Discrimination in the workplace has been extensively studied, with particular attention paid to an employee’s sex or gender, race, and age (Bobbit-Zeher 2011; Hirsh and Kornrich 2008; Pager and Shepherd 2008; Roscigno 2019; Roscigno et al. 2007). However, religious discrimination in the workplace is less well understood (Ghumman et al. 2013) and perhaps a “neglected diversity dimension” (Gebert et al. 2014:543). This is unfortunate not only because nearly three quarters of Americans consider religion important in their lives (Brenan 2018) but also because reported incidents of religious discrimination in the workplace are rising (EEOC 2021a). Additionally, a growing number of people in the United States identify as nonreligious, or with non-Christian religions, and within Christianity there is growing racial and ethnic diversity (Pew Research Center 2015). As the religious landscape in the United States continues to diversify, the workplace is one place where people from different religious backgrounds are likely to interact. Yet with increased religious diversity comes the potential for conflict between groups. As Ghumman et al. (2013:449) noted, religious expression in the workplace may theoretically “be connected to the mistreatment of certain other protected groups” because one’s “sincerely held religious beliefs” may conflict with workplace diversity policies that seek to protect LGBTQ+ people, women, and religious minorities in the workplace.

Between fiscal year (FY) 1992 (the first year the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission began reporting such data) and FY 2020, charges of religion-based discrimination in the workplace filed with the EEOC increased by 73 percent (from 1,388 cases to 2,404) (EEOC 1997, 2021a). This growth dwarfs the changes in other sources of discrimination in the same time frame, such as sex (1.8 percent decrease), race (25 percent decrease), and national origin (14 percent decrease). Although charges of religion-based discrimination represent a relatively low proportion of overall charges (3.6 percent as of FY 2020), their historical growth illustrates the need to study religious discrimination more fully. Although U.S. employment law makes it illegal to discriminate on the basis of religion (1964 Civil Rights Act,
Title VII), subsequent EEOC guidelines also require employ-
ers to make reasonable adjustments to the work environment
that will allow employees to comply with their religious
beliefs, including making scheduling accommodations
(EEOC 2021b). Furthermore, EEOC guidelines clarify that
behaviors creating a hostile work environment on the basis
of an employee’s religious identity are considered harass-
ment and are illegal under Title VII. This includes harass-
ing behaviors from customers, which employers are responsible
to prevent (within reason) and address. Yet there may be
other more subtle behaviors not reflected in official legal
frameworks that may still be perceived by employees as neg-
ative or unfair treatment due to their religion or nonreligion.
Although things such as teasing, name-calling, offensive
comments, and social ostracizing fall into murkier legal terri-
tory, these kinds of behaviors can still be detrimental to
employee well-being and mental health, job satisfaction, and
morale. Scholars call these more subtle or covert forms of
discrimination microaggressions (Sue 2010). Religious
microaggressions, specifically, are subtle everyday behav-
iors that are interpreted as “denigrating, invalidating, and
prejudicial” (Cheng, Pagano, and Shariff 2018:255) or expe-
rienced as “demeaning” or “negating” (Cheng, Pagano,
and Shariff 2019:327) by members of a religious or nonreligious
group. When repeated over time, these behaviors can make
employees feel devalued or excluded.

Given that the topic of religious discrimination remains
understudied in workplace discrimination research, and that
experiences of religious discrimination, including microag-
gressions, may meaningfully affect employee well-being and
organizational dynamics, in the present study we seek to illu-
minate the ways diverse employees perceive religious dis-
crimination and othering in the workplace. In particular, we
are interested in understanding how religious majority and
minority groups’ perceptions of religious discrimination align and diverge. We draw on data from a national study of
faith in the workplace.

**Religious Discrimination in the Workplace: Expanding the View**

Although research on religious discrimination in the work-
place is relatively limited, a number of studies have looked at
the specific challenges Muslims face in the workplace, espe-
cially during the hiring process (Acquisti and Fong 2020;
Bartkoski et al. 2018; Wallace, Wright, and Hyde 2014;
Wright et al. 2013). Discrimination in hiring of Muslims may
be further amplified by the sex of the applicant and the wear-
ing of religious identifiers such as the hijab (Ghumman and
Ryan 2013; King and Ahmad 2010). Moreover, other reli-
gious groups such as Sikhs who “look Muslim” may be vul-
nerable to discrimination because of racialized conflation of
religion with ethnicity and/or national origin (Considine
2017; Joshi 2006). Additional studies have focused on per-
ceptions of discrimination, finding that Muslims who engage
in religious activity more frequently (Ghaffari and Çiftçi
2010) and who believe religion is important to their lives
(Padela et al. 2015) are also more likely to perceive religious
discrimination in the workplace.

In contrast to what is known about experiences of dis-
crimination among Muslims, less is known about the experi-
cences of other minority religious groups in the workplace.
Although not explicitly focused on the workplace, a recent
thread of sociological research has illuminated the work-
place as a site of perceived discrimination for atheists
(Hammer et al. 2012) and nonreligious people broadly
(Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). For example, Cragun
et al. (2012) found that nonreligious people “who hold more
pronounced views are more likely to report discrimination”
(p. 105), and those who self-identify as “atheist” or “agnostic”
are three times more likely to report workplace discrimi-
nation compared with those who label themselves as “nones”
(p. 116). Notably, however, there has been almost no exami-
nation of perceived religious discrimination in the workplace
in relation to Hindus, Buddhists, and Jews, with the except-
ion of studies by Scheitle and Ecklund (2017, 2018, 2020),
though audit experiments on hiring discrimination have
looked at Christians, Jews, and atheists alongside Muslims
(Wallace et al. 2014; Wright et al. 2013).

The fact that Muslims receive significant attention in
workplace discrimination literature may speak to the fre-
quency and intensity with which Muslims experience dis-
crimination in the workplace vis-à-vis other minority
religious groups. Indeed, Muslims report higher levels of
religious discrimination than other religious groups.
Although only 1 in 100 Americans identify with Islam
(Mohamed 2018), Muslims represented 23.3 percent of all
complaints of religion-related discrimination to the EEOC in
2017, the last year for which these data are publicly available
(EEOC 2018). Furthermore, limited focus on other minority
religious groups may be attributable to their small numerical
size: Hindus and Buddhists each constitute 0.7 percent of the
U.S. population, and Jews constitute 1.9 percent of the U.S.
population (Pew Research Center 2015). At the same time,
there are twice as many Jews in the United States (1.9 per-
cent) as there are Muslims (0.9 percent).

