

# Religious Diversity in a “Christian Nation”: The Effects of Theological Exclusivity and Interreligious Contact on the Acceptance of Religious Diversity

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*Using data from the nationally representative Religion and Diversity Survey, Americans’ responses to religious diversity are examined at the national and community levels. While an overwhelming majority of Americans agree that religious diversity has been good for the nation, support for the inclusion of non-Christians in community life is mixed. Theological exclusivism is consistently and strongly associated with negative attitudes toward religious diversity and less willingness to include Muslims and Hindus in community life. Belief that the United States is a Christian nation is associated with a positive view of religious diversity but decreased willingness to include Muslims in community life. Prior contact with Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus is predictive of more positive views of religious diversity; contact with Muslims is associated with greater tolerance for a mosque in one’s community.*

## INTRODUCTION

Alexis de Tocqueville, a French visitor to the United States in the early 19th-century, described Christianity as “a fact so irresistibly established, that no one undertakes either to attack or defend it” (1835:396). Since that time, however, the religious landscape has been characterized by ever increasing diversity, largely because of immigration to the United States. Though small, the proportion of Americans claiming a non-Christian faith has grown about three- to four-fold since 1970 (Smith 2002). Of perhaps more importance, non-Christian faiths are increasingly visible in American society (Eck 2001; Warner 1998). The growth of non-Christian religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam has confronted Americans with a new kind of religious diversity, and evidence indicates that, despite their high rates of educational attainment, members of these non-Christian groups show a lack of social and political integration (Wuthnow and Hackett 2003). Identifying obstacles to integration of these groups remains an important task for researchers.

Is Christianity no longer “irresistibly established” in American life? Scholars since the mid-20th century have observed a weakening of the boundaries between religious traditions and increasing tolerance of religious differences (Alwin 1986; Glock and Stark 1965; Hartmann, Zang, and Windschadt 2005; Herberg 1960). In her account of the growth of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, Eck (2001) contends that these non-Christian faiths are increasingly legitimate ways to be American. Furthermore, religious boundaries may shift over time. Edgell, Hartmann, and Gerteis (2006) suggest that Americans’ strong distrust of atheists is evidence of a strengthening symbolic boundary between religion and *nonreligion*, a shift away from the

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Christian–non-Christian boundary. Several lines of evidence, however, suggest that the boundary between Christians and non-Christians is still meaningful and helps to define cultural membership and social trustworthiness in American society. Negative attitudes toward non-Christians are common, and Americans show reluctance to fully incorporate non-Christians into social life.

While a significant body of research has examined Americans' tolerance of groups generally perceived to be unpopular or out of the cultural mainstream (Bobo and Licari 1989; Duch and Gibson 1992; Gibson 2006; Golebiowska 1999; Karpov 1999; Mondak and Sanders 2003; Stouffer 1955; Wilson 1994), surprisingly little research has examined attitudes toward non-Christians. Given the notable growth of non-Christian Americans in recent decades, more research in this area is critical. Furthermore, political debates about immigration and national security in post-9/11 America often involve discussion of non-Christian faiths and their adherents. Knowing more about how Americans respond to these groups would undoubtedly be of value. While research on tolerance of non-Christians is minimal, a significant body of literature does exist that examines the relationship between religion and tolerance generally. Studies have repeatedly found that religious affiliation, church attendance, and religious beliefs all predict to some extent an individual's tolerance of unpopular minority groups (Beatty and Walter 1984; Ellison and Musick 1993; Katnik 2002; Stouffer 1955). Evangelical Protestants are the topic of several studies (Ellison and Musick 1993; Hunter 1984; Tamney and Johnson 1997; Tuntiya 2005). Researchers generally find that while evangelical Protestants have become more tolerant, they are still less willing than other Americans to extend civil liberties to unpopular groups (Reimer and Park 2001). Nonetheless, despite these advances in understanding tolerance and its determinants, we know little about Americans' responses to a religious landscape that now more obviously includes non-Christian faiths.

Using a uniquely suited data set, the nationally representative Religion and Diversity Survey, this article examines Americans' responses to religious diversity in the nation and in their communities. This study extends prior research on religion and tolerance by examining the relationship between theological beliefs *about* religious diversity and attitudes *toward* religious diversity, including willingness to include non-Christians in community life. In addition, the current study utilizes this unique data set to examine two previously unexplored factors that are especially relevant to understanding Americans' attitudes toward non-Christians: beliefs about the role of Christianity in American society and the effect of prior personal contact with non-Christians. This study finds that each of these factors predict to some extent Americans' attitudes toward religious diversity and their tolerance of non-Christians.

### NON-CHRISTIANS IN AMERICA

Less than 3 percent of Americans practice non-Judeo-Christian faiths (Smith 2002). Most of these individuals are Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus who, according to the recent U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, together make up 1.7 percent of American adults (Pew Forum 2008). Despite their small numbers, the growth of non-Christians has been noticeable since immigration laws changed in 1965. The proportion of Americans claiming a non-Christian faith appears to have grown about three- to four-fold since 1970 (Smith 2002). Thus, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and other non-Christians represent a small but significant and growing segment of the religious landscape.

