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**THE SIMON REVIEW
PAPER #63**

THE CHURCH AND MICHAEL BROWN

**THE INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY ON
RACIALIZED POLITICAL ATTITUDES IN
FERGUSON, MISSOURI**

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The Simon Review

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The Simon Review

Paper #63

The Church and Michael Brown: The Influence of Christianity on Racialized Political Attitudes in Ferguson, Missouri

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Author's Note

The following paper is a condensed version of my doctoral research conducted through the University of Missouri-St. Louis under the supervision of my advisor, David Kimball. Adriano Udani, Todd Swanstrom, and Anita Manion were also members of my committee. I am very thankful for their support and mentorship. This paper was edited by Dr. John Jackson who was also the one who encouraged me to write it. I am so grateful for his guidance and encouragement. The author would also like to thank Dave Robertson who supported me in this research and Dawna Williams who worked alongside me to draft and conduct the 2014 UMSL Exit Poll which is utilized in this work. I would also like to thank Alee Quick who served as the copy editor for the project.

The Author's Biographical Statement

Tyler Chance earned his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Missouri-St. Louis in 2021. He also holds an MA in Bible and Theology (Lincoln Christian University, 2021), and an MA in Political Science (University of Missouri-St. Louis, 2017), and a BA in Political Science (Southern Illinois University, 2013). He conducts research on the intersection of race, religion, and politics in American life. His research has been featured in “The Monkey Cage” section of *The Washington Post*.

In addition to his research, Chance is dedicated to fostering political consciousness in young leaders as an educator at both the secondary and post-secondary levels. Chance is a Teach for America alumnus, having served in the 2019 St. Louis Corps teaching language arts and social studies in downtown St. Louis. He currently teaches high school in southern Illinois.

The Church and Michael Brown: The Influence of Christianity on Racialized Political Attitudes in Ferguson, Missouri

Abstract

This study examines whether the Christian faith played a pacifying or inspiring role in racialized politics following the death of Michael Brown and subsequent uprisings in Ferguson, Missouri. To evaluate the role of religion in responding to racialized crisis, the author examines both the attitudes of individual citizens and the actions of faith leaders. Using data gathered from two exit polls conducted by the author in Ferguson and the surrounding area during the period between the death of Michael Brown and the decision not to indict the officer who killed him and then again after the grand jury decision, the author finds religious and racial gaps in the acceptance of narratives about the death of Michael Brown. The analysis of exit-poll data also shows a racial cleavage in perceptions of congregational response to the Ferguson Moment. The author then uses interviews with clergy from across the St. Louis region to analyze the various ways faith leaders responded to the racial crisis and the doctrinal, demographic, and place-based variables that may have influenced these responses.

Introduction

This project seeks to address the ways in which the Christian religion helps Americans to interpret the prominence of police killings of Black people that, since the advent of online streaming and the ability to quickly share video footage, have become prevalent in the American social conscience. Broadly, this paper will address how race, religion, and politics — three of the most polarizing forces in American life — intersect in modern America. More specifically, this paper will use the Ferguson Moment and continuing racial unrest in the St.

Louis region as a case study to examine how religious attitudes and religious institutions help to

influence responses to racialized state violence.

Ultimately, this paper will argue that while faith may seem to play a subtle role in responses to racialized politics, it can work as both a force stymieing progress for racial equity in criminal justice or inspiring advocacy for racial progress. Many factors including doctrinal beliefs, religious practices, congregational community, tradition and denomination, personal characteristics, and location can work as indicators for which of these paths a member of the clergy might take in his or her response to racialized violence. Additionally, this paper will show how many citizens in the Ferguson area perceive that their religious congregation is taking action to fight racial injustice, even to the point of encouraging civil disobedience. Whileat the same time, some religious institutions can act as centers of the white dominant political status quo.

Within the field of political science, the influence of religious belief on American politics is often understated outside of the work of a small group of scholars. However, the relationship between the church and state has been at the center of philosophical, theological, and practical discussions for centuries. Our understanding of this tension has developed significantly over time and can be highlighted in key moments such as Jesus of Nazareth's directive to "give unto Caesar," Augustine's *The City of God*, and Thomas Jefferson's "high wall of separation." In modern American society, a third social force influences civic life: race. Scholars must better understand how these three major social forces interact within American life.

According to Noll (2008), "Together, race and religion make up, not only the nation's deepest and most enduring moral problem, but also its broadest and most enduring political influence" (Noll, 2008;1). Both forces divide Americans and shape American culture. Religion is a very significant wedge in American politics, perhaps second only to race, and this cleavage permeates throughout many areas of American life. Green (2010) found that in the 2004

presidential election, the gap between the Democratic and Republican candidates based on religious affiliation and religious attendance was greater than on income, region, rural/urban divide, gender, generation, and education; while the only gap shown to be larger was the racial gap (Green, 2010;17). The influence of religious belief and race on American politics should not be underestimated.

Likewise, religion should not be neglected when we discuss the Ferguson Moment. In 2014, the police killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teen, in Ferguson, Missouri sparked uprisings in the surrounding community alongside harsh responses from state and local governments and became a focusing event on race and policing in the United States. At first glance, it is not easy to see the interaction between faith and Ferguson. However, there are many instances that point toward the importance of religion in the world's reaction to Michael Brown's death including, among others: a controversial eulogy of Michael Brown in the *New York Times* calling him "no angel," Michael Brown's family's church falling victim to arson¹, a group of Tibetan monks standing in solidarity with Ferguson protestors, and, most importantly for this study, the large number of religious leaders speaking out about Brown's death and the proper ways for their disciples to respond (Hafiz, 2014; Lowery, 2014; *Religion and Politics*, 2014).

The connection between racial tensions and religion in modern American life was made tragically clear when, less than a year after Michael Brown's death, Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, a historic Black church in Charleston, South Carolina, was the site of a racially charged mass shooting.

There is evidence that clergy played a strong supportive role in the demonstrations following the killing of Michael Brown. Leah Gunning-Francis (2015) uses interviews and other

¹ This parallels the fact that there were 40 Black churches burned in Mississippi in the early summer of 1964 and is part of a trend of several Black churches falling victim to arson in 2015.

qualitative evidence to show how mainline Protestant clergy became involved in the Ferguson demonstrations (Francis, 2015). Francis shows that clergy actively demonstrated and provided resources to the young activists that led the demonstrations, but they most often did not take on leadership roles themselves (Francis, 2015).

However, the media have shown examples of how other religious leaders in the St. Louis area responded to Michael Brown's death. One notable example is Ferguson resident and professional jazz musician Brian Owens, who, according to *The Christian Chronicle*, proclaimed "Worship is our protest" at the predominantly African American Ferguson Heights Church of Christ, going on to say, according to *The Christian Chronicle's* paraphrase, that it was "the fight for hearts and souls –not the fight in the streets—that matters" (Ross, 2015). The implication here is that spiritual revitalization is more powerful than political reform or perhaps that it will be the only way to achieve political reform.