Research on religious discrimination among Christian
workers is also limited. This fact is probably attributable to
Christians being a religious majority in the United States as
well as assumptions by scholars that those who are part of
majority groups will be less likely to perceive discrimina-
tion because of their relative social power. However,
research suggests that under certain conditions, Christians
may also perceive religious discrimination. For example,
Scheitle and Ecklund (2018) found that religious academic
scientists report discrimination in the workplace more fre-
cently than their nonreligious colleagues do. Although this
finding holds true for both minority and majority religions,
it is especially true of evangelical Christians. Similarly,
Yancey (2011) found that academic job candidates are
viewed more negatively when they identify as conservative Christian or Mormon. Hodge (2006) also found that Christian master’s degree students in social work were more likely to report religious discrimination if they were theologically conservative. These findings suggest that in specific work contexts, such as academia, conservative or evangelical Christians may be especially likely to perceive religious discrimination.

Expanding the View on Religious Discrimination

The lack of comprehensive literature regarding different religious groups’ experiences with workplace religious discrimination makes it difficult to understand how different groups compare in the ways they understand and describe workplace religious discrimination. This, in turn, may impede nuanced understandings of common modes of religious discrimination faced by employees in the workplace as well as risk overlooking salient differences between groups.

Examination of perceived religious discrimination in the workplace may be especially helpful for illuminating the ways religious microaggressions are experienced in the workplace. For example, broader studies of religious microaggressions have found that Muslims are often stereotyped as terrorists, encounter Islamophobic language, and have their religion pathologized or exoticized by others (Nadal et al. 2012), whereas for Jews microaggressions may include anti-Semitic stereotypes about being “cheap” (Nadal et al. 2010). Survey research also suggests that both majority and minority religious groups in the United States experience religious microaggressions under certain conditions. However, Jews and Muslims report higher levels of religious microaggressions than Christians (Cheng et al. 2019), and atheists report experiencing the highest incidents of microaggressions compared with other nonreligious groups (Cheng et al. 2018).

Study of perceptions of religious discrimination is important for several additional reasons. First, regardless of objective evidence or legal recognition of discrimination, if employees perceive themselves as being mistreated because of their religion, this may significantly affect their overall well-being. Psychology researchers have often noted the poor mental and physical health outcomes associated with perceived racial, gender, and sexual orientation discrimination (Pascoe and Richman 2009), but less is known about the impact of religious discrimination on health. Given that Americans spend the majority of their lives at work, it is important to understand the extent to which religious discrimination is encountered in the workplace as the cumulative effects of such experiences could have serious implications on the mental health and well-being of religious and nonreligious employees.

In one of the few studies to date examining the relationship between religious discrimination and health, Wu and Schimmele (2021) found that religious discrimination is detrimental to the self-rated mental health of all people of faith, regardless of the social location of the religious group. This suggests that individuals from both religious minority and majority groups may be negatively affected by perceived religious discrimination in the workplace. But it is also likely that religious discrimination may interact with and amplify other modes of discrimination in the workplace, such as racial or gender discrimination. Grollman (2012) tested the “double disadvantage” hypothesis demonstrating that individuals who perceive multiple forms of discrimination have worse physical and mental health outcomes than those reporting only one form of discrimination. Although Christianity is a majority religion in the United States, many racial/ethnic minorities identify as Christians. This means that Black, Hispanic, and Asian Christians, especially women, may experience more negative impacts to their health and well-being when they perceive religious discrimination because of the potential interaction with other forms of discrimination and disadvantage in U.S. society.

Second, there is evidence that one’s surrounding context may play an important role in whether employees are likely to perceive discrimination in the workplace, complexifying how we think about majority and minority status. Scheitlle and Corcoran (2018) found that evangelical Protestants living in the West are more likely to perceive religious discrimination at work than evangelical Protestants living in the South. One theoretical explanation for this is that these southern Christians “perceive themselves as in less conflict with their surroundings than their counterparts in other regions” (p. 297). Thus, if a religious person perceives conflict between their religion and the surrounding environment (whether regional or work specific), they may be more likely to perceive threat and, eventually, discrimination. Scheitlle and Corcoran also found that atheists and the nonreligious in the South are also more likely to experience religious discrimination in the workplace than those in the Northeast and the West, perhaps because Christianity is dominant in the South.

Finally, recent research suggests that evangelical Christians are especially likely to perceive an increase of religious hatred and social persecution in the United States more broadly over the past decades, even if actual levels of hostility have not increased (Yancey 2018). Thus, it may be useful to understand how evangelical Christians perceive religious discrimination in the workplace and the similarities and differences with other groups. Theoretically, evangelical Christians’ perceptions of discrimination may be due to a long-standing sense of embattlement among evangelicals vis-à-vis non-Christian and non-evangelical Christian groups, which, as Smith et al. (1998) argue, has long been central to evangelical boundary-making and group identity. Additionally, recent research suggests that white evangelical Christians, in particular, may perceive threats to their identity because of broader racial, political and social anxieties about their place in their nation (Baker, Perry, and Whitehead...
Gallup drew a stratified sample of 29,345 individuals aiming to match U.S. population targets on the basis of the 2017 Current Population Survey, as well as oversamples of preidentified Muslim and Jewish (n = 752) and Jewish (n = 882) respondents, yielding a participation rate of 45.2 percent and a response rate—which accounts for all stages of recruitment per the American Association for Public Opinion Research—of 1.2 percent. We sampled 29,345 members of the Gallup Panel, a nationally representative probability panel of U.S. adults, by Internet and mail in the fall of 2018 on their experiences related to faith in the workplace. We received 13,270 completed surveys, oversampling on minority religious traditions (Jews and Muslims). The survey was available in both English and Spanish. We knew that a probability-based panel would include a large number of Christians, but we chose to include oversamples of Muslims and Jews, who represent the largest minority religious groups in the United States, in the sample selection to accurately characterize faith-work integration and religious discrimination among members of these minority religious traditions, as well as to compare members of minority religious traditions with the Christians in our sample.