Survey data suggest that many Americans have serious reservations about non-Christians, particularly Muslim Americans. Drawing on data from their own survey, Edgell, Hartmann, and Gerteis (2006) note that Muslims are virtually tied with atheists at the top of a list of groups Americans find most problematic. A recent Pew report demonstrated that only 55 percent of Americans have favorable views of Muslim Americans, while only 41 percent have favorable views of Islam as a religion (Pew Research Center for People and the Press 2006). In a recent

social distance study based on a national survey, Americans ranked Muslims and Arabs second-to-last and last, respectively, out of 30 groups (Parillo and Donoghue 2005). Asian Indians, who are overwhelmingly Hindu or Muslim, were ranked 26th. Finally, recent data suggest that for many Americans, being a non-Christian is antithetical to being a good American. As part of the "National Identity" module on the General Social Survey, respondents were asked how important it is to be Christian in order to be "truly American." In 1996, 54 percent agreed that it is either "very important" or "fairly important" and in 2004 this number increased to 66 percent (Davis, Smith, and Marsden 2007). Clearly, many Americans are uncomfortable with the full inclusion of non-Christians into American society. For many Americans, non-Christians may be an "other" that does not subscribe to the nation's moral and cultural core. The sense that non-Christians are an "other" is likely intensified by the fact that most Americans have had very little meaningful contact with them and know little about their faiths.

### **Dealing with Religious Diversity**

How do Americans deal with religious diversity? Berger (1967) argued that religious pluralism ultimately erodes religious belief by bringing into contact people with opposing religious beliefs and claims. Only when a religion envelops society in a monopolistic "sacred canopy" can it conceal its socially constructed nature and enjoy a taken-for-granted quality. However, several reasons to question Berger's hypothesis come to mind. Some scholars assert that religious diversity actually drives religious mobilization and increases vitality in a religious economy (Smith 1998; Stark and Finke 2000). Furthermore, and perhaps of more relevance, meaningful interreligious contact in fact appears to be very minimal, particularly among those with exclusivist beliefs. Religious groups with higher levels of strictness and theological exclusivity tend to strongly discourage nongroup activities and contact with nongroup members (Iannacone 1994). Adolescents with exclusivist beliefs tend to have dense religious peer networks that limit outside contact and provide "a more all-encompassing social environment" (Trinitapoli 2007:476). Churches themselves, across the spectrum, generally do very little to promote interreligious contact or understanding (Wuthnow 2005). Local interfaith organizations are not very representative of local religious diversity and generally foster little theological discussion (McCarthy 2007).

At the level of the family, the situation is very similar. Mormons and evangelical Protestants, two groups likely to hold exclusivist beliefs, are significantly less likely than others to marry outside their faith (Sherkat 2004). Significantly, the least likely religious intermarriage is between a conservative Protestant and a member of a non-Judeo-Christian group (Sherkat 1999). Smith (1998:106), challenging Berger's "sacred canopy," proposes instead "sacred umbrellas" that allow individuals to maintain exclusivist beliefs in a pluralistic society by providing "small, portable, accessible relational worlds—religious reference groups—'under' which their beliefs can make sense." Taken together, the above findings suggest that most Americans, whether intentionally or not, tend to deal with religious diversity by simply avoiding it.

### **Explaining Attitudes Toward Religious Diversity**

If meaningful interreligious contact is uncommon and Americans know little about non-Christians and their faiths, then what factors shape Americans' attitudes toward religious diversity? This study focuses primarily on three factors that are hypothesized to influence attitudes: theological beliefs, beliefs about the role of Christianity in American society, and prior contact with non-Christians. Below I examine each of these factors in detail.

While Americans' theological beliefs are rarely examined in depth on major sociological surveys, evidence suggests that they influence attitudes and behavior. For instance, biblical literalism is related to a willingness to restrict the civil liberties of homosexuals, atheists, and other unpopular minority groups (Burdette, Ellison, and Hill 2005; Tuntiya 2005). Ellison and

Musick (1993) reported that a nine-item index measuring theological conservatism is significantly associated with intolerance of several unpopular groups, including atheists and homosexuals. Beliefs about God have social significance as well. One's personal conception or image of God is a powerful predictor of religious belief and commitment, views of moral and social issues, political affiliation, and political participation (Bader and Froese 2005; Driskell, Embry, and Lyon 2008). Recently, Froese, Bader, and Smith (2008) reported that a wrathful image of God is significantly related to intolerance of unpopular groups, even controlling for religious affiliation, attendance, and views of the Bible.

However, the social significance of beliefs about Christianity's relationship to other religions is poorly understood. Theological beliefs *about* religious diversity may have implications for religious tolerance, since such beliefs provide a moral framework from which to interpret events and evaluate others. Glock and Stark (1966) found evidence that anti-Semitism in the United States has significant religious roots and is driven in part by Christian orthodoxy and theological exclusivism. Social psychologists find that religious fundamentalism, characterized by certainty that one's beliefs are correct and that one has access to absolute truth, is consistently related to prejudice against outgroups, including members of religious outgroups (Hunsberger and Jackson 2005; Jackson and Hunsberger 1999).