These accounts represent two perspectives on the role of the church in response to Michael Brown's death and exemplify a continuing debate on the role of Christianity in African American political advancement. The two theories, as described by Harris (1999), are the *opiate theory*, in which an otherworldly focus turns religious institutions into "an instrument of political pacification and fatalism," and *inspiration theory*, which argues that Christianity has been a powerful and positive force in Black American politics (Harris, 1999). Sociologist Christian Smith sums up the dichotomy quite well saying, "Religion *can* help to keep everything in its place. But it can *also* turn the world upside-down" (Smith, 1996; 1). While there is evidence of both faces of religion within the history of the Civil Rights Movement and Black political advancement in America, the question this paper seeks to address is which of these theories better describes the way that religion worked in the aftermath of Michael Brown Jr.'s

death and the continuing racialized conflict in the St. Louis region. If it can be assumed that it probably works for both ends, then we must ask how.

Literature Review

Political scientists and sociologists have provided a dualistic literature of diametrically opposed authors on the subject of religion's capacity to create positive change for racial minorities in the United States or racial progress in general. Fredrick Harris refers to these two competing schools of thought as *opiate theory* and *inspiration theory*. Harris describes the former as the theory that "insists that Afro-Christianity promotes otherworldliness, functioning as an instrument of political pacification and fatalism" while the latter "makes exactly the opposite claim arguing that Afro-Christianity has played a central role in Black politics, catalyzing, for example, the collective involvement of African Americans in the modern civil rights movement" (Harris, 1999; 4-5). **In this paper, I will use the same terms, however, I will not limit their definitions to Black Christianity in America, but I will try to show how religion has inspired or discouraged Americans from all racial and faith backgrounds to act in response to the police killings of people of color in America, specifically the killing of Michael Brown.**

The term *opiate theory* in the African American religious context is credited to Gary Marx (1967), who found that the more frequently a Black respondent attended church and the higher the importance placed on religion by the respondent, the lower the level of the respondent's civil rights militancy (Marx, 1967). The creation of several secular Black interest groups (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League) throughout the early 20th century as alternatives to Black churches coincides with this perception of religion as an opiate to militancy (Fowler et al., 2010). While there is a clear history of the

American church being complicit with racism in the United States, there are instances that support the idea of inspiration theory including the religiosity associated with the Civil Rights Movement.

There are several doctrinal attitudes associated with racial conservatism. These include: *sacred transcendence*, a focus on the otherworldly that shifts how one views reality, causing believers to care little about the temporal world in hopes of heavenly rewards; *premillennialism* and *dispensationalism*, beliefs about the end times that feature a continued global decay before the millennial reign of Christ; *individualism*, a focus on personal salvation that causes Christians to see social ills as rooted in personal morality rather than systems and structures; *authoritarianism*, a belief in the necessity of strict obedience to authority; *militant masculinity*, aggressive machoism within the church, and *biblicism*, a high view of scripture as divinely inspired and ultimately authoritative coupled with an overly literal reading of biblical texts. Additionally, it is no secret that branches of American Christianity have become consistently aligned with right-wing politics in the form of the “Christian right.”

On the other hand, there are aspects of American Christian worldviews that seem to inspire racial progressivism. These include: *Postmillennialism*, envisioning the mission of the church as ushering in the millennial Kingdom of Christ; *the Social Gospel*, a movement from the early 20th century that still affects Christian thinking today, in which sin is a societal problem rather than individual and thus could be countered with socialist solutions; *liberation theology*, in which the gospel is interpreted through the lived experiences of the oppressed; *communitarian religion*, the opposite of individualistic religion in which faith is not about the individual but the community; and *Inspiring Sacred Transcendence*, in which a vision of the otherworldly shifts how one views reality so that the heavenly ideal is the model by which temporal society is

judged.

Clergy in Racial Crises

Having provided a short summary of the factors that influence Christians toward racial progressivism or protection of the status quo, we must now turn to the question of how clergy respond to racialized crisis. Two studies in particular describe the reaction of clergy in instances of racialized tension or violence. These are Campbell's and Pettigrew's 1957 study of clergy and school integration in Little Rock, Arkansas, and Sokhey's 2001 study of clergy reaction to protesting and violence following the police killing of a young Black man in Cincinnati, Ohio (Campbell and Pettigrew, 1957; Sokhey, 2001). These two studies are separated by several decades and by the direction of the racial tension.

Ernest Campbell and Thomas Pettigrew were the first to systematically study clergy response to racial unrest in their study of ministers in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. The Little Rock case was a controversy surrounding an early instance of federally mandated school integration in which nine African American students were enrolled in Little Rock Central High School, which had previously been a whites-only school. The controversy and subsequent mob action led to both Arkansas National Guard and Federal troops being deployed to escort the students to school. Just days before, the Arkansas National Guard had been used by the governor to keep the black students from enrolling at Central High. This action also produced a major showdown and test of wills between Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus and President Dwight Eisenhower. The president won the face-off, but only after nationalizing the Arkansas National Guard and bringing in U.S. Army troops from the 101st Airborne Division from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, to enforce the court's orders requiring the desegregation of Central High School (Huckaby, 1980; Reed, 1997).

Neither Little Rock nor St. Louis are part of the “Deep South,” yet both are states where slavery and segregation have left a major scar. The clear difference between Little Rock and Ferguson was the direction of the outrage. In Little Rock, rioting by those supporting segregation broke out over the policy to integrate schools. The outrage was centered around an antiracist policy, whereas in Ferguson and the St. Louis region at large, racial tensions centered around ongoing perceived racist policies and behavior by public officials. In Little Rock, it was white people protesting to preserve a racist policy, while in Ferguson, more than half a century later, it was a diverse racial group that protested the actions of Ferguson police.

In Campbell’s and Pettigrew’s work we see Christian appeals to peace and law and order in Little Rock, rather than a Christian defense of desegregation. Campbell and Pettigrew describe a prayer meeting held some weeks after the rioting as a “ritualistic termination of any attempts by the clergy to direct the course of events in the racial crisis” as the clear goal of the service was to emphasize compromise and peace rather than moving forward toward racial justice (Campbell and Pettigrew, 1959; 511). In this way the clergy were able to appease national pressure for church action, while not actually having to take steps that may have been deemed to be controversial by their congregants.

The authors discover that certain institutional factors influence clergy to act in pacifying ways rather than to work for social reform. They find that institutional structures within religious congregations help clergy with antiracist convictions to avoid developing feelings of guilt while maintaining their inaction.

Campbell and Pettigrew discuss three systems that help to determine whether a minister will be active in their integrationist views or remain inactive. These systems are: the self-reference system (SRS), or how one sees oneself and their own motivational factors; the

professional reference system (PRS), occupational carrots and sticks outside of their own congregation; and the membership reference system (MRS), influence from one's congregation. While a member of the clergy's self-reference system and professional reference system tend to motivate action on racial justice, they are not as powerful as the membership reference system.

According to Campbell and Pettigrew, congregations expect ministers to act as a "cohesive force" and maintain harmony within the congregation, to show steady increases in church membership, and to encourage maximum annual giving for improvement and expansion of the congregation's resources. These goals are difficult to achieve by the clergy going public and acting on divisive issues, including racial justice.