Interview eligibility criteria for Christians included identifying as Christian, attending religious services at least once per month, and working full-time or part-time or not currently working but looking for work. Religious minority respondents needed to identify as either Muslim or Jewish, self-identify as either “moderately” or “very” religious, pray several times a day (Muslims), attend religious services at least once per month (Jewish), and be working full-time or part-time or not currently working but looking for work in order to be eligible for interview participation. Nonreligious respondents were deemed eligible if they selected “no religion” for their religious identity on the survey. In addition to salience of religion, potential interview respondents were sampled on the basis of diversity with respect to their position within their organization, race, ethnicity, education, occupational industry, age, and region. Three hundred fifty-three survey respondents were invited to participate in follow-up interviews, and this yielded a 58 percent response.

Interviews were semistructured and conducted by members of the research team. Separate interview guides were created for religious majority, religious minority, and nonreligious respondents. Respondents could elect to complete interviews in English or Spanish. Most interviews were conducted by phone, but a small proportion were conducted in person or via Zoom video calls. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission from respondents. Most interviews were transcribed by a contracted transcription firm. However, a small proportion were transcribed by trained undergraduate and graduate students. All interview transcripts were edited for accuracy by a member of the research team and deidentified prior to analysis.

To examine the different ways employees perceive religious discrimination or othering, as well as to examine how people from majority and minority religious traditions perceive and describe religious discrimination, here we analyze interview data from 194 interviews (159 Christians, 13 Jews, 10 Muslims, and 12 nonreligious respondents). We developed an initial coding scheme that was used by our team to descriptively record with a simple “yes” or “no” categorization whether respondents reported experiences of being treated unfairly or differently because of their religion at work. While looking for any instance in which different or unfair treatment tied to religion was discussed in the interview, we paid particular attention to responses to the interview questions “Have you ever been treated differently or unfairly in your workplace because of your religious identity or beliefs [or due to the fact that you are not religious]?” and “Have you personally experienced any religious discrimination in your workplace [or because you were not religious]?” All interviews were coded by two team members and any coding discrepancies were reconciled by a third member. Following this initial descriptive analysis, we used a partially inductive interpretive coding method to identify themes that emerged in the descriptive coding regarding different modes of perceived religious discrimination and othering and to

Data and Methods

To answer these research questions, here we draw primarily on interview data from a mixed-methods study that included a national population survey of 13,270 people as well as 194 in-depth interviews with Christians, Muslims, Jews, and nonreligious respondents (Ecklund et al. 2020). The national survey included questions about topics such as workplace satisfaction, spiritual meaning and purpose tied to work, religious expression and practices in the workplace, and experiences of discrimination in the workplace. Survey respondents who expressed interest in completing an interview to discuss issues addressed in the survey in greater detail and who were deemed eligible to participate in the subsequent phase of the study were contacted via e-mail and/or phone and invited to participate in an in-depth interview.
identify qualitative similarities and differences among respondent narratives.

Additionally, to offer a broad descriptive picture of perceptions of religious discrimination in the workplace, here we also include basic descriptive survey data from a subsample of 11,356 respondents who were employed full-time or part-time, were self-employed, or were retired. Because we were interested in employee experiences, respondents who identified as homemakers, students, or volunteers or were unable to work were excluded from the analytic sample. To determine the prevalence of perceived religious discrimination in the workplace, we asked respondents the frequency with which they were treated unfairly in the context of their work because of their religion or nonreligion; possible answer choices included “never,” “rarely,” “sometimes,” “often,” “very often,” and “not applicable.” To characterize respondents’ experiences with discrimination, responses were recoded as “no discrimination,” including “never” and “not applicable,” and at least some discrimination,” including all other answer choices. We also conducted descriptive analysis to describe the proportion of survey respondents who reported religious discrimination alongside of one or more other forms of discrimination (e.g., sex or gender, marital status, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, national origin, disability, or criminal background).

Results: Religious Discrimination and Othering in the Workplace

Nearly a third (27 percent) of all survey respondents from our subsample (n = 11,356) reported perceiving religious discrimination at some point in their working tenure. A larger proportion of Muslim (63 percent) and Jewish (52 percent) respondents reported religious discrimination compared with other religious groups. Additionally, perceptions of religious discrimination varied within Christian subgroups, with 36 percent of evangelical Protestants, 24 percent other Christian/other Protestants, and roughly 20 percent of Catholics and mainstream Protestants each reporting religious discrimination.

A little more than one quarter (27 percent) of all nonreligious respondents perceived religious discrimination in the workplace. It is also worth noting that respondents who perceived religious discrimination at work often reported other forms of discrimination tied to their social location. Of the 27 percent of people who reported experiencing religious discrimination, 24 percent reported experiencing one or more other forms of discrimination in the workplace. This was especially true for Muslim and Jewish respondents, of whom 60 percent and 44 percent reported experiencing other forms of discrimination, respectively.

In-depth interviews with survey takers shed further light on the ways employees perceive religious discrimination and othering in the workplace. When asked about being treated differently or unfairly at work because of their religion, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and nonreligious respondents often described similar modes of perceived unfair or differential treatment in the workplace. This included experiences of name-calling and stereotyping, social exclusion and othering, and other negative experiences tied to observing religious holidays or display of religious symbols at work. Yet analysis of the ways members of these groups narrated their experiences also reveals nuances in individual experiences of religious discrimination and othering as well as differences between majority and minority groups’ experiences of religious discrimination.

Verbal Microaggressions and Stereotyping

By far the most common form of religious discrimination described by interview respondents were verbal microaggressions, including experiences of name-calling, mocking, ridicule, and uncomfortable “joking,” which could also be accompanied by other forms of harassment or a sense of being judged or stereotyped by others. Although some respondents did not consider microaggressions to be discrimination, because they were not fired or did not feel individually targeted, nevertheless, the behaviors described were often interpreted as demeaning, invalidating, or prejudicial.