A commonly used typology of theological orientations toward religious diversity includes exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism (McCarthy 2007). Exclusivism is the view that one's own religious worldview is the only one that leads to salvation and union with God. Inclusivism holds that religious truth can be found in many faiths, though it is perfected only in one's own. Pluralism is the view that no one religion has unique access to religious truth and that all religions are potentially equally valid paths. Theologically exclusive beliefs may lead individuals to view those not holding those beliefs, particularly non-Christians, as less moral or trustworthy. For the believer, God's rejection of non-Christian faiths may legitimate social exclusion of non-Christians themselves. Specifically, I offer the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1: Theological exclusivism will be associated with more negative views of religious diversity and decreased willingness to include non-Christians in social life.*

Americans' wariness toward non-Christians may stem from their beliefs about religion and society. A majority of Americans believe that the United States and Christianity share a special relationship and that Christianity played a significant role in the nation's founding. A recent national survey found that 65 percent of Americans believe that the nation's founders intended it to be a Christian nation and 55 percent believe that the U.S. Constitution *actually establishes* a Christian nation in spite of the fact that the Constitution nowhere mentions God or Christianity (First Amendment Center 2007). Based on in-depth interviews with evangelical Protestants, Smith (2000) found that many members of this highly religious group nostalgically envisioned an earlier Christian era when there was a majority of "faithful Christians" and when Christian-compatible "principles and values" predominated. Many interviewees asserted that the foundation of American government was based upon Christian principles that were held by religious founding fathers. Somewhat paradoxically, for many the ideal of religious freedom was strongly associated with the idea of a Christian nation. In fact, Smith notes that while evangelicals hold a wide variety of ideas about a Christian nation, most say that they accept religious and cultural pluralism, or at least see it is a fact of life in America. Smith suggests that for many evangelicals, talk of a Christian nation and even disapproval of non-Christians reflects more an effort to maintain collective identity than intolerance or overt rejection of pluralism. Nonetheless, Smith's work, along with recent survey data, suggests that many Americans think of the United States as a Christian nation in some sense and ground this belief in a set of perceived historical events and traditions. Furthermore, many in the Christian Right actively advocate a greater public

role for Christianity, citing the founding of the United States as a Christian nation (Wilcox and Larson 2006). Despite the prevalence of a belief that the United States is a "Christian nation," no previous study has empirically examined what that implies for tolerance of non-Christians. Belief in the United States as a Christian nation may be associated with negative attitudes toward non-Christians, who may be viewed as untrustworthy citizens and as a threat to the religious and moral foundations of American society.

In contrast to a view of the United States as uniquely Christian, some scholars have emphasized that, increasingly, religion *in general* forms a moral and cultural core to American life (Edgell, Hartmann, and Gerteis 2006). Furthermore, several scholars have suggested that American civil religion has expanded or may expand to include non-Christian faiths (Angrosino 2002; Kao and Copulsky 2007; MacHacek 2003). Yet for many Americans the notion of a Christian core to American civil religion and culture persists, especially given that a majority of Americans accept some notion of a Christian nation. Therefore, I test the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2: The belief that the United States is a Christian nation will be associated with negative views of religious diversity and decreased willingness to include non-Christians in social life.*

In addition to the primary role of personal beliefs, personal experiences with diversity may also play a role in shaping attitudes toward non-Christians. A long tradition of research has examined how intergroup contact can reduce individuals' prejudice toward other groups (Allport 1954; Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami 2003; Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). This research has traditionally focused on race, but evidence shows its beneficial effects are not limited to interracial contact. For example, contact with those of different political ideological views leads to greater awareness of rationales for other viewpoints and greater political tolerance (Mutz 2002). In his classic study of political tolerance, Stouffer (1955) argued that contact with a variety of people and viewpoints is related to higher levels of tolerance. Interreligious contact may have similar effects as well, particularly since most Americans have had little to no contact with Buddhists, Muslims, or Hindus. Non-Christians may be a sort of symbolic "other" who remains outside a perceived moral and cultural core of American life, yet personal interaction may make Americans more accepting of them. Contact with Muslims in particular may have beneficial effects, since Americans are routinely exposed to negative imagery about this group (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007). Such interreligious contact may reduce misunderstanding, challenge stereotypes, and foster appreciation or at least tolerance of other religious perspectives. This study examines the effects of interreligious contact by testing the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3: Prior contact with non-Christians will be associated with more positive views of religious diversity and increased willingness to include non-Christians into social life.*

## DATA AND METHODS

The Religion and Diversity Survey was designed by Robert Wuthnow at Princeton University in conjunction with the Responding to Diversity Project sponsored by the Lilly Endowment. The survey results are based on telephone interviews conducted by Schulman, Ronca, and Bucuvalas, Inc., in New York with a nationally representative sample of 2,910 adults, 18 and older living in households with telephones in the continental United States. The interviews were conducted from September 18, 2002 through February 25, 2003, and lasted approximately 35 minutes. The selected sample is a random-digit sample of telephone numbers selected from telephone exchanges in the continental United States and was drawn by Survey Sampling, Inc., of Fairfield, Connecticut. The response rate was 43.6 percent. A recommended weight is

used for descriptive analyses. More information on the Religion and Diversity Survey is available at the Association of Religion Data Archives website, where it is available for download (<http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/DIVERSTY.asp>).