Additionally, one's SRS can pacify any guilt over inaction by allowing ministers to focus on their "role" as leaders of their congregation and through communication techniques such as talking about "deeper issues" or vague values rather than the temporal issues at hand. They feel that they are doing their God-sanctioned duty by keeping peace rather than pursuing progress.

Campbell and Pettigrew note that all major Protestant denominations had made statements declaring support for school desegregation, yet they find that congregational pressures constrained the behavior of clergy in Little Rock. We can, therefore, expect similar behavior in St. Louis. While Christian leaders on a national scale may preach racial reconciliation and healing and call for systematic reform of criminal justice in response to the death of Michael Brown, local clergy may not follow for a variety of reasons, notably congregational pressure. Additionally, Protestant denominations have become more independent of national denominational organizations. Campbell and Pettigrew look specifically at ministers from established denominations. Their scope does not include church leaders of independent congregations beyond or on the fringe of Christian orthodoxy.

However, the Little Rock study has several shortcomings. Campbell and Pettigrew conducted 29 interviews with ministers, 27 Protestant and two Jewish. They attempted to interview Roman Catholic priests but were unable due to lack of cooperation. Therefore, Campbell and Pettigrew can only speak to two of the major religious traditions in the United States but do not tell us anything about how Black Protestant or Roman Catholic clergy react to instances of racial crisis. Additionally, Campbell and Pettigrew look specifically at ministers from established denominations. Therefore, their scope does not include church leaders of independent congregations or faiths beyond or on the fringes of Christian orthodoxy. This is possibly due to Campbell's and Pettigrew's use of the "snowball technique" (i.e., respondents suggesting other possible respondents) rather than random selection in choosing who to interview. Indeed, it may be likely that they find similar behaviors and pressures across their sample because they chose to forego random selection. They acknowledge these shortcomings, explaining that their sample is weighted toward large, prestigious congregations or those that were reputed to have played active roles in the conflict.

Following Campbell and Pettigrew, Sokhey examines clergy behavior decades later in Cincinnati. In the year 2001, Cincinnati was a city rife with racial unrest following the shooting of Timothy Thomas, one of many young unarmed African American men who have been killed by police in the United States. Outrage following the shooting led to passionate protesting.

Using mail surveys to and phone interviews with Cincinnati clergy, Sokhey (2007) studied the response of religious leaders to the racial unrest in the city following Thomas' death. Sokhey's study is unique because it focuses specifically on the role of proximity in determining how clergy respond to racial tension and protest. His main research question was whether being farther removed from the protests geographically leads to being further removed from the issues

that the protests address. Following Djupe and others, Sokhey is interested in what mobilizes clergy to political action and how clergy then mobilize their congregants.

The abuse and killing of young unarmed Black men by police in American cities followed by protest and intermittent violence have become common events. While each city has its own history and culture, the scenario in Cincinnati bears considerable resemblance with the unrest that surrounded the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson. Protesting, vandalism, looting, and rioting occurred in Cincinnati's Over-The-Rhine area for three days following the shooting of Timothy Thomas, although unlike in Ferguson, a mayor-ordered curfew helped to end the tumult just a few days after the shooting (Garretson, 2001). Both uprisings led to national media attention and the influx of high-profile figures into the city, including the Reverends Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. While in Ferguson, the police officer who killed Michael Brown was not indicted, Cincinnati officer Stephen Roach was tried for the killing of Timothy Thomas but was found not guilty (Horn, 2001).

Sokhey found fairly high amounts of engagement from the Cincinnati clergy, although engagement breaks down differently across race and religious tradition and attention was self-reported (Sokhey, 2007). According to Sokhey's study, Black Protestant churches were the most likely to report clergy and congregational interest in race-related issues, followed by Roman Catholics. While 60% of Sokhey's survey responded that they believe that the Cincinnati government had not done enough to deal with the city's racial tensions, nearly 70% of the survey said that rioting was an unjustified response to Thomas' death. Additionally, 90% of the survey agreed that the church should be more active in handling racial reconciliation in the city.

Sokhey found that race was a key determinant in how clergy responded to the racial unrest in their city; while only 10% of the clergy in white churches reported that they believed

the rioting was justified, 45% of clergy in churches with predominantly Black congregations did so. There was also a racial distinction between who clergy believed was to blame for the riots. Half of the clergy from Black churches blamed the police and only 12% of clergy from white churches said the same. Clergy viewed the performance of churches in pursuing racial reconciliation differently along racial lines as well, with a larger percentage of the survey believing that Black churches had been successful in promoting racial reconciliation (40%) compared to white churches (15%), with an overwhelming majority of Black clergy (70%) saying that white churches were ineffectual.

How then did the clergy behave in Cincinnati in the early 2000s? Sokhey found that the clergy mostly responded to the racial unrest through public speech. Sokhey found a small increase in various activities across the board, including hosting special worship services dedicated to racial reconciliation and hosting a community leader to discuss race relations. However, he finds that most of the change comes from congregations who were already engaged with these issues.

Interestingly, however, Sokhey's survey reports a comparatively large percentage of the Cincinnati clergy participating in marches or rallies for racial justice (about 30%); African American clergy were much more likely to participate in these less conventional forms of clergy participation than were the clergy of predominantly white churches. Ultimately, Sokhey finds that in addition to congregational and community resources, race plays a large role in whether the clergy actively participate in justice work.

Similar to Campbell and Pettigrew, Sokhey examines resources and motivations for clergy action. Sokhey found some differences in resources; the clergy from Black congregations were more likely to report that their congregation was lower income than other nearby

congregations. However, despite the lack of resources a much larger racial gap exists in motivation to participate, where Sokhey finds the clergy of Black churches were more likely to say that their congregations, their community organizations, and attitudes of other clergy were encouraging in reconciliation efforts.

One aspect that sets Sokhey's study apart from the previous works on clergy activism is his focus on geographic distance as a predicting factor in clergy behavior. Sokhey looks at physical distance between congregations and the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood where most of the rioting took place. He finds that clergy whose churches are located farther from the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood were much less likely to pay attention to racialized political issues, and were also less likely to participate in reconciliation efforts in response to the riot by public speech or more active means. Sokhey's study ultimately concludes that clergy working nearer to the racial crisis took on the role of community leaders and provided for a social network that encouraged prolonged and pronounced clergy participation in reconciliation efforts.

Sokhey's study is also unique because he attempts to explain what factors are predictive of different types of political action among clergy. He estimates three models, one in which all forms of reconciliatory actions are considered, one in which community-oriented action is considered, and a third that focuses on individualistic activity. Within the model based around community-oriented action, such as attending meetings or active protesting, he finds that personal interest and religious beliefs as well as whether the clergy were compelled by media or congregational pressures to participate in reconciliatory efforts as significant predictive variables. He also finds length of tenure in congregation and geographic distance from the uprisings to be significant factors. However, in the model that examines individualized and personal activities that are more within-church, personal beliefs still play a predictive role, but

distance is not a predictive factor, and congregational encouragement and racial makeup are more likely to play a role in discouraging this type of political behavior.