Both Jewish and Muslim respondents described verbal microaggressions tied to anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic stereotypes. For example, a white Jewish woman working in social services in Indiana described how coworkers made stereotypical comments about her being “good at bookkeeping and keeping track of money” a common anti-Semitic trope. Similarly, a white Jewish man who works in information technology in Florida described hearing occasional comments of “Well, Jews run all the banks,” while a white Jewish consultant in Illinois recalled hearing, early in his career, a colleague use the phrase “Jew me down.” Another white Jewish man living in New Jersey, a former Air Force officer, also recalled how during officer training school, his fellow trainees would make “little jokes” about the Holocaust. At the time, he did not recognize it as anti-Semitism, until a fellow cadet came to him and said “they’re saying this because you’re Jewish. Don’t you realize it?”

Similarly, several Muslims also described expressions of Islamophobic sentiment in the workplace. An Asian Muslim man who is an engineer in New York mentioned hearing workplace conversations in which colleagues expressed anti-Muslim views (i.e., “Muslims are extremists” or, during the Gulf War, “Send ’em back”), though notably he did not consider this to be discrimination or directed at him explicitly. In a more extreme example, a white Muslim woman working

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2F_W_ST112, white, woman, Jewish, social services, Indiana.
3F_W_ST121, white, man, Jewish, information technology, Florida.
4F_W_ST108, white, man, Jewish, consulting, Illinois.
5F_W_ST151, white, man, Jewish, retired civil servant, New Jersey.
6F_W_ST115, Asian, man, Muslim, engineer, New York.
in sales at a construction company in Louisiana described being “harassed” when she converted to Islam so that “an already stressful job became much, more stressful.”¹⁷ After making the decision to dress more modestly and cover her head, “I was ridiculed.” Additionally, “signs were put up” in the office that “were just plain ugly.” For example, one sign said, “I tried to see your point of view, but your point of view is stupid.” In another instance, she recalled a customer coming to work one day wearing an “Infidel” T-shirt with a machine gun graphic on the front. She perceived these instances to also be intimidation tactics to silence her from publicly expressing her newfound faith and in response to her political views regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Eventually human resources got involved, but in the meantime the woman experienced such extreme stress that she contemplated taking an early retirement and described “crying outside [the office] because it had gotten so bad.”

For Christians, especially evangelical Christians, verbal microaggressions often took the form of specific name-calling, which could result in feeling stereotyped or judged. For example, a white evangelical woman who is a nurse in Tennessee described how in a past job she endured name-calling: “They would call me “Ms. Holy,” because some employees…would want to break protocol or break the rules,” whereas she wanted to follow her employer’s policies. In her view,

it didn’t even have to do with my faith….I wanted to follow the policies of my employer, and, because I didn’t want to break the rules or the policies, they attributed it to my faith. And so, even though it wasn’t really a question of my faith, it was morals, they still attributed it to, because I’m Christian, I thought that I was better than everyone else.⁸

An African American mainline Protestant woman from Alabama reflected that early on in her work life, about 15 years ago, when she was an office manager of a department store, her coworkers would “insult” her by calling her “Holy Roller.”¹⁹ This incident seemed to be precipitated by the fact that she would be “turning my Christian music on to encourage myself and to encourage others.” The fact that her non-Christian colleagues did not appreciate this illustrates how this respondent may also have been an enactor of unwelcome behavior in the workplace.

Other names directed at Christians in the workplace include “Goody Two-Shoes,” which was ascribed to a white evangelical woman nurse in Minnesota¹⁰ when she would challenge racist or inappropriate remarks made by coworkers, and “Preacher Boy,” which a Hispanic evangelical man who was a delivery driver in California encountered at a previous job.¹¹ The man described this as “kind of derisive” and said he was “harassed” but also noted the term was said in a joking manner and that he didn’t feel singled out for discrimination because he was “picked on” like everybody else at work. Another term used by coworkers and interpreted as demeaning was “Jesus Lover” for a white evangelical man paramedic supervisor in Oregon.¹²

Christians also described mocking or stigmatizing comments made by coworkers. A Hispanic evangelical woman living in Tennessee reported that coworkers at a past job “would make fun of me because I didn’t talk or participate in their tasteless conversations, saying ‘Oh, there’s the hallelujah, or the sanctimonious person.’”¹³ A Black evangelical man who was a criminal investigator in Texas reflected that “there’s kind of this theme out there that Christians are inherently judgmental and hypocritical and so on,” and “when I was younger, I was faced with a lot of those kinds of statements and proddings” at work on the basis of these stereotypes.¹⁴

Taken together, these examples highlight the different forms religious verbal microaggressions and stereotyping can take. In particular, evangelical Christians described a sense of being stereotyped by coworkers as someone who was narrow-minded or judgmental or thought they were better than others (indexed by terms such as “Holy,” “Goody-Two-Shoes,” “Preacher Boy” or “Jesus Lover”), which, in turn, could feel ridiculing, demeaning, or stigmatizing. They also often linked these instances to taking a personal moral stand in the workplace or religious visibility in the workplace. Jewish and Muslim respondents also linked microaggressions to their religious visibility in the workplace, though the terms directed at Muslims and Jews did not index perceived piousness (e.g., “Holy”) so much as being threatening or malevolent in some way (e.g., “extremist,” “Jew me down”) because of ascribed group membership. In this way, anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic rhetoric in the workplace reinforced long-standing cultural and racial stereotypes used to justify violence against Jewish and Muslim groups in ways that were distinct from anti-Christian rhetoric.

Social Exclusion and Othering

Often overlapping with verbal microaggressions and stereotyping, those we interviewed also described ways they felt othered or socially excluded by coworkers because of their...
religious identity or feared this as a possibility. In some cases, this could result in a chilling effect or in downplaying or hiding one’s religious identity or beliefs.

Several Jewish and Muslim respondents described feeling as if their coworkers treated them as exotic, foreign, or fragile because of their religion. For example, an Indian American Muslim woman working as an optometry technician in Illinois noted how her colleagues were hesitant to approach her about a gift exchange among the workgroup during the Christmas holiday and were “kind of walking on eggshells around me.”¹⁵ She subsequently had to reassure them that “oh, we can definitely do a gift exchange, I’m down for that.” A white Jewish man working in information technology in Florida expounded a bit further on his interactions with colleagues:

There’s been a couple of people that are kinda shocked to find out I’m Jewish [said in a mocking tone] [laughs]. “That’s weird” [laughs]. And don’t quite know what to do with me. You’re like, all of a sudden, you’re like glass, easily breakable or something. And now, we’re gonna offend you or something. I’m like, “Dude, relax” [laughs]. “If I hadn’t told you, you probably wouldn’t have known” [laughs]…It’s just new and weird and different, and they don’t know what to do with you.⁶

Although such interactions may be well intentioned or reflect a desire not to offend, for religious minority respondents they were experienced as socially awkward and created an uncomfortable sense of being singled out for being religiously different.