### Dependent Variables: Responses to Diversity

Three dependent variables assess Americans' responses to religious diversity at the national and community levels. The first measure asks respondents whether they "agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly" with the statement: "Religious diversity has been good for America." Two additional measures assess respondents' attitudes specifically toward Muslims or Hindus at the community level. Respondents were asked to: "Suppose some Hindus wanted to build a large Hindu temple in your community. Would this bother you a lot, bother you a little, not bother you, or be something you would welcome?" A random half of the sample was asked about Hindus and the other half was asked the same question but instead about Muslims building a "large mosque."

### Independent Variables

Table 1 contains descriptive statistics for all independent variables. To assess the relationship between theologically exclusive beliefs and views of religious diversity, this study uses an index

Table 1: Description of independent variables

Variable	Description	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Female	1 = female	2,876	0.52	
White	1 = white	2,876	0.75	
Age	Age in years (18 to 96)	2,854	43.9	17.5
Rural residence	1 = rural residence	2,840	0.45	
Education	Level completed (1 = some high school or less to 6 = post graduate)	2,869	3.08	1.4
Northeast residence	1 = Northeast residence	2,876	0.19	
Midwest residence	1 = Midwest residence	2,876	0.25	
West residence	1 = West residence	2,876	0.19	
Mainline Protestant	1 = mainline Protestant	2,876	0.13	
Catholic	1 = Catholic	2,876	0.24	
Black Protestant	1 = black Protestant	2,876	0.07	
Other faith	1 = adherent of other faith	2,876	0.08	
No religion	1 = no religious preference	2,876	0.18	
Belief in Christian nation	Mean of three items (see Methods for details; 1 = DS to 4 = SA)	2,639	2.98	0.76
Theological exclusivity	Mean of four items (see Methods for details; 1 = <i>SD</i> to 4 = SA)	2,768	2.45	0.87
Prior contact with Hindus	Personal contact with Hindus (1 = none to 5 = a great deal)	2,856	2.11	1.15
Prior contact with Muslims	Personal contact with Muslims (1 = none to 5 = a great deal)	2,854	2.45	1.27
Prior contact with non-Christians	Personal contact with Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists (3 = none to 15 = a great deal)	2,858	6.61	3.03

Note: *N* = number; *SD* = standard deviation; DS = disagree strongly; AS = agree strongly.

Source: Religion and Diversity Survey, 2002–2003.

constructed from respondents' mean on four survey items ( $\alpha = .74$ ). Respondents were asked whether they "agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly" with the following four statements: "All major religions, such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam contain some truth about God," "All religions basically teach the same thing," "Christianity is the only way to have a true personal relationship with God," and "Christianity is the best way to understand God." These measures are recoded such that higher values indicate greater theological exclusivism.

Three measures assess the impact of beliefs about the historical and contemporary role of Christianity in American society on social acceptance of non-Christians. The mean of these variables was used to create an index intended to measure respondents' belief that the United States is a Christian nation ( $\alpha = .68$ ). Respondents were asked whether they "agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly" with the following three statements: "The United States was founded on Christian principles," "In the 21st century, the United States is still basically a Christian society," and "Our democratic form of government is based on Christianity." Measures have been recoded such that higher values indicate greater agreement.

Three measures are used to assess the effect of prior interreligious contact on responses to religious diversity. In separate questions, respondents were asked how much personal contact they have had with Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus. Possible responses include "a great deal, a fair amount, only a little, almost none, or none." These measures have been recoded such that higher values indicate greater contact. Some analyses use a scaled version that sums respondents' values for each of the three into one measure, ranging from 3 through 15 ( $\alpha = .80$ ). Thus, a score of 3 would indicate that the respondent has had no contact with any group, while a score of 15 would indicate "a great deal" of contact with all three groups. This scaled version is referred to as "contact with non-Christians."

### **Control Variables**

Control variables have been selected based on their prior association with tolerance: gender (Gibson 1992; Golebiowska 1999; Stouffer 1955), age (Karpov 1999; Wilson 1994), level of education (Bobo and Licari 1989; Golebiowska 1995; Karpov 1999), rural residence (Marcus, Piereson, and Sullivan 1980), and region of residence (Ellison and Musick 1993). Religious affiliation is captured by the RELTRAD classification scheme, which places respondents into one of seven religious traditions based on their denominational preference: evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, Catholic, black Protestant, Jewish, "other," or no affiliation (Steensland et al. 2000). In this study, Jewish respondents are added to the "other" category. Thirty-one respondents identifying themselves as Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu were excluded from all analyses. A dummy variable for race is used in which white respondents are coded 1 and nonwhite respondents are coded 0. Ideally, this study would include a measure of political ideology or party affiliation, which is known to be associated with religious affiliation and beliefs, views of immigration, and beliefs about the role of religion in society (Kohut et al. 2000). Unfortunately, the Religion and Diversity Survey contains no suitable political measures.