While Campbell and Pettigrew examined personal beliefs, the congregation, and denominational restraint, and as we shall see Djupe and Glibert added community restraints as a predictive factor in clergy behavior in situations of racial unrest (Djupe and Gilbert, 2009), Sokhey's work is important because it confirms the effect of these influences. However, he also adds distance from the incident of police violence and protesting as a significant factor that needs to be considered in the sociological examination of religious response to racial unrest. He also contributes significantly to our understanding of what factors mobilize participation among clergy by his conclusion that the type of reconciliatory activity that is being considered may be influenced more or less strongly by different types of factors. By separating community and individualistic factors of reconciliatory action, Sokhey wisely shows us that different factors influence different types of behaviors. Sokhey's work shows how a clergy's personal beliefs, denominational structure, congregational beliefs, and community pressure can press upon clergy the role of community leader, causing them to take part in more outward-facing actions (Olson, 2000).

Whereas more individualistic activities such as public speech were influenced more by congregational factors such as racial demographics and the political/theological attitudes of the congregation regardless of distance from riots and protests. While social networks and community ties do more to encourage outward prophetic behaviors, white congregational homogeneity can encourage silence from the pulpit.

While the scenarios in Cincinnati and Ferguson are easily comparable, over a decade separates the two tragic moments of racial unrest. Can Sokhey's study speak to Ferguson? This

author believes so; however, it would be unwise to assume that clergy behavior in Ferguson would be exactly the same as that in Cincinnati. Additionally, Sokhey tells us a lot about clergy mobilization, but not much about the effectiveness of clergy in mobilizing congregants or in helping the community beyond the clergy's self-reporting of overall church effectiveness.

Sokhey also does not try to get to the bottom of what factors of personal belief must be present to activate clergy activism. Is it theological, political, or eschatological? While personal belief is a motivational predictor of both of Sokhey's factors of participation, what aspects of one's beliefs are important? Are they socialized more from the seminary or from Main Street? Which is more important: beliefs about God or beliefs about the importance of community? These are questions that Sokhey's study does not address.

The Response of Clergy to Racialized Crisis in Ferguson, Missouri

To investigate how clergy responded to the crisis surrounding the death of Michael Brown, I conducted interviews with various clergy from throughout the St. Louis region. Interviews were conducted throughout the fall of 2019 into the early part of 2020.² The five-year gap between the event and the interviews allowed for members of clergy to discuss what is different about serving in their role since the death of Michael Brown and how their congregations have changed.

However, the gap in time led to some setbacks. Often, congregational leaders who had served during the Ferguson Moment are no longer in their posts. If this was the case, efforts were made to talk with both current leaders and their predecessors.

Interviews consisted of 14 questions representing three main topics: doctrinal and theological issues, social and political issues, and questions regarding attitudes and reactions to

² This means the study was complete before the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, which caused a major national upheaval in race relations similar to what happened in Ferguson earlier.

the Ferguson Moment. Interviews usually lasted around an hour and a half. Interviews were conducted in person when possible, although some clergy opted to be interviewed over phone or via Zoom video-conferencing software.

Churches were selected in order to include the four major religious traditions within the United States: Black Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, and Catholic. However, it was very difficult to find Catholic clergy who were willing to participate in the study. Ten interviews were conducted representing nine different churches covering all four traditions. Of these, one respondent represented Catholicism, five represented Mainline Protestantism, two represent Black Protestantism, and two represented Evangelical Protestantism.³ Responses included three Black respondents, one Latinx respondent, and six white respondents.⁴ Eight male clergy and two female clergy were interviewed.

As this project seeks to evaluate how the frames around the death of Michael Brown are accepted and transmitted within religious circles, the main dependent variable for this study focuses on what information the member of clergy believes about the death of Michael Brown. Clergy are asked directly what they think happened the day that Michael Brown died. Their responses are then examined by the researcher and categorized as being a narrative that is police favorable or Black Lives Matter favorable. For example, one respondent provides information that they believe a bullet hole was found in Darren Wilson's car from Michael Brown firing off the police officer's gun. There is no actual evidence of this occurring; however, the member of clergy heard this evidence existed and internalized it. This would be categorized

³ When classifying based on tradition, I chose to follow Pew Research Center's approach and identify churches that are predominantly Black/African American but are associated with a mainline denomination as a mainline church rather than as part of the Black Protestant tradition (Masci et al. 2018).

⁴ Demographics information such as race, age, and sex were interviewer-perceived.

as a police-favorable narrative as it promotes the idea that Michael Brown's death was an unfortunate incident of self-defense. However, if a statement rejects the idea that Darren Wilson acted in self-defense, it would be deemed a Black Lives Matter-favorable narrative. In addition, variables around issue interest, political interest, and political actions also act as dependent variables in this section of the study.

Hypotheses

My overarching hypothesis is that I will discover more evidence for *opiate theory* than *inspiration theory* in looking at clergy reactions to the Ferguson Moment. Additionally, I expect to find that clergy predominantly take a *pacifying approach* over a *change-oriented approach* in how they discuss the death of Michael Brown. I also expect to find that those who see the mission of Jesus as political or directed toward the poor or oppressed to be more likely to be politically interested in *social justice*. Finally, I expect to find that congregational demographics and location are closely related to responses to the Ferguson Moment and the types of issues in which clergy are politically interested.

Findings

Overall, I found that clergy in the sample communicate about the death of Michael Brown in different ways. Specifically, two respondents communicate using narratives congruent with a police-positive narrative, five respondents communicate in narrative more in line with Black Lives Matter, two were unsure about the events leading up to the death of Michael Brown and were uncategorizable as promoting either narrative, and one respondent refused to discuss the death of Michael Brown.

Clergy in the sample had different political interests, as well. Half of the sample were politically interested solely in justice issues such as racial equity and poverty. The other half

were focused on both justice issues and morality issues such as abortion and LGBTQ+ rights or restrictions. No respondents indicated that the only issues of concern were morality issues.

Additionally, clergy responded to the Ferguson Moment in different ways. These reactions include: delayed action or inaction, speaking from the pulpit, protesting, working as de-escalators at protests, providing for needs in the community such as trash pickup, and creating or joining small group Bible studies focused on racial reconciliation.

I examined three main categories of independent variables including questions regarding doctrine or theological beliefs, demographics, and location. Of these, I believe the first, theological beliefs, has been understudied in the literature. I found that when it comes to religious tradition, Mainline Protestants were the most consistent in presenting a narrative consistent with Black Lives Matter. Additionally, they were more likely to be interested in justice issues than other respondents in the survey. To check for practices more congruent with communitarian or individualistic religion, I ask respondents how their congregation practices baptism. Infant baptism as a rite of passage into the faith community rather than an individual choice is considered more closely associated with communitarian faith. Those who practiced infant baptism said that racism is one of the most important issues facing St. Louis, while those who practiced adult baptism were split evenly on whether they said racism was the most important issue facing the community. Attitudes on communion are another indicator of communitarian religion. However, I found no discernable relationship between frequency of communion and racialized political attitudes.