Fearing social exclusion or censure from coworkers, several nonreligious people we interviewed described feeling compelled to downplay or hide their nonreligion. For example, a Hispanic nonreligious man who was a security guard in California shared that,

I don’t really express my views, but if they bring it up, and I do decide to engage, I kinda—I speak softly, and I reassure them I’m not the authority on the subject. It’s just kind of what I think, what I’ve read….And then, it has to be away from other people, because if other people hear, they misconstrue what’s said.¹⁷

He went on to describe fear of being reprimanded, disciplined, or fired if something was taken out of context. Likewise, a Black agnostic woman engineer in Arizona described how she was hesitant to reveal her agnosticism because she was already a “triple minority” in the workplace as the youngest employee and a Black woman.¹⁸ She feared that if she said directly “Yes, I’m not religious,” then, I might—I will be looked at differently or interacted with differently as well.” Describing her work environment as aggressively Christian, the respondent shared her beliefs only when “I’m already at a level of comfort with you that I feel like it’s safe to speak on it, and I won’t be looked at in any sort of way.” At the same time, she noted that because Christianity is so heavy in the Black community, a lot of people would just see me and immediately assume that I’m Christian. So, I’m like, if I just be quiet [laughs], I usually don’t have to worry. I usually can kinda slide under the radar, until they get to know me.

A Hispanic atheist man who was an attorney in New York also described how he tended to be “very careful” when it came to revealing his atheism in the workplace because of reactions from others.

Sometimes they go bug-eyed. They assume—they assume that you’re some kind of savage Conan the Barbarian character that has no respect for human life and wants to kill everybody and eat babies and all kinds of stuff.¹⁹

Perceiving New York as highly (though diversely) religious, he felt that atheists were especially vulnerable to negative treatment.

Although religious minority groups described a sense of being seen as exotic, foreign, or pathologized because of their identities, Christians also described instances of feeling socially othered or excluded in the workplace. Evangelical Christians, in particular, described how coworkers stopped conversation or seemed to consciously exclude them in the workplace, which they interpreted as tied to their Christian identity and morality. For example, the evangelical nurse labeled “Goody-Two Shoes” for challenging racist and inappropriate remarks noted that when she would come to the lunch table people would say, “You gotta stop talking because the religious one is here.” A Hispanic evangelical woman who is a teacher in California described how, among her fellow teachers,

it felt like they didn’t allow me into their circle. They lived their life a different way. I felt they were very careful around me, and sometimes just mean [laughs], not talking to me or shunning me,

which she attributed to both her faith and trying to act with “integrity” in the workplace.²⁰

Other Christians, particularly women of color, felt that their colleagues excluded them from after-hours socializing because of assumptions about things like alcohol. A Hispanic Catholic woman who is an administrative assistant living in Michigan, referred,

¹⁵F@W_ST152, Indian American, woman, Muslim, social media manager/optometry technician, Illinois.
¹⁶F@W_ST121, white, man, Jewish, information technology, Florida.
¹⁷F@W_ST200, Hispanic, man, nonreligious, security guard, California.
¹⁸F@W_ST205, Black (British), woman, agnostic, engineer, Arizona.
¹⁹F@W_ST202, Hispanic/white, man, atheist, attorney, New York.
²⁰F@W_ST190, Hispanic/white, woman, evangelical, high school teacher, California.
I do have times at work, that coworkers, I think, have a different perception of me as far as that there’s certain things that I do or don’t do. Like drinking alcohol or those type of things, so there are a lot of times where there’s social gatherings and things like that... they don’t really think to invite me just because they feel that I’m a pretty straight-and-narrow [laughs] person.21

In another case, an African American woman who described herself as a conservative Christian living in California shared how she felt socially excluded by coworkers because she was “never invited” to after-work events or celebrations by coworkers “because they would assume, you know, that oh, she doesn’t do any—that’s not her thing, and, you know, just being omitted basically.” This respondent, thus, felt a sense of isolation, of “not having close friends in the workplace because I have stood out as a Christian.”22 Again, although such behaviors may signal a desire among colleagues to not offend Christian moral sensibilities, these behaviors were interpreted by these women as communicating a message of being seen as different or other and thus unworthy of social inclusion.

Interestingly, like some of the nonreligious respondents, Christians also described a sense of feeling unfairly judged or unwelcome in the workplace by colleagues because, in their view, they represented religious and/or political identities that were different from many of their colleagues or at odds with dominant views in their wider context. For example, a Black mainline Protestant woman working as an assistant professor of English in Texas described the challenges she faced working in academia, specifically in the humanities, “which tend to not always be welcoming towards religious people.”23 She recalled several instances when she was treated differently because of her religious beliefs and noted that in her work context, “a lot of people will question the validity of your religion, let alone your faith, and dismiss it on those rights.” These kinds of experiences, the professor shared, had affected her desire to pursue certain job opportunities or apply “because this is the place that makes you feel unwelcome.”

Pointing to the conflation of religious and political identity for some evangelicals, the white evangelical man called “Jesus lover” who was a paramedic supervisor in Oregon explained that he lived in a “very liberal” city, and because of this, “it is not always ok to be a white, Christian, male” because others assumed that “oh, you voted for Trump.”24 Specifically, he noted that his coworkers automatically made assumptions about his social and political views (e.g. “pro-Trump,” “pro-conservative”) and treated him dismissively, even though he saw his Christian faith as aligned with social justice. Likewise, an African American evangelical man living in Virginia described feeling othered by colleagues while working at an airport in a major city because of a “left-right split.” He shared that his colleagues had “their preconceived notions about Christians, and they just refuse to get along” and “if you weren’t in their [liberal] club, then you were singled out for destruction.”25 In this instance, the man, similar to other evangelicals, also linked hostile treatment to moral conduct: “If you were a person of integrity, you just didn’t fit in.” However, it is striking that when asked directly if he had ever experienced religious discrimination in the workplace, this man answered, “not per se,” attributing his negative experiences instead to political differences, that is, that his colleagues were “leftist,” and he was a conservative. Nevertheless, because of this “toxic” environment, the man left this job after two years, the shortest work experience of his career.