## **RESULTS**

### **Descriptive Analyses: Beliefs About Religious Diversity**

Table 2 offers insight into how Americans think about and experience religious diversity. An overwhelming majority of Americans see value in religious diversity. Nearly 90 percent of respondents either strongly or somewhat agreed that "religious diversity has been good for America." The nearly unanimous approval of religious diversity probably indicates both the

Table 2: Descriptive analyses of dependent and key independent variables

<i>Dependent Variables</i>	Percent
Agree strongly or somewhat that religious diversity has been good for America	87.8
Welcome or not be bothered by:	
Hindu temple in community	63.8
Muslim mosque in community	57.3
<i>Key Independent Variables</i>	
Agree strongly or somewhat that:	
All religions contain some truth about God	81.4
All religions teach the same thing	43.1
Christianity is the best way to know God	60.1
Christianity is the only way to know God	45.9
U.S. founded on Christian principles	80.4
Our democracy based on Christianity	58.3
American society still basically Christian	75.2
No or almost no prior personal contact with:	
Muslims	50.7
Hindus	65.9
Buddhists	64.8

*Source:* Religion and Diversity Survey, 2002–2003.

importance of religion to Americans and the value that they place on religious freedom. However, far fewer Americans are comfortable with religious diversity in their communities arising from the growth of non-Christian groups. Only 64 percent would welcome or not be bothered by a large Hindu temple in their community. When instead it is a large Muslim mosque, this number decreases to 57 percent. These striking results tell us something about how Americans think about religious diversity. For many, non-Christians like Muslims and Hindus are simply not a legitimate or welcome part of that diversity. Clearly, when many Americans think about “religious diversity,” they have only Christian diversity in mind.

The remainder of Table 2 reports survey findings on the three factors that are the focus of this study: theological beliefs about religious diversity, beliefs about the role of Christianity in society, and prior contact with non-Christians. Most Americans appear to be fairly theologically inclusive—nearly four out of five agree that all religions “contain some truth about God.” Many Americans have quite pluralistic theological views. Over 40 percent agree with the statement “all religions basically teach the same thing.” However, Christian exclusivism is also common. Six out of 10 Americans agree that Christianity is the “best way to know God” and nearly half assert that it is the “only way to know God.” Beliefs asserting that the United States is a Christian nation are common. Most Americans believe that Christianity played an important role in the nation’s founding—eight out of 10 agree that the nation was founded on Christian principles and about six out of 10 believe that American democracy is based on Christianity. For the three-quarters of respondents agreeing that American society is “still basically Christian,” Christianity continues to serve as the cultural and moral core of the nation. Finally, results from the survey suggest that most Americans have had very little contact with non-Christians. About half report having no or almost no prior contact with Muslims, while roughly two-thirds of Americans report having virtually no prior contact with Buddhists or Hindus.

Table 3 reports the correlations between the three indexes measuring theological exclusivity, belief in a Christian nation, and prior contact with Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus. Theological exclusivity and belief in a Christian nation are significantly correlated with a coefficient of

Table 3: Correlations between belief in a Christian nation, theological exclusivity, and prior contact with non-Christians

	Prior Contact with Non-Christians	Theological Exclusivity
Belief that United States is a Christian nation	-.162** <i>N</i> = 2,647	.308** <i>N</i> = 2,585
Theological exclusivity	-.277** <i>N</i> = 2,762	—

\*\*Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Religion and Diversity Survey, 2002–2003.

roughly .3. This relationship makes sense—Christians with the most exclusive religious beliefs are likely to view the nation and its history in a way that privileges Christianity. Prior contact with non-Christians and belief in a Christian nation are weakly associated at the level of  $-.16$ . Finally, individuals with exclusive theological beliefs have less contact with non-Christians. The two measures share a significant negative relationship with a coefficient of  $-.28$ . As discussed earlier, individuals with exclusive beliefs tend to have more all-encompassing social environments that limit contact with outsiders.

### Multivariate Analyses: Religious Diversity in Nation and Community

I use logistic regression to examine the effect of theological exclusivity, belief in a Christian nation, and contact with non-Christians on Americans' responses to religious diversity in nation and community. The three dependent variables have been recoded as dichotomous variables for use with logistic regression. The item on religious diversity in the nation has been recoded to measure agreement versus disagreement (1 = strongly or somewhat agree, 0 = strongly or somewhat disagree). The items on attitudes toward a Hindu temple or Muslim mosque in one's community have been recoded to measure acceptance versus nonacceptance (1 = welcome or not be bothered, 0 = bothered a lot or a little). Predictors are included in the logistic regression model in successive blocks. Model 1 contains only demographic controls while Model 2 adds religious tradition. Model 3 adds the measures central to the current study: measures of prior contact with non-Christians, belief in the United States as a Christian nation, and theological exclusivity. For the items on a Hindu temple or Muslim mosque, Model 4 adds as a predictor the first dependent variable, agreement that religious diversity “has been good for America.”

