads forthwith away from brotherhood and into bigotry. It does so because it feeds one's pride and hunger for status—two important psychological roots of prejudice."<sup>8</sup>

Greeley says that "religious groups . . . constitute within the larger society several in-group associations which in turn generate distrust, fear, and hostility toward members of the out group, a hostility which is particularly powerful because the felt differences are the result of very early socialization. Growing up religious . . . means growing up not only as a member of one religious group but also as someone distinct from and distinctly in opposition to members of other religious groups."<sup>9</sup>

Batson and Ventis have explained that religion can "justify callous rejection of anyone not like oneself. For there appears to be a tragic, unintended corollary to knowing that one is among God's elect. If some are the 'elect,' 'sheep,' 'chosen people,' 'family of God,' then others are the 'damned,' 'goats,' 'outcasts,' 'infidels.' Far from encouraging universal brotherly love, such labels are likely to encourage rejection and intolerance."<sup>10</sup>

*Focus on salvation.* A concern for beyond-this-life personal salvation may lead to lack of concern for the temporal plight of people. Milton Rokeach conducted a survey in which he asked people to rank 18 values as to importance. Those who ranked salvation high on their scale of values were more anxious to maintain the status quo and were generally more indifferent to the needs of minorities and the poor. They were significantly lower on social compassion and more opposed to civil rights than those for whom salvation was of minor importance.<sup>11</sup>

It is possible to so focus on the next world

for our rewards that we become oblivious to this one. Regard for our own salvation may lead to a selfish disregard for anyone else. Then if we do notice the poor and oppressed, our message to them may sound like this: "Grin and bear it. You'll have it made up to you when Jesus comes." It was the tendency of religious people to tolerate injustice, because of the promise of future rewards, that caused Karl Marx to label religion "the opium of the people."

*Work ethic.* Paradoxically, Christians may become prejudiced for a reason opposite to otherworldliness. The so-called Protestant ethic encourages believers to work hard and not waste money on frivolous pleasures. As a result, these Christians tend to accumulate possessions and move upward on the socioeconomic ladder. They may come to regard their prosperity as a sign of God's favor and look down on the less fortunate as being in divine disfavor. These Christians compare themselves with others and decide they are doing quite well indeed in a system in which the rewards are based upon merit.

Allport described the phenomenon this way: "For many people, religion is a dull habit, or a tribal investment to be used for occasional ceremony, for family convenience, or for personal comfort. It is something to use, but not to live. And it may be used in a variety of ways: to improve one's status, to bolster one's self-confidence, to enhance one's income, to win friends, power, or influence. It may be used as a defense against reality and, most importantly, to provide a supersanction for one's own formula for living. Such a sentiment assures me that God sees things my way."<sup>12</sup>

*Religious conservatism.* By its very nature the church is an agent of conservatism. Christians worship a God who changes not, and they speak of eternal verities. Living in a world marked by rapid change in technology, learning, social arrangements, and values, they find the church the one institution they can count on to conserve the best from the past—a pillar of stability by which to preserve order and security in their lives. Douglas Walrath reminds us that the church gives tradition prominence in nearly every aspect of its life.<sup>13</sup> Churchgoers may perceive members of outgroups as threatening the stability and permanence of their way of life.

*Need satisfaction.* It is a psychological axiom that behavior results from the attempt to satisfy needs. Prejudice most often serves a need for superiority or status,<sup>14</sup> either mental, moral, religious, or social. But religion may also satisfy this need. We may consider ourselves above those who have neither the

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"truth" nor the "in" with God that we have. We may not have the wealth, power, or prestige that others in our society possess, but in our religion we have something infinitely better than they do, so we can look down on them with a certain smugness. And we may particularly feel the need to distance ourselves from those just below us on the theological/social ladder.

"The reason why churchgoers on the average are more prejudiced than non-churchgoers is not because religion instills prejudice. It is rather that a large number of people, by virtue of their psychological makeup, require for their economy of living both prejudice and religion."<sup>15</sup> So if they are self-doubting and insecure, prejudice enhances their self-esteem, and religion provides security. If they are guilt-ridden, prejudice provides a scapegoat, and religion provides relief. If they fear failure, prejudice explains by postulating that there are menacing out-groups, and religion holds out a reward.<sup>16</sup>

*Closed cognitive style.* The last link between religion and prejudice that we will discuss involves how some people process information. Prejudiced people often have rigid habits of mind. They lack complexity in their information processing and thus prefer simple, unambiguous, black-or-white answers. Both religion and bigotry often serve the needs of those who require clear-cut distinctions between good and evil.<sup>17</sup>

James Dittes has summarized the research findings on the personality characteristics that go with prejudice: (1) need for unchanging structure; (2) need for religious absolutism ("To say 'I don't know' would cast them adrift from their cognitive anchor"); (3) closed-mindedness—not open to new ideas; and (4) high regard for hierarchy and order.<sup>18</sup> Rigid people often seek out a religion that speaks with certainty, for such a religion offers security from the ambiguity they cannot tolerate. New ideas and different groups threaten their stability—for if things are uncertain, then perhaps nothing can be counted on.