When it comes to social exclusion, religious tradition did seem to play a role in how respondents felt socially othered, excluded, uncomfortable, or unwelcome as a result of interactions with coworkers. Jewish and Muslim respondents described interactions with coworkers that made them feel religiously foreign or exotic. Nonreligious respondents also described the care they took to avoid being seen as outside the norm or pathologized. However, when Christian respondents described being socially excluded or judged by coworkers, this was often attributed to moral differences, or they described a sense of marginalization in relation to the majority of their colleagues, broader industry, or regional context.

**Religious Holidays and Symbols**

Respondents also described instances of perceived religious discrimination in the workplace tied to observing religious holidays or visible displays of religious symbols in the workplace, including religious attire. Jewish and Muslim respondents, in particular, described struggles around issues of accommodation and wearing of religious attire in the workplace. In fact, anticipating mistreatment and hostility, several Jewish and Muslim women we interviewed actively concealed or downplayed their religious identity in the workplace to preempt discrimination. Citing fear of violence, an Asian Muslim woman who owned a gas station in South Carolina intentionally did not display her faith through clothing or symbols “because I don’t want to be a target of anything.”26 She described how in the United States “you are sorted out... and your life could be in danger [laughs]” if you wear articles of faith anywhere outside of a religious

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21F@W_ST69, Hispanic, woman, Catholic, administrative assistant, Michigan.
22F@W_ST71, African American, woman, evangelical, reimbursement analyst, California.
23F@W_ST102, Black, mainline, assistant professor of English, Texas.
24F@W_ST40, white, man, evangelical, paramedic supervisor, Oregon.
25F@W_ST80, African American, man, evangelical, law enforcement, Virginia.
26F@W_ST105, Asian, woman, Muslim, gas station owner, South Carolina.
function. In addition to her own physical safety, she fears that expressing her faith will also affect her business. She went on to describe how, even though regular customers feel like family because she sees them every day, she feels that “I cannot tell them [about my faith].” She worries especially about customers with negative, anti-Muslim views because “they can burn your place [laughs], not good, so I try not to express.”

A white Jewish woman who had worked as a project manager at an engineering firm in New Jersey reflected that although she knew there were policies in place to protect employees at her work from religious discrimination, she did not feel free to express her Judaism in the workplace, stating,

“They’ve always told me, “You’re free to practice your religion.” … But because I don’t see other people doing it, I don’t feel comfortable. And the times that I did have to pray, I actually walked outside into a closed corner in the hallway to do it.”

This same woman, who often covered her hair in accordance with Orthodox practice, also recalled the discomfort she felt when she decided to wear a headscarf instead of a wig at work:

I decided to go in one day [laughs], with a head scarf, and I didn’t feel comfortable doing it. But I was just so hot and so tired of wearing wigs every day. And, when I walked in, I saw that they did look at me differently, and I felt really uncomfortable. But then, after I wore a scarf, I felt I couldn’t just switch back to a wig. So, I kept wearing scarves. But every day, I was conscious of people looking at me, conscious of people judging me, and I was so uncomfortable.

The connection between religious attire, othering, and discrimination was mentioned by several other women. Recall the Muslim woman convert who said that covering her head and dressing more modestly seemed to instigate verbal harassment from coworkers and clients. A white Jewish woman living in California also described her sense that wearing Orthodox Jewish attire, including a head covering, negatively affected new professional relationships because “someone just doesn’t know what box to put me in.” Such examples further reveal how religious minorities may feel uncomfortable or afraid to visibly express their religion in the workplace, because of concerns about hostile or violent responses from others, and how Muslim and Orthodox Jewish women may feel especially vulnerable to negative treatment when they wear religious attire.

Several Christians also described encountering hostility from superiors when they observed religious holidays or displayed religious symbols, particularly around Easter and Christmas. For example, a Hispanic Catholic woman working as an information systems analyst in New Jersey described working a 10-hour shift on Good Friday. Upon leaving work, her manager called her cell phone to reprimand her asking, “Why are you not at the office? You have a lot of work. [Your colleague] is complaining that you don’t do enough work.” This respondent felt the manager’s tone was harsh and that he had crossed a personal boundary by contacting her outside of her usual work hours. When she reminded her manager that it was Good Friday, she was surprised by his response that, “Your religion is not going to pay your food or rent or give you a promotion.” A white Catholic woman working as an art teacher in Illinois described how when she returned to work with ashes on her forehead to mark Ash Wednesday, her boss made remarks “making fun of it” and there was a “subtle sort of hostility” by a supervisor for observing Ash Wednesday. In another example, a Latina evangelical working in finance in Texas shared that her supervisor asked her to take down an angel Christmas decoration on her desk, though nonreligious decorations were deemed acceptable. This incident and a sense of not being able to personally mark the holiday as a religious one in the workplace contributed to a broader sense of discouragement in the workplace, and the respondent left her job the next year specifically because “I did not feel like I was welcome there anymore as a Christian.”

Illustrating the fraught nature of religious holidays, nonreligious people we interviewed shared how coworkers’ religious expression around holidays such as Christmas and Easter were uncomfortable for them in the workplace and how accommodations for religious people could result in a sense of unfair treatment towards nonreligious people. For example, the Hispanic nonreligious security guard in California described how

a lot of my coworkers are religious. So, like Christmas is a big thing to them, Easter. So, a lot of times, they will project that to you, and they’ll say, “God bless,” and stuff like that, “Let’s pray,” and—you know. So, they try to incorporate it into the workplace, and it becomes very uneasy for me, uncomfortable. I feel like they don’t see—they don’t accept that other people might have different points of view from them. And if they do, they don’t accept it.