### The Nation

Table 4 reports results from logistic regression of agreement with the statement “religious diversity has been good for America.” Model 1 indicates that women are significantly less likely to value religious diversity in the nation, while Americans from earlier birth cohorts or with higher levels of education are more likely to. Those living outside the South are significantly more likely than Southerners to value religious diversity. Only age remains a significant predictor in the final model. The positive relationship between age and attitudes toward religious diversity is notable. Generally, studies find lower levels of tolerance among earlier birth cohorts (Karpov 1999; Wilson 1994). However, the positive attitudes toward religious diversity noted in this study may reflect higher levels of religiosity among older Americans. Older Americans may simply be more favorable toward religion in general. In Model 2, mainline Protestants and Catholics are significantly more likely than evangelical Protestants to value religious diversity. However, in the final model, only mainline Protestants differ significantly from evangelical Protestants.

Table 4: Logistic regression of agreement with the statement "religious diversity has been good for America"

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio
Female	-.265*	.77	-.274*	.76	-.163	.85
White	.004	1.00	.124	1.13	.039	1.04
Age	.013**	1.01	.012**	1.01	.014**	1.01
Education	.180**	1.20	.164**	1.18	.084	1.09
Rural residence	-.070	.93	-.046	.96	.076	1.08
<i>Region<sup>a</sup></i>						
Northeast	.499**	1.65	.377*	1.46	.169	1.18
Midwest	.373*	1.45	.304	1.36	.225	1.23
West	.465**	1.59	.414*	1.51	.317	1.37
<i>Religious Tradition<sup>b</sup></i>						
Mainline Protestant			.737**	2.09	.494*	1.64
Black Protestant			.512	1.67	.439	1.55
Catholic			.641**	1.90	.232	1.26
Other			.252	1.29	-.026	.97
No religion			.281	1.33	-.328	.72
Prior contact with non-Christians					.055*	1.06
Belief in a Christian nation					.421**	1.52
Theological exclusivity					-.807**	.45
Nagelkerke R-square	.036		.050		.125	
<i>N</i>	2522		2522		2522	

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

<sup>a</sup>South is the reference category.

<sup>b</sup>Evangelical Protestant is the reference category.

Source: Religion and Diversity Survey, 2002–2003.

Model 3 indicates that prior contact with Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus is significantly associated with agreement that religious diversity is good for America. This finding provides evidence that interreligious contact supports more positive views of religious diversity. Model 3 also demonstrates that, contrary to expectations, belief that the United States is a Christian nation is significantly associated with a *positive* view of religious diversity. This somewhat surprising finding, as well as the positive effect of age, suggests that many Americans may have primarily Christian diversity in mind when they think about religious diversity. Model 3 reveals that, as hypothesized, theological exclusivity is strongly associated with a more negative view of religious diversity in the nation as a whole.

### **Community: Hindu Temple**

Table 5 contains results from logistic regression of acceptance of a large Hindu temple at the community level. Model 1 finds that women and those living in rural areas are significantly less accepting of a Hindu temple in their community. Educational attainment is significantly positively associated with a more welcoming attitude. Those residing in the Northeast and West are more welcoming than Southerners. Only educational attainment and residence in the West remain significant predictors in the final model. These findings agree with other studies reporting that gender, education, rural residence, and region of residence are predictive of levels of tolerance

Table 5: Logistic regression of attitude toward Hindus building a temple in respondent's community

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Beta	Odds Ratio						
Female	-.269*	.76	-.234	.79	-.156	.86	-.121	.89
White	-.099	.91	-.044	.96	-.171	.84	-.153	.86
Age	-.005	.96	-.003	1.00	.004	1.00	.003	1.00
Education	.238**	1.27	.223**	1.25	.142**	1.15	.137**	1.15
Rural residence	-.299*	.74	-.247*	.78	-.184	.83	-.169	.84
<i>Region<sup>a</sup></i>								
Northeast	.355*	1.43	.189	1.21	-.047	.95	-.023	.98
Midwest	.179	1.20	.109	1.12	-.023	.98	-.012	.99
West	.683**	1.98	.567**	1.76	.484*	1.62	.492*	1.64
<i>Religious Tradition<sup>b</sup></i>								
Mainline Protestant			.611**	1.84	.256	1.29	.212	1.24
Black Protestant			.356	1.43	-.004	.97	-.020	.98
Catholic			.629**	1.88	-.066	.94	-.065	.94
Other			.442	1.56	-.305	.74	-.328	.72
No religion			1.125**	3.08	.225	1.25	.247	1.28
Prior contact with Hindus					.077	1.08	.069	1.07
Belief in a Christian nation					-.074	.93	-.127	.88
Theological exclusivity					-.969**	.38	-.898**	.41
Religious diversity good for America							.308**	1.36
Nagelkerke R-square	.081		.115		.241		.254	
<i>N</i>	1253		1253		1253		1253	

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

<sup>a</sup>South is the reference category.

<sup>b</sup>Evangelical Protestant is the reference category.

Source: Religion and Diversity Survey, 2002–2003.

(Bobo and Licari 1989; Ellison and Musick 1993; Gibson 1992; Golebiowska 1999, 1995; Karpov 1999). Model 2 indicates that, net of demographic controls, mainline Protestants, Catholics, and those with no religion are significantly more welcoming of a Hindu temple than evangelical Protestants. These results support other studies finding that evangelical Protestants exhibit lower levels of tolerance than other Americans (Ellison and Musick 1993; Reimer and Park 2001; Tamney and Johnson 1997).