Additionally, I asked about perceptions of whether the church should be involved in politics. Within my sample, those who gave answers indicated that the church, following Jesus' mission, should be involved in politics, whether very involved or somewhat involved, were more

likely to advance a Black Lives Matter-favorable narrative than were those who said the Church should not be involved in politics. This finding was statistically significant at the .05 criterion of significance.

Table 1: Acceptance of Narratives on the Death of Michael Brown by Attitudes on Church Involvement in Politics.

	The Church should not be involved in politics	The Church should be involved in politics	Total
Police Narrative	2 (50%)	0 (0%)	2 (20%)
Black Lives Matter Narrative	0 (0%)	5 (83.33%)	5 (50%)
Unsure	1 (25%)	1 (16.67%)	2 (20%)
No Answer	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	1 (10%)
Total	4 (100%)	6 (100%)	10 (100%)

Pearson Chi²(3)=7.92; Pr=0.048.

Figure 1 displays this finding graphically. I also inquired about eschatological beliefs. While I feel that this is a promising aspect of doctrine that may be related to political interest and action, there was not enough variance in my sample to make connections with racialized political action.

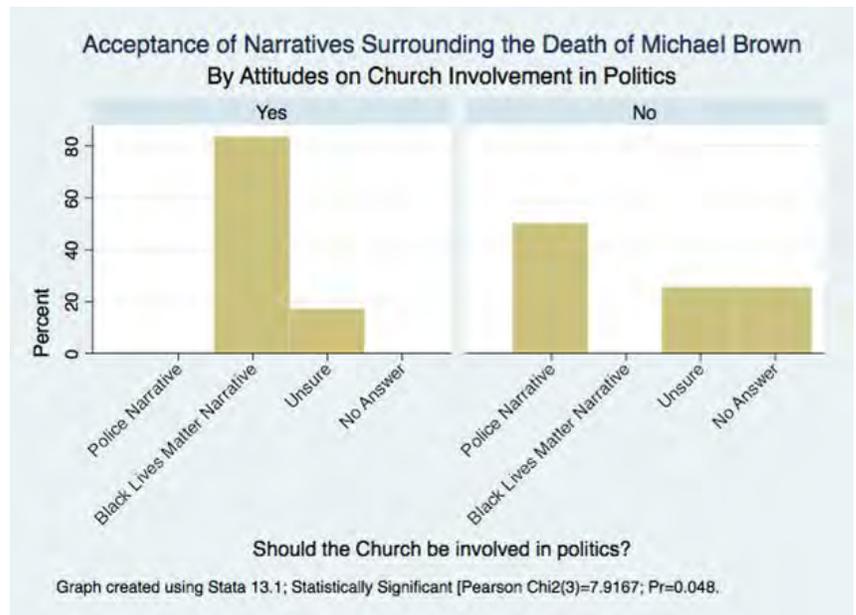


Figure 1

I asked respondents to describe the mission of Jesus in some depth. Responses centered

around two different themes: salvation and justice. Many respondents connected the mission of Jesus with providing for salvation from sins and hell. However, others also indicated that there was something about Jesus’ mission that pertained to justice. Those in the latter group took different approaches. Some said that there was a political component to Jesus’ ministry or that it was subversive of his culture. Others saw his mission as helping the poor and powerless. Although inferential statistics are not promising due to the small sample size, within the sample there seems to be a relationship as predicted between each of these variables and acceptance of narratives around the death of Michael Brown.

One hundred percent of respondents who see aspects of Jesus’ mission as political make statements that align with the Black Lives Matter narrative, while those who do not identify a political component to Jesus’ mission are more divided on the issue. Of those that say Jesus’ mission was not political, 37.5% make statements aligned with the Black Lives Matter narrative; 25% make statements aligned with the police narrative; and the remainder provided answers that showed they were unsure of which narratives to accept or chose not to answer (37.5%). Refer to Figure 2 for a graphical depiction.

	The mission of Jesus was not political	The mission of Jesus was political	Total
Police Narrative	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	2 (20%)
Black Lives Matter Narrative	3 (37.5%)	2 (100%)	5 (50%)
Unsure	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	2 (20%)
No Answer	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	1 (10%)
Total	8 (100%)	2 (100%)	10 (100%)

Pearson $\chi^2(3)=2.5$; Pr=0.475.

As shown in Table 3, the variable on Jesus’ mission being to the poor shows a weaker pattern. Here those who believe Jesus’ mission was, at least in part, to care for the poor were split between the police narrative and the Black Lives Matter narrative fifty-fifty. Whereas

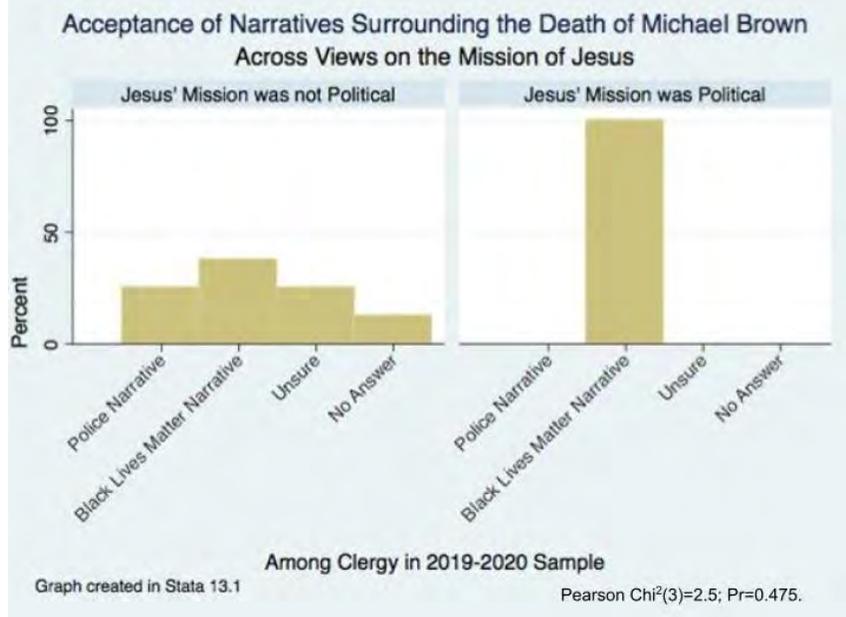


Figure 2

those who did not mention Jesus’ mission as being related to the poor also had 50% of the respondents favoring the Black Lives Matter narrative; however, here 25% were unsure, 12.5% did not give a response, and 12.5% accept the police narrative. Curiously, however, these variables do not seem to have any directional relationship with identifying race as a major issue of concern in St. Louis.

	The Mission of Jesus was to the poor	The Mission of Jesus was not to the poor	Total
Police Narrative	1 (50%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (20%)
Black Lives Matter Narrative	1 (50%)	4 (50%)	5 (50%)
Unsure	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	2 (20%)
No Answer	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (10%)
Total	2 (100%)	8 (100%)	10 (100%)

Pearson Chi²(3)=1.875; Pr=0.599.