Similarly, a South Asian man who was a consultant in Texas shared that

it becomes a very thorny issue when it comes to time off and exceptions to rules in general….I have found myself, for

27F@W_ST153, white, woman, Jewish, student, New Jersey.
28F@W_ST160, white, woman, Jewish, field representative for state legislator, California.
29F@W_ST169, Hispanic, woman, Catholic, information systems analyst, New Jersey.
30F@W_ST42, white, woman, Catholic, art teacher, Illinois.
31F@W_ST38, Hispanic, woman, evangelical, finance, Texas.
32F@W_ST200, Hispanic, man, nonreligious, security guard, California.
33F@W_ST206, South Asian, man, nonreligious, consultant, Texas.
example, being responsible for work because a colleague was on a day of fasting for religious holiday. Whereas, if I had chosen to engage and said, fasting for health benefits, I would not have been afforded the same relief from work. You know, things like, [three-second pause] not being available for weekend work because of the observance of the Sabbath or because of going to church on Sunday, versus not being available for weekend work because I don’t want to be available for weekend work. It’s much easier to say I’m going to church and lie than it is to say I’m not available.

Taken together, these examples highlight how Christians who observe religious holidays or visibly display religious symbols in the workplace tied to holidays like Easter or Christmas may feel discouraged from doing so by supervisors or perceive hostility from others. At the same time, they also reveal how the observing of religious holidays and religious expressions, specifically Christian ones, may also feel like an enactment of discrimination toward minority religious groups, such as the nonreligious, which raises difficult questions about how to negotiate the needs of multiple groups in the workplace.

Complicating Evangelical Narratives

Several of the evangelical respondents described above shared that a sense of hostility or unwelcome at work was significant enough to inform their choice to leave their jobs or to apply for specific jobs. Surprisingly, however, the only respondents in our entire sample who described religious discrimination in terms of preventing career advancement or resulting in firing were white evangelical men. Although this should not be taken as evidence of the lack of this form of religious discrimination in the workplace more broadly, or as in contradiction to the many studies showing evidence of hiring discrimination affecting religious minorities, these responses further illustrate the particular ways evangelical Christians tend to perceive discrimination.

Indeed, a common theme in evangelical Christian narratives of religious discrimination included descriptions of taking a moral stand in the workplace against perceived unethical behaviors because of their faith, which resulted in being censured for having “integrity.” However, such narratives may also serve to reinforce a sense of evangelical distinctiveness vis-à-vis other groups that casts them as characters of goodness or righteousness taking a stand in a hostile workplace, a characterization that was not typically part of religious minority narratives who often described efforts to hide or downplay their religion in the workplace for fear of exclusion, harassment, and even violence because they were part of a religious minority group. Moreover, such narrative can elide other structural advantages granted to them in the workplace because of being part of a religious majority group, which may also be amplified by race or gender.

For example, a white evangelical man from South Carolina described being fired from a previous office manager job “because I refused to be dishonest expressly because I’m a believer” and “to do unethical things”. The conflict began when he reported his supervisor for sexually harassing a supplier’s sales representative. The incident was investigated, and the supervisor was fired, but the fact that the respondent had filed the report put him in a tenuous position with the company. After this, he was asked to fudge time sheets and sign off on an incorrect product shipment date.

And I refused and instead of being fired, I submitted my resignation, and I went in and met with the—I handed it to the CEO, and he turned and looked at me and said, “You can’t resign, you’re fired.”

While linking being fired to expressions of religious morality, the fact that this respondent felt secure enough to resign as a form of moral protest may signal other forms of privilege he enjoyed as a white man.

Another white evangelical man who is a corrections officer in Michigan described his sense of how his faith had affected his career advancement:

When I was working for the department, it was well known that I was a Christian….I was promoted to sergeant, that’s all the highest I ever got….I had heard from different people that talked about, “well I don’t know if we want that religious guy up in here.”…And those things all worked against me, and I pretty much stayed sergeant for the rest of my career. I never was able to go up the ladder that way.

It was not simply being identified as a Christian, however, that was perceived as inhibiting upward mobility. Rather, it was taking a moral stand in the workplace as a result of Christian faith, particularly in opposition to superiors, that was seen as leading to workplace hostility.

You know I didn’t fit into the good ole boys club. Those people if they could screw somebody over to get ahead, or they wanted you to do it to somebody so that they could get ahead, they wanted to know that you were on that team. And if you had a measure of integrity that said I’m not gonna do whatever it takes to promote, or I’m not gonna do whatever it takes to watch your back so that you can watch my back. If you weren’t part of that good ole boy club, you just weren’t gonna go anywhere.

Thus, for this respondent, it was not simply “religious discrimination” but “character discrimination” that resulted in him and other religious colleagues’ experiencing hostility in

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34F@W_ST44, white, man, evangelical, maintenance technician, South Carolina.
35F@W_ST11, white, man, evangelical, corrections officer, Michigan.
36F@W_ST48, white, man, evangelical, truck driver/pastor, Ohio.
the workplace. The respondent cited several other religious colleagues who had made “honest” and “ethical” decisions informed by their faith, “but they weren’t the decisions the higher ups wanted them to make.” As a result, these colleagues “suffered” in various ways. However, it is also important to note that elsewhere in the interview, the respondent described his failure to be promoted as an example of being “racially discriminated against” because he was recommended to become a lieutenant, but twice a person of color, including a woman of color, was promoted instead. This illustrates overlapping perceptions of discrimination and perhaps a conflating of religious and racial identity, so that perceived discrimination for being white corresponds to perceived discrimination for being Christian.