Model 3 indicates that, contrary to expectations, prior contact with Hindus is not predictive of a more welcoming attitude toward a Hindu temple. Similarly, belief in a Christian nation is not a significant predictor of attitudes toward a Hindu temple. However, Model 3 reveals that, as hypothesized, theological exclusivity is strongly associated with decreased willingness to include Hindus into community life. Model 4 adds as a predictor the first *dependent* variable, agreement with the statement "religious diversity has been good for America." The association between belief in a Christian nation and the view that religious diversity is good for the nation suggested that many respondents had only Christian diversity in mind. This variable was added to determine whether a positive view of religious diversity in the nation as a whole predicts greater tolerance

Table 6: Logistic regression of attitude toward Muslims building a mosque in respondent's community

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Beta	Odds Ratio						
Female	-.360**	.70	-.321*	.73	-.276*	.76	-.272*	.76
White	-.184	.83	.007	1.01	.034	1.03	-.042	.96
Age	-.011**	.99	-.009*	.99	-.004	.97	-.005	.96
Education	.174**	1.19	.157**	1.17	.064	1.07	.051	1.05
Rural residence	-.272*	.76	-.193	.82	-.042	.96	-.058	.94
<i>Region</i> <sup>a</sup>								
Northeast	.524**	1.69	.335*	1.40	.043	1.04	.006	1.01
Midwest	.383*	1.47	.351*	1.42	.254	1.29	.230	1.26
West	.780**	2.18	.658**	1.93	.499*	1.65	.463*	1.56
<i>Religious Tradition</i> <sup>b</sup>								
Mainline Protestant			.600**	1.82	.248	1.28	.275	1.32
Black Protestant			.886**	2.43	1.038**	2.82	1.015**	2.76
Catholic			.563**	1.76	.118	1.13	.129	1.14
Other			.783**	2.19	.345	1.41	.273	1.31
No religion			1.213**	3.36	.365	1.44	.467*	1.60
Prior contact with Muslims					.108*	1.11	.094†	1.10
Belief in a Christian nation					-.147	.86	-.225*	.80
Theological exclusivity					-.893**	.41	-.786**	.46
Religious diversity good for America							.451**	1.57
Nagelkerke R-square	.087		.130		.248		.270	
<i>N</i>	1235		1235		1235		1235	

† $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

<sup>a</sup>South is the reference category.

<sup>b</sup>Evangelical Protestant is the reference category.

Source: Religion and Diversity Survey, 2002–2003.

of non-Christians at the community level. Model 4 reveals that, in fact, it does predict a more positive attitude toward Hindus constructing a temple in one's community.

### **Community: Muslim Mosque**

Table 6 contains results from logistic regression of acceptance of a large Muslim mosque at the community level. Recall that fewer Americans are comfortable with a Muslim mosque than are with a Hindu temple in their community. Results from the multivariate analysis underscore this fact. Effect sizes are generally larger for attitudes toward a mosque, and the pseudo R-squared values are even slightly larger. Muslims are clearly a more divisive group than Hindus. Model 1 demonstrates that women, older Americans, and those living in rural areas are significantly less accepting of a Muslim mosque in their community, while educational attainment is significantly associated with a more welcoming stance (albeit less strongly than for a Hindu temple). Regional effects are pronounced. Those living in any region outside the South are more likely than

Southerners to be willing to include Muslims in community religious life. Of these demographic variables, only gender and region remain significant predictors in the final model. Model 2 reveals even stronger denominational effects than for attitudes toward religious diversity in the nation and a Hindu temple in one's community. Evangelical Protestants are, net of demographic controls, significantly less accepting of a mosque than Americans in every other religious tradition. In the final model, however, only black Protestants and the unaffiliated remain significantly more welcoming than evangelicals toward Muslims in community life. The especially warm attitudes of black Protestants likely reflect the large number of black Muslims in the United States.

Models 3 and 4 again provide evidence that interreligious contact is associated with greater religious tolerance. Unlike contact with Hindus, prior contact with Muslims is significantly associated with a more welcoming attitude at the community level. Model 4 also demonstrates that belief in a Christian nation is significantly associated with greater reluctance to include Muslims in community life. While belief in a Christian nation does not exclude Hindus from the acceptable range of religious diversity, it does appear to exclude Muslims. Models 3 and 4 reveal again that theological exclusivity is strongly associated with decreased willingness to include non-Christians in social life. Finally, belief that religious diversity "has been good for America" is significantly associated with a welcoming stance toward Muslims. Note the diminished effect of prior contact with Muslims in the final model. A more positive view of religious diversity in the nation may in fact be the result of prior interreligious contact. Contact with Muslims may lead to greater comfort with religious diversity, making individuals more accepting of a mosque in their community.

## DISCUSSION

The current study addresses a significant gap in the literature on religion and tolerance: Americans' attitudes toward the growing numbers of non-Christians in the United States. While previous work has established a strong relationship between religion and tolerance generally (Beatty and Walter 1984; Ellison and Musick 1993; Katnik 2002; Stouffer 1955), we know less about what shapes Americans' responses to religious diversity and their willingness to include non-Christians in social life. This study seeks to extend the literature on religion and tolerance by examining how theological beliefs shape Americans' responses to religious diversity. In addition, I argue that two additional factors are key to understanding how Americans view non-Christians and their faiths: beliefs about the role of Christianity in American society and prior contact with non-Christians.