I took demographic variables into account for both the clergy in the sample and their respective congregations. Through this, I found that Black respondents were more likely to accept a Black Lives Matter narrative than white respondents, although

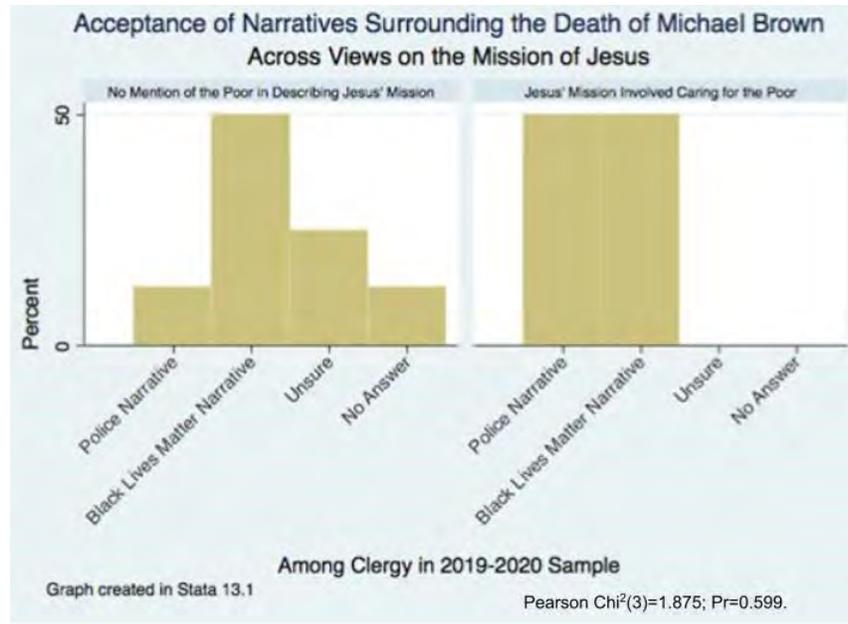


Figure 3

this finding was not statistically significant at the .05 criterion. Additionally, while men in the survey were divided in what narratives they accept and present, the women in the sample all discuss the Ferguson Moment through a Black Lives Matter narrative (compared to 37.5% of the men in the survey). The women both participated in protest and responded to the death of Michael Brown (one as a de-escalator), while only one of the eight men in the survey said that he participated in protests in any capacity. Both women described either police injustice or race as important issues facing St. Louis compared to only 75% of the men in the sample.

Many clergy reported feeling pressure from their congregations to speak out or remain silent on political issues. However, of those who described this pressure, most said that the pressure came from both sides and often contradicted each other. Indeed, for some members of the clergy, navigating reactions to social issues is difficult because one can offend members of their flock on either side. Clergy who lead predominantly Black congregations were more likely to discuss the death of Michael Brown through a Black Lives Matter narrative.

Finally, does location work as a predictor of clergy attitudes in Ferguson as it did in Sokhey's study of Cincinnati? A theme of distance from the location where Michael Brown was shot was apparent in the sample for both those who lived in Ferguson and outside of Ferguson. One respondent who pastored a church in Ferguson said, "Most people in Ferguson did not even know that Canfield Green Apartments were even in Ferguson." Another pastor from approximately 20 miles outside of Ferguson in St. Charles, Missouri said:

During that time, we just hunkered down. We're pretty far removed from Ferguson geographically. We are a whole different community but realizing that we have families that live in Ferguson we reached out to them. They were fearful and they were sad that their city was being seen this way. There was so much pain, that the world saw them this way, so we cared for them, but community-wise we didn't really do anything at the time. Like, what do we do?

I found that the mean distance from the Canfield Green Apartments of churches whose clergy accept a police-positive narrative was higher (10.8 miles) than those who accept a Black Lives Matter narrative (only 3.78 miles). However, I found that those who responded to the death of Michael Brown through protest politics had a higher mean distance (6.15 miles) compared to those who did not (5.2 miles). It seems that while being close to the racialized violence can influence narratives and action, greater distance can free up clergy from a need to pursue community peace allowing them to pursue policy change. A quote from a respondent represents this idea well: "A lot of clergy could roll into town, be in front of the camera for protests and get in their car and drive back, but that didn't materially change the state that the people in the community were living in."

The Response of Citizens to Racialized Violence in Ferguson

In order to understand how religion affects the response to racialized violence among citizens, I conducted two exit polls. The pilot survey was conducted in November 2014 after the death of Michael Brown and before the grand jury decision not to indict Darren Wilson. The second survey was conducted later in the spring of 2016. The timing of these surveys is important because they allow us to access narratives about the death of Michael Brown both before and after the evidence was released after the grand jury decision not to indict.

I used a question asking whether Darren Wilson was severely injured by Michael Brown in order to access narratives that are accepted by respondents. This is a useful variable in evaluating the narratives accepted by the public for several reasons. First, before the grand jury decision, Darren Wilson was away from the public eye. The public had virtually no way of knowing the extent of his injuries outside of the narratives they accepted. However, there was misinformation being spread about the extent of Darren Wilson's injuries including a photograph of a man with extensive facial injuries that was falsely said to be Wilson. Both images are shown in Appendix A. Additionally, while a Grand Jury failed to indict Wilson on criminal charges after being presented with a wide array of evidence, including photographs depicting the extent of Wilson's injuries, public opinion remains divided on whether the lethal use of force was justified and whether Wilson was actually injured during the confrontation.

The pilot survey was relatively small, covering four precincts within Ferguson (two predominantly white and two predominantly Black). The racially stratified sample of polling places was selected by identifying the racial composition of polling places as majority white or majority Black. Two precincts of each were then randomly selected. The survey consisted of 28 questions concerning religion, wealth, and criminal justice as well as demographics. There were

129 total respondents, 58% of which were Black, 35.5% were white, and a handful identified as Asian, Latinx, or other.

Across racial groups there was a clear perception by respondents that their religious congregation was concerned with social justice. However, when asked if they believe their religious congregation encourages them to participate in civil disobedience or protest there was a clear racial gap between Black respondents and white respondents. A large majority (72.4%) of white respondents said that their congregation does not encourage civil disobedience or protest, while Black respondents were split on the question with a plurality (37.7%) responding yes, 31.9% responding no, and 30.4% answering that they do not know. See Table 4.

Whether a respondent viewed their religious congregation as encouraging civil disobedience or protest was found to be positively related to believing that race or police-community relations are the biggest issues facing the community and having an unfavorable opinion of the police, and is negatively related to believing that Darren Wilson was significantly injured by Michael Brown (all of these are statistically significant at the .05 criterion of significance). See Table 5 for a breakdown of percentages. However, these relationships do not remain in our 2016 survey data.