In a final example of the complicated nature of evangelical narratives, a white evangelical man who worked as a truck driver in Ohio described how he believed he was “let go” from a previous job after he requested not to work on Sunday mornings. Although he acknowledged this may have been because of scheduling needs, he also felt that those who made the decision “did not like me, because I was a Christian.” However, paradoxically, the same respondent shared later that he felt that Muslims in his current workplace “use their faith as a way—as a victim card, to get whatever they want,” including changes to shifts for religious reasons. Although one might expect the man to be sympathetic to Muslim requests for scheduling accommodation given his own experience, here he dismisses Muslims as being manipulative and questions their religious sincerity. He also describes how his current boss created a part-time position for him, so that he could also serve as a part-time pastor without losing regular income. However, in this case, he does not question merit this treatment, drawing an implied distinction between himself and Muslim colleagues.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This study highlights the lived experience of religious discrimination in the workplace and contributes to deeper understanding of religious discrimination in the workplace. In our broader survey, we find that perceived religious discrimination in the workplace is relatively common. Nearly one third of all workers surveyed reported having experienced religious discrimination at work to some degree: Muslims, Jews, and evangelical Christians were especially likely to report religious discrimination in the workplace. More than half of Jewish and Muslim workers and more than a third of evangelical Christians report religious discrimination. Follow-up interviews with Muslim, Jewish, nonreligious, and Christian respondents revealed how minority and majority religious traditions describe similar categories of religious discrimination including verbal microaggressions and stereotyping, social exclusion and othering, and negative experiences tied to observing religious holidays or displaying religious symbols.

At the same time, how perceived religious discrimination was narrated differed substantially between minority and majority religious groups. Jewish and Muslim interview respondents tended to link experiences of religious workplace discrimination or othering to ascribed group membership. Unlike anti-Christian rhetoric, instances of anti-Semitism and anti-Islamic rhetoric reinforced long-standing ideologies used to justify violence against Jews and Muslims as a group. Verbal microaggressions were accompanied by racial/ethnic or national origin discrimination (“send ‘em back”). This underscores how religious discrimination targeting minority groups is often entangled with racism, nativism, and white nationalism. In addition, discrimination was linked with visible religious identifiers, such as the wearing of religious attire. Several conservative Jewish women described how wearing a head covering led to a sense of being judged in the workplace or affecting professional relationships, in ways that may be similar to Muslim women who wear hijab, something not discussed in existing research. Moreover, anticipating social hostility or even physical violence in the workplace, Muslim and nonreligious employees described how they downplayed or concealed their religious visibility preemptively, which highlights the unique ways in which these two groups may feel stigmatized in the U.S. workplace (Cragun et al. 2012; Ghumman et al. 2013). Minority religion respondents further described experiencing discomfort in the workplace around holidays such as Christmas, because these holidays tended to reveal their religious differences from coworkers.

By contrast, Christian interview respondents, many of them also women and racial/ethnic minorities, tended to link experiences of negative treatment in the workplace to visible expressions of personal piety (e.g., not drinking alcohol, listening to Christian music, display of religious symbols or observing religious holidays) or to instances of moral conflict (e.g., not wanting to break the rules, engage in unethical behavior, or participate in workplace conversations seen as inappropriate). Many also felt that they were unfairly stereotyped by coworkers as judgmental or narrow-minded. This seemed especially salient when the respondent did not share the religious or political views of the majority of their colleagues or those in their broader context. Christians also described feeling ridiculed, censured, or discouraged for visible religious expression in the workplace tied to the Easter or Christmas season.

In addition to highlighting common modes of religious discrimination as well as qualitative differences between groups, this study builds on existing research of perceived religious discrimination in the workplace to show how regional and other contextual factors shape perceptions of discrimination (Scheitle and Corcoran 2018; Scheitle and Ecklund 2018). In particular, the relationship between one’s own religious beliefs (and related political or moral views) vis-à-vis one’s coworkers or broader context was a theme that came up for Jewish, Muslim, nonreligious, and Christian
employees alike. It is also worth noting that respondents often described behaviors that felt demeaning, othering, or prejudicial, but they did not always see these as qualifying as discrimination. This illustrates the need for further research into more subtle instances of discrimination or religious microaggressions (Cheng et al. 2019; Nadal et al. 2010) that might be overlooked in survey data. It also illustrates the ways in which employees themselves and employers may not be sensitized to the varied ways in which religious discrimination manifests in modern organizations.

Finally, this study reveals specific terms and stereotypes that are perceived by Christians, especially evangelical Christians, as indicative of anti-Christian bias or workplace hostility. To be clear, we are not arguing that Christian perceptions of discrimination are consequential or carry the same risk for violence that religious minorities experience. Yet it is important to recognize that Christians do perceive religious discrimination and othering in the workplace in ways that feel demeaning, prejudicial, or exclusionary, and this should not be dismissed by researchers. However, it is also noteworthy that evangelical Christian narratives often cast employees as characters of moral goodness who are negatively treated by coworkers or superiors for either standing up on behalf of others or refusing to participate in unethical behavior in the workplace. Such narratives may serve to bolster beliefs about being persecuted or embattled in the United States (Yancey 2018) as well as reinforce notions of superiority vis-à-vis other religious or social groups via moral boundary making while overlooking majority privileges. The tendency of evangelical Christians to connect perceived religious discrimination to their own moral behavior in the workplace is distinctive and adds nuance to recent research on how evangelical Christians understand their place in contemporary U.S. society (Baker et al. 2020; Whitehead et al. 2018).

Ultimately, this study reveals the value of studying groups alongside one another for the fullest picture of workplace religious discrimination and points the way toward further sociological research of how both majority and minority groups perceive discrimination. Although much is known about the extent to which employees perceive race, gender, and age discrimination in the workplace, far less is known about perceptions of religious discrimination across traditions, even though we know that religious discrimination in both U.S. society (Scheitle and Ecklund 2020) and in the workplace is rising (EEOC 2021a). Thus, our findings begin to illuminate what Gebert et al. (2014) called the “neglected diversity dimension” of religion.

Understanding perceived religious discrimination and its nuances is important because of how discrimination can affect employee job satisfaction, mental well-being, or comfort with expression of their religious identity in the workplace. It can also lead to a chilling effect whereby employees feel compelled to hide or downplay their religious identities at work, leave their jobs, or chose not to apply for certain jobs. A limitation of this study, however, is that it included only small samples of Jewish, Muslim, and nonreligious interview respondents. To this end, more qualitative research is needed on how minority religious groups perceive and describe religious discrimination in their everyday work contexts. Future research should also examine how factors such as politics, race, gender, and national origin interact with experiences of religious discrimination for both religious majority and minority groups. Finally, given that our data also highlight how perceptions of discrimination can coexist with behaviors and attitudes that also may be prejudicial or discriminatory toward other groups in the workplace, future research should look at how perceived religious discrimination and attitudes about diversity in the workplace are connected and shape intergroup relations.

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