This study adds to a growing number of studies indicating that individuals' theological beliefs hold social significance and have important implications for tolerance (Bader and Froese 2005; Ellison and Musick 1993; Froese, Bader, and Smith 2008; Tuntiya 2005). Theological exclusivism is very strongly associated with more negative views of religious diversity and decreased willingness to include non-Christians in community religious life. Some scholars have argued that exclusivists' responses to religious diversity are less problematic than they appear. Trinitapoli (2007:475) found that adolescents with exclusive theological beliefs generally express those beliefs in a tentative manner and add important qualifications about the "limitations of their knowledge or the legitimacy of others who hold opposing views." Furthermore, Smith (1998) suggests that rejection of religious pluralism may reflect important boundary construction work rather than intolerance of religious others. Such boundary construction helps to maintain a strong sense of collective identity, one way by which more strict religious groups maintain high levels of commitment. Nonetheless, the results of this study suggest that theologically exclusive beliefs held by a substantial percentage of Americans are a significant hurdle to the full inclusion of non-Christians in American society.

Debates about the religious roots of the United States and the role of religion in public life are seemingly endless. Such debate often centers on whether the United States is a "Christian

nation” (see Hecklo 2007). A majority of Americans believe that the United States is a Christian nation and that Christianity played a crucial role in its founding. Yet this study suggests that the relationship between belief in a Christian nation and views of religious diversity is complex. A three-item index measuring belief that the United States is a Christian nation is positively associated with the belief that religious diversity “has been good for America.” It may be that when many Americans think of “religious diversity,” they have only Christian diversity in mind. Alternatively, Smith (2000) argues that for many Americans, belief in a Christian nation entails appreciation for religious freedom and an acceptance of religious diversity. However, Smith’s suggestion is undermined by findings regarding acceptance of Muslims in community life. While belief in a Christian nation is not significantly related to attitudes toward a Hindu temple, it is a significant predictor of a less welcoming attitude toward a mosque. It seems that while inclusion of Hindus in community life does not threaten Americans’ idea of a Christian nation, inclusion of Muslims does. On a more encouraging note, the fact that most Americans are comfortable with religious diversity at a community level suggests that an expansion of American civil religion may be underway and that non-Christians are becoming a more legitimate part of the religious landscape (Angrosino 2002; Kao and Copulsky 2007; MacHacek 2003). However, the results of this study caution that this development is drawing resistance.

This study included a unique test of the effects of interreligious contact on religious tolerance and views of religious diversity. Results from the current study indicate that interreligious contact supports more positive views of religious diversity and greater willingness to include Muslims in community religious life. It is significant that contact with Hindus does not have a similar effect on acceptance of a Hindu temple. Muslims appear to occupy a worse position than Hindus in terms of public opinion. Accordingly, the potential positive effects of contact with Muslims may be greater than for Hindus. Misconceptions and stereotypes about Muslims may be so widespread that even a minimal amount of contact is enough to improve attitudes (see Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007). The potential for interreligious contact to lead to greater religious tolerance deserves more scholarly attention. Future research should seek to use better measures of contact and, ideally, longitudinal data. Despite the potentially beneficial effects of interreligious contact, however, it appears to be very minimal for most Americans, particularly for those with theologically exclusive beliefs. Religious groups across the spectrum could do more to encourage meaningful interreligious contact.

Previous research has found that evangelical Protestants generally exhibit lower levels of tolerance than other Americans (Ellison and Musick 1993; Reimer and Park 2001; Tamney and Johnson 1997). The current study extends that research by reporting that, compared to other Americans, evangelical Protestants are generally less accepting of non-Christians in community life. Evangelical Protestants are especially wary of Muslims. Net of demographic controls, they are significantly less welcoming of a mosque than every other religious category. Cimino (2005) reports that popular evangelical literature has grown increasingly anti-Islamic since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. While pre-9/11 literature was generally critical of Islam, post-9/11 literature draws even sharper boundaries between Islam and Christianity and portrays Islam as an inherently violent faith. Cimino argues that evangelical opposition to Islam is part of a broader effort by evangelicals to maintain the boundaries of evangelical identity in a highly pluralistic society. As Cimino argues, identifying Islam as an enemy to the faith has the “unwitting result of maintaining unity and internal cohesion” (Smith 1998:107). While this kind of boundary maintenance may have beneficial effects for evangelical identity and commitment, it appears to have less desirable effects on interfaith relations.

This study reveals a nation somewhat conflicted over how to deal with religious diversity and how to incorporate non-Christians into public and private life. The suggestion that American civil religion is expanding to include non-Christian faiths may be a useful way to understand how Americans deal with religious diversity by expanding the range of what is acceptable and valuable to society. Smith’s “sacred umbrella” metaphor (1998) sheds light on how those with exclusive

religious beliefs may deal with religious diversity by creating supportive social environments that limit contact with differing viewpoints. Ultimately, this study makes it clear that no consensus exists about the value of non-Christian perspectives in American society and that Americans are divided on this issue.

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