#### Ways of being religious

While there are perfectly reasonable explanations for the relationship between prejudice and religion, religious people, of course, are not all prejudiced. Many students of the subject believe that the way individuals integrate religion into their lives underlies the difference. Richard Gorsuch and Daniel Aleshire, for example, have found that nonmembers and highly active members are least prejudiced, and the marginally active most prejudiced.<sup>19</sup>

Various scholars have applied different

labels to the polar extremes of religiosity. The best known and most thoroughly researched are the "extrinsic" and "intrinsic" dimensions Allport described. The former is "a self-serving, utilitarian, self-protective form of religious outlook, which provides the believer with comfort and salvation at the expense of out groups." The latter "marks the life that has interiorized the total creed of his faith without reservation, including the commandment to love one's neighbor. A person of this sort is more intent on serving his religion than on making it serve him."<sup>20</sup>

Dittes has identified two brands of religion in the parable of the wandering son of Luke 15. The open, giving stance of the father characterizes prodigal religion, and the older brother's approach—serve, obey, and earn your reward—epitomizes contractual religion. Dittes notes that prejudice is associated with contractual religion, not with prodigal religion, because "prejudice, after all, has a close family resemblance to contractual religion. . . . In a moment of contractual religion, we are taking the unfathomable mysteries of God and His relations with us and collapsing them into a deed (e.g., churchgoing) or an object (e.g., rosary) or a rule (e.g., 'Don't drink') which is fathomable and manageable, but which is now too constricted to be treated as God. . . . In a moment of prejudice, we are collapsing the rich, unfathomable mysteries of other persons into stereotypes or pictures or labels that can be managed, to our benefit, but which bear little resemblance to the real persons. The prejudiced mind and the contractual mind—like the elder brother—constrict their experience and their world to narrow and familiar boundaries that they can patrol and control."<sup>21</sup>

So we solve the problem of religion and prejudice, not by abandoning religion but by replacing contractual, extrinsic religion with that which is prodigal and intrinsic. Or perhaps better yet, by maturing in our religious experience.

In 1950 Allport published his first major statement distinguishing between immature and mature religion. He proposed six criteria that identify the mature religious faith.<sup>22</sup> Roland J. Fleck summarizes and comments on these criteria as follows:

1. *Well-differentiated.* The mature Christian knows that religion is complex, and continually examines his faith.
2. *Dynamic.* Mature faith may spring from simple needs, but in time it becomes a major motivating force.
3. *Consistent.* A mature religious life will produce a consistent morality.
4. *Comprehensive.* Mature faith raises all

the crucial questions of life, seeking functional answers to these questions. Tolerance will be a natural characteristic of this comprehensive-ness.

5. *Integral.* The mature Christian's religion is not departmentalized or isolated from other aspects of the world.

6. *Problem-solving.* The mature Christian is always seeking to discover truth—knowing, however, that commitment does not require complete certainty.<sup>23</sup>

As we advance into such maturity, we do not lose our religious faith or even our belief in revelation and election. "But dogma is tempered with humility; in keeping with biblical injunction, [we withhold] judgment until the day of the harvest. A religious sentiment of this sort floods the whole life with motivation and meaning. It is no longer limited to single segments of self-interest. And only in such a widened religious sentiment does the teaching of brotherhood take firm root."<sup>24</sup>

Such mature religion produces the ability to "act wholeheartedly even without absolute certainty. It can be sure without being cocksure."<sup>25</sup>

#### Overcoming prejudice

Once we understand prejudice, we may feel a sense of outrage—a prejudice against prejudiced people. But we must be very careful. "When we attack the prejudice, in ourselves or in others, and try to scold or threaten it away, we seldom succeed. It is because our scolding and our threatening only enhance the need for the prejudice. . . . If we are going to undo the prejudice, we must undo the need for the prejudice, not enhance the need."<sup>26</sup>