Table 4: Perceptions on Religious Congregation Encouraging Civil Disobedience or Protest by Race (2014 Exit Poll)					
	Black/African American	White	Asian	Latino/Hispanic	Other
Believes that congregation encourages civil disobedience or protest	26 37.68%	4 13.79%	0 0%	1 100%	3 60%
Does not believe that congregation encourages civil disobedience or protest	22 31.88%	21 72.41%	1 100%	0 0%	1 20%
Unsure	21 30.4%	4 13.79%	0 0%	0 0%	1 20%
Total	69 100%	29 100%	1 100%	1 100%	5 100%
Pearson Chi ² (8)=19.10; Pr=0.01.					

Table 5: Congregations and Racialized Attitudes in 2014 Pilot Study	Congregation Encourages Protest	Congregation Does Not Encourage Protest
% who believe race and/or police community relations are the biggest issue facing the community	71%	53.3%
% who have an unfavorable opinion of the police	67.7%	36.4%
% who believe that Darren Wilson was severely injured by Michael Brown	16.1%	36.6%
Note: All of these differences are statistically significant at the .05 criterion of significance		

The 2016 Survey

The 2016 survey was much larger than the pilot. It covered 11 precincts throughout Ferguson and neighboring communities (Jennings, Cool Valley). There were 399 total respondents. Like the pilot study, this survey was conducted in the form of an exit poll. While once again acknowledging the limits of exit poll data, the 2016 survey works alongside the 2014 pilot study to provide a snapshot of attitudes within Ferguson during and in the direct aftermath of its racialized crisis. The sample was comprised of 58% Black/African American respondents, 23% white respondents, 1% Latinx respondents, <1% Asian respondents, and 4.7% responded other. The remainder did not respond.

The gap between white and Black respondents in perceiving that their church encourages civil disobedience persists. However, the relationship between racialized attitudes and perceived clergy support for civil disobedience does not hold up in the 2016 sample. Perhaps these relationships waned over time.

In our sample, Catholics were about twice as likely to think that Darren Wilson was severely injured by Michael Brown (59.6%) than non-Catholic Christians (24.3%). This is statistically significant ($\chi^2(5)=37.69$; $Pr=0.000$). This could be because Black respondents are significantly less likely to be Catholic. However, when we control for race by examining just white respondents, we see that Catholics are still more likely to believe that Darren Wilson was severely injured (75.9%) than Christian non-Catholics (62.1%) [$\chi^2(4)=13.11$; $Pr=0.01$]. Conversely, 24.1% of white Catholics in our sample said that Wilson was not severely injured compared to 37.9% of white Christians who do not identify as Catholic. Religion is not a significant indicator of whether a respondent thinks Wilson was injured among Black respondents.

I ran a binary logit model to evaluate the acceptance of narratives surrounding the death of Michael Brown. The dependent variable asked respondents to identify whether Darren Wilson was injured in his confrontation with Michael Brown. They were given two response categories: yes or no. The main independent variables I was interested in were respondent race and respondent religion. I created dummy variables for whether a respondent is Black or not, as well as whether a respondent is Catholic. I also used income, education, party identification, and year born in my model as controls.

I found that religion, race, education, and year born were all significant indicators at the .05 criterion of significance. Factors such as race, education, and year of birth have a negative relationship with believing that Wilson was severely injured, as might be expected. Being Black, having more education, and being younger all seem to make one more likely to reject the self-defense narrative and show distrust of the police.

	Coef.	Std. Err.	Z (P> z)
Catholic*	1.41	.45	3.13 (0.00)
Black*	-1.38	.37	-3.76 (0.00)
Income	.09	.11	0.86 (0.39)
Education*	-.43	.20	-2.15 (0.03)
Republican*	2.59	.63	4.10 (0.00)
Year born*	-.03	.01	-2.35 (0.03)
N=280; Pseudo R ² =..3285			

However, being Catholic is positively related to thinking that Wilson was severely injured. In fact, going from being non-Catholic to being Catholic increases a respondent's odds of thinking that Wilson was injured by a factor of 3.4, while going from being non-Black to Black decreases one's odds by a factor of .18 (See Table 7).

Table 7: Predicted Probability that Respondent Believes Darren Wilson was Injured		
	Black	Not-Black
Catholic	.27	.68
Non-Catholic	.099	.38
N=280; Pseudo R ² =.27; AIC =245.52; BIC= 270.96		

While the difference in acceptance of narratives about the death of Michael Brown across race might be intuitive, why is there a statistically significant difference in perception among Catholics even when controlling for socioeconomic factors? Part of the story might be segregation in Ferguson. Catholic respondents were clustered into predominantly white precincts (see Appendix B). However, they are more likely to accept a police narrative even when controlling for race. This may be due to the fact that, according to Wald and Brown (2014), the Catholic Church has “developed and occupied a distinctive centrist position in American political life” (Wald and Brown, 2014; 243).

There is a wealth of articles within the *St. Louis Review*, the St. Louis Archdiocese publication, that shows that the local Catholic Church was doing social justice work in response to the death of Michael Brown including creating a Peace and Justice Commission and holding special masses (*St. Louis Review*). While representatives from the Catholic Church participated in marches organized by Black Lives Matter protesters, they also focused on ministering and providing chaplaincy services to the local police (*St. Louis Review*). Another Catholic news source, *The National Catholic Reporter*, documents demands from Black Catholic leaders that the church be less ambiguous in its response to police shootings of Black citizens during the annual Archbishop Lyke Conference in which Black Catholics from across the nation gather to worship and discuss pressing issues (Feuerherd, 2016). These anecdotal data alongside the local

nature of this study indicate that the local attitudes unearthed in this study cannot be projected onto the entire Catholic tradition.

However, there is a clear relationship between being Catholic in Ferguson and accepting a police narrative on the death of Michael Brown. At the time of the 2016 survey, being Catholic made one significantly more likely to be supportive of then-Mayor James Knowles III, 57.14% compared to just +27.68% of non-Catholics.

Table 8: Favorability of Mayor James Knowles III by Religious identity		
	Non-Catholic	Catholic
Favorable	75 27.68%	24 57.14 %
Unfavorable	121 44.65%	12 28.57%
Unsure	75 27.68%	6 14.29%
Total	271 100%	42 100%
Pearson Chi ² (2)=14.71; Pr=0.001.		

Just two years prior to the death of Michael Brown, the city of Ferguson under the leadership of Knowles purchased the Good Shepherd Catholic Church from the St. Louis Archdiocese in a \$1.5 million deal (Gillerman, 2012). Another potential explanation for the Catholic gap in narrative acceptance may be location. As Map 1 below shows, Catholics in Ferguson are more likely to live in predominantly white precincts, and therefore may have fewer interactions with Black people. The evidence in this survey shows that the Catholic Church in Ferguson may function as an institution that facilitates the centering of whiteness within Ferguson politics.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the study finds evidence for both inspiration theory and opiate theory. The Ferguson Moment clearly awakened both religious leaders in the St. Louis region as well as the

people of Ferguson to the idea of persistent racial injustice in St. Louis and the United States today. However, the response to this focusing event has divided the community as well as the rest of the nation into two camps: one that seeks racial justice and one that has not only accepted the status quo but has doubled down on their support for the current systems of criminal justice under which Michael Brown was slain.

This study utilized in-depth interviews with clergy from throughout the St. Louis region. All the subjects displayed a mindfulness of racial inequities in the city. However, not all of them identified race or injustice in policing as a major issue facing St. Louis. Furthermore, the language and evidence that these leaders use to discuss the Ferguson Moment sometimes reflected an antiracist perspective and at other times clearly showed an acceptance of the status quo or support for the police. They were also varied as to the reactions they took to crisis in their community or in neighboring communities. Some insulated themselves and are playing a game of catch-up when it comes to racial justice. Others took care of tangible needs through providing resources like food or meeting spaces. Others utilized public speech to prime values within their congregation. Very few participated actively in protest or tried to directly influence the political sphere. Many clergy felt mixed pressures from their congregations and some took those pressures as cues informing them of the parameters of their role.

All the clergy demonstrated a clear passion for their faith and their role as faith leaders. The teachings of Jesus and the Bible were important in informing them on how to respond to the racialized crisis around them. However, each read their Bibles with different presuppositions, different personal characteristics, and different social-work environments. Each held different ideas on the mission of Jesus, which informs their worldview and, therefore, their political attitudes. A complex mix of theological beliefs, religious practices, congregational community,

tradition and denomination, personal characteristics, and even location all seem to play into the responses that the clergy chose.

While the clergy response to the Ferguson Moment seems to indicate that Christianity acted as an opiate for some in Ferguson, the high religiosity coupled with a widespread belief by voters in the community that their church favors social justice may show that the Church at least has the potential to be a force for racial justice in St. Louis. Indeed, many of the voters in our sample feel encouraged to participate in contentious politics because of their faith.

However, at the same time, the study provides evidence that religious congregations can be centers of power that reinforce whiteness within their own communities. In Ferguson, Catholic respondents were more likely to believe police narratives about the death of Michael Brown in 2014 when misinformation was rampant and then again in 2016 when more information had been released to the public. High levels of Catholic support for Ferguson's former white mayor, James Knowles III, provides more evidence for how the church operated in this way.

The work conducted in this study has only become more relevant in the years 2020 and 2021 when several acts of violence against Black people made national news and inspired widespread protests and counter-protests throughout the United States. Since the death of Michael Brown, Black Lives Matter has gone from a small organization or controversial slogan to an idea supported by a majority of Americans (Thomas and Horowitz, 2020). Some of this was fueled by the protests following the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. The Church is still divided in its response with many reinforcing support for law and order while others advocate for antiracism and racial justice. Many Christian media outlets dedicated much of their articles to responding to the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others with jeremiads.

Many sermons did the same. However, others overemphasized the violence that rarely, but sensationally, accompanied protests. In the year 2020, the author of this text observed at different churches both sermon series on racial justice as well as “Hero Days” supporting law enforcement during this contentious time. The question that social science must evaluate, and the church must answer, is whether it will be an inspiring force for racial progress or an opiate to the masses reinforcing the status quo.

Racialized state-violence continues to haunt St. Louis. In 2017, when a judge declared former St. Louis police officer Jason Stockley not guilty after his 2011 shooting of 24-year-old Black man Anthony Lamar Smith, protests erupted across the city leading to tense confrontations with police. During one such confrontation, video footage shows police co-opting a Black Lives Matter chant, “Whose streets? Our streets,” demonstrating the divisive relationship between the police in St. Louis and the communities that they are charged with protecting (Edwards, 2017). In 2020, protests in reaction to George Floyd’s death led to violent uprisings that caused property damage as well as the shooting deaths of four police officers.

Further research is thus needed as understanding the factors that have led to the continued division between law enforcement and their communities might help lead to peace and more progress. The problems of racial division predate the founding of the American republic and continue today to strain the political system, stressing, and sometimes breaking, the bonds that are supposed to unite us as a nation and as a people. It will be a deeply vexing and continuing challenge to see if the norms which are supposed to unite us can withstand the forces which constantly seek to divide us.

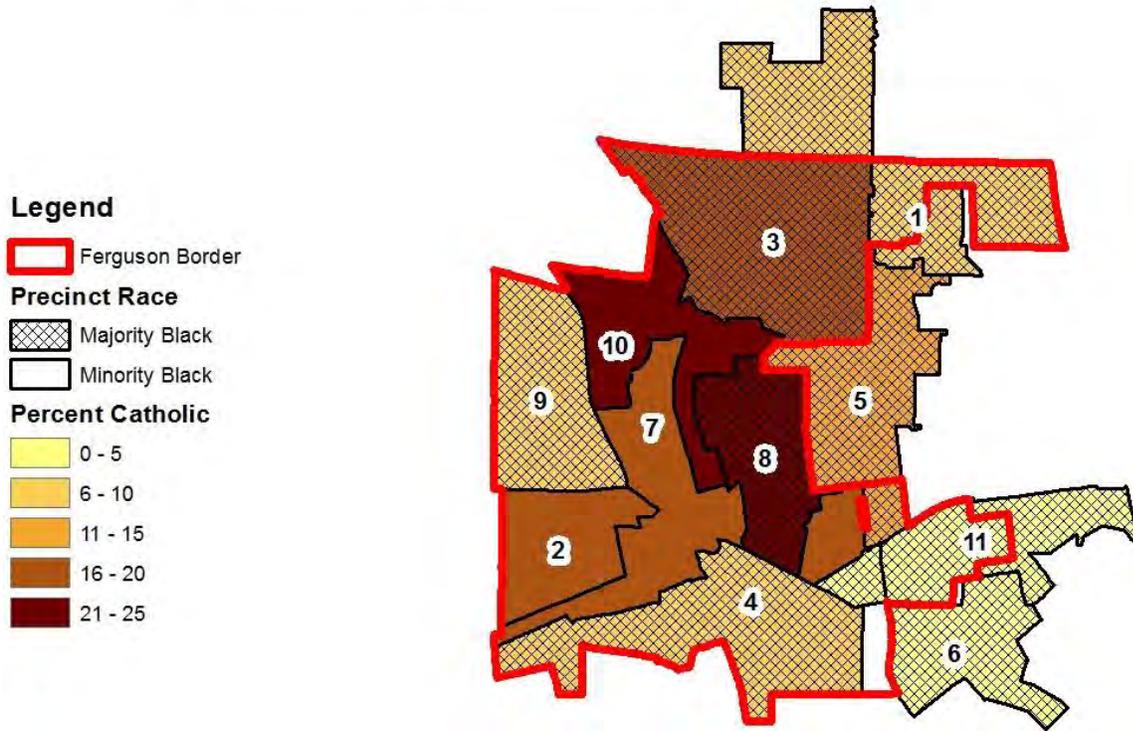
Appendix A: Images



On the left is an official image (*New York Times*, 2014) showing Darren Wilson's injuries following his encounter with Michael Brown. On the right is a viral image (Mikkelson, 2014) that purported to be Darren Wilson but showed a different person with injuries that were not related to the interaction between Wilson and Brown.

Appendix B: Maps

Percentage of Catholic Respondents by Precinct



Map 1

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