Dittes suggests several ways that the Christian community can undermine the needs prejudice satisfies:

1. Where prejudice provides feelings of importance and worth by deeming others unworthy, the Christian community can provide these feelings more profoundly and more securely by offering the same enabling embrace the prodigal father offered both his sons.
2. Where prejudice provides the defensive power of the stockade and the aggressive power of dominating others' lives, the Christian community can offer the power that comes from opening ourselves to the infinite riches of God's creation and to our many marvelous fellow creatures.
3. Where prejudice makes people feel like winners by letting them come out on top, the Christian community can demonstrate that the categories of winners and losers are tran-

sient aspects of our culture. God's apex of success is service and a cross.

4. Where prejudice promotes the feeling of belonging to an "in" group in the face of isolation and loneliness, and builds a sense of group solidarity by creating artificial separations between this group and the "outs," the Christian community can find ways, in small groups and large, to create a sense of true belonging.

5. Where prejudice helps people cope with a terrifying world by enclosing them in small fortresses, the Christian community can show them that they need not save themselves. That has already been done.<sup>27</sup>

While, as Christians, we must see prejudice as a sin, we must also follow Jesus' example and love the sinner. When we love and accept prejudiced people, we undermine the insecurity that feeds their prejudice; we make it unnecessary. Not only that, we model the behavior appropriate for dealing with those who are different from us. Prejudice is an attempt to guarantee our self-worth by certain protective structures. Christian faith says "to the prejudiced person: 'Your personal worth does not need such fragile guarantees. It is already guaranteed by One whose guarantee is unchallengeable and unchanging.'"<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Clifford T. Morgan, *A Brief Introduction to Psychology*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), pp. 383, 384.

<sup>2</sup>Gordon W. Allport, *Personality and Social Encounter* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 257.

<sup>3</sup>Andrew M. Greeley, *The Denominational Society* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1972), p. 207.

<sup>4</sup>J. D. Davidson, "Religious Belief as an Independent Variable," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 11 (1972): 65-75.

<sup>5</sup>C. Daniel Batson and W. Larry Ventis, *The Religious Experience: A Social-Psychological Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 257.

<sup>6</sup>James E. Dittes, *Bias and the Pious* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1973), p. 50.

<sup>7</sup>Merlin B. Brinkerhoff and Marlene M. Mackie, "The Applicability of Social Distance for Religious Research: An Exploration," *Review of Religious Research* 28 (1986): 158.

<sup>8</sup>Allport, p. 258.

<sup>9</sup>Greeley, p. 216.

<sup>10</sup>Batson and Ventis, p. 254.

<sup>11</sup>Milton Rokeach, "The H. Paul Douglass Lectures for 1969," *Review of Religious Research* 11 (Fall 1969): 3-39.

<sup>12</sup>Gordon W. Allport, "Behavioral Science, Religion, and Mental Health," *Journal of Religion and Health* 2 (April 1963): 193.

<sup>13</sup>Douglas A. Walrath, "Social Change and Local Churches: 1951-1975," in *Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950-1978*, Dean Hoge and David Roozen, eds. (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979), pp. 248-269.

<sup>14</sup>Morgan, p. 386.

<sup>15</sup>Gordon W. Allport, "The Religious Context of Prejudice," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 5 (Fall 1966): 451.

<sup>16</sup>Dittes, pp. 60, 61.

<sup>17</sup>See Dittes, p. 28; Greeley, pp. 211, 213.

<sup>18</sup>Dittes, pp. 30-32.

<sup>19</sup>Richard L. Gorsuch and Daniel Aleshire, "Christian Faith and Ethnic Prejudice: A Review and Interpretation of Research," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13 (1974): 281-307.

<sup>20</sup>Allport, *Personality and Social Encounter*, p. 257.

<sup>21</sup>Dittes, pp. 75-77.

<sup>22</sup>Gordon W. Allport, *The Individual and His Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), p. 57.

<sup>23</sup>Ronald J. Fleck, "Dimensions of Personal Religion: A Dichotomy or Trichotomy?" in *Research in Mental Health and Religious Behavior*, William J. Donaldson, Jr., ed. (Atlanta: The Psychological Studies Institute, Inc., 1976), p. 192.

<sup>24</sup>Allport, *Personality and Social Encounter*, p. 265.

<sup>25</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, *The Individual and His Religion*, p. 72.

<sup>26</sup>Dittes, p. 47.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 93-95.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 92.