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American Moral Exceptionalism

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Abstract

The judgments and actions of contemporary Americans reflect the implicit influence of America's Puritan-Protestant heritage. Americans valorize individual merit, a residue of the Protestant emphasis on a personal relationship with God and earthly rewards and punishments. And the United States has remained deeply religious and traditional in the face of enormous prosperity, at least in part attributable to the founding influence of the Puritan-Protestants. Americans, but not members of comparison cultures, implicitly link work and divine salvation and display other judgmental biases consistent with *implicit Puritanism*. As predicted by theories of implicit social cognition, which hold that the influence of traditional cultural values is strongest at an implicit level, less religious and non-Protestant Americans are just as likely to display such effects as devout American Protestants.

In his classic *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville (1840/1990) became the first major scholar to characterize America as exceptional, and many others have since followed suit (e.g., Baker, 2005; Kingdon, 1999; Lipset, 1996; Shafer, 1991; Voss, 1993). Although the focus of these commentators differed—the small size of the federal government in the case of Kingdon (1999), the ostensible American crisis of values in the case of Baker (2005)—they shared a sense that America is somehow qualitatively different from other countries, and that this difference needs explaining.

As we will argue, much of American culture's unique quality stems from its Puritan-Protestant heritage.¹ Moreover, contemporary manifestations of

¹ In the present chapter, we use the term *Protestant* when referring to the Protestant faith and community in general, including both United States and northwestern Europe, among others. The terms *Puritan-Protestant* or simply *Puritan* are used to refer to a subgroup of English Protestants who felt that the Anglican Church had undertaken insufficient reforms when it broke from the Catholic Church. These Puritan-Protestants were especially devout and committed to the values of the Reformation, and—in part because they were among the first to arrive—exerted a disproportionate influence on what became the American creed. We sometimes use the term *Puritan* in reference to contemporary American beliefs to reflect this heritage.

Puritan-Protestant values are frequently implicit and automatic. In making this case, we draw on the work of Sanchez-Burks (2002, 2005), who demonstrates that American Protestants implicitly follow a "Protestant relational ideology" that prescribes impersonal work relationships. The research reported in this chapter extends this important work into the domain of moral values (i.e., questions of right and wrong rather than appropriateness), and further focuses on cases in which non-Protestant and less religious Americans display judgments consistent with traditional Puritan-Protestant values.

We focus on two key ways in which American moral values are "exceptional" in the sense of diverging markedly from the norm, both of which have their roots in America's Puritan-Protestant heritage. First, American culture valorizes individual merit to a remarkable degree. This is due in part to the Protestant emphasis on an individual relationship with God and the notion of earthly punishments and rewards.

Second, and just as importantly, the *developmental course* of American culture diverges sharply from the norm around the world. Almost as a rule, wealth and democracy engender secular, less traditional values (Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Because historically Protestant countries industrialized and became wealthy prior to other cultures, they were also the first to secularize and are today among the world's *least* traditional societies. The major exception is the United States, which remains deeply religious and traditional, a consequence of its heritage as a nation founded by extremely devout Puritan-Protestants. Indeed, contemporary American values are in some respects more similar to those of impoverished totalitarian states than to those of other wealthy democracies. Despite their extremely high level of economic development, Americans are relatively likely to emphasize the importance of religion, endorse traditional family values, and reject divorce, homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, and suicide. Of particular relevance to contemporary issues such as the war on terror, Americans are much more absolutist when it comes to their moral standards than one would predict based on national wealth.

While drawing on the results of self-report questionnaire measures like the World Values Survey (Inglehart, 1997), we emphasize that the implicit cognitions of contemporary Americans are especially likely to reflect traditional Puritan-Protestant morality. Of particular interest, Americans implicitly link work with divine salvation. We consider this and related phenomena manifestations of *implicit Puritanism*.

IMPLICIT CULTURAL COGNITION

There has been an increasing recognition within psychology that implicit cognitions play a central role in human judgments and behaviors (Bargh &

Chartrand, 1999; Dijksterhaus & Bargh, 2001; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Haidt, 2001; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Rudman, 2004; Sanchez-Burks, 2002; Wegner & Bargh, 1998; Wilson, 2002). The term *implicit* is used to refer to cognitions that are intuitive, spontaneous, effortless, unintentional, uncontrollable, and/or unconscious (Bargh, 1994; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Wegner & Bargh, 1998; Wilson, 2002). However, it is rare for all of these characteristics to occur together (Bargh, 1994). In the present chapter, we use the label *implicit* to refer to cognitions that are intuitive, spontaneous, effortless, and which do not require a conscious intention on part of the social perceiver to occur. But the social perceiver is in many cases consciously aware of his or her cognition and can, at least in theory, deliberately correct for its influence.

To take one example, an American social perceiver may intuitively, spontaneously, and effortlessly judge a lottery winner who retires at a young age negatively. No conscious intention to evaluate the lottery winner needed to take place for the judgment to occur. However, the social perceiver is aware of her negative judgment, and may upon deliberation decide it does not make sense for the lottery winner to continue working when it is no longer economically necessary.

This places the cognitions we examine in this chapter in a similar category to those described in Haidt's (2001) influential social intuitionist model. He argues persuasively that moral judgments are typically intuitive rather than reasoned, and culturally socialized rather than individually chosen. Supporting this thesis, participants find themselves "morally dumbfounded" (i.e., unable to muster an effective logical argument) when asked to explain their opposition to harmless yet culturally condemned acts such as washing the toilet with the national flag and eating the family dog after it has been killed by a car (Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993). Moral judgments occur spontaneously, but their logical justifications are often rationalizations rather than ~~true~~ reasons (for additional empirical evidence, see Uhlmann, Pizarro, Tannenbaum, & Ditto, 2007).

Not only indirect measures, but also explicit scenarios and survey questions like those used in social intuitionist studies (Haidt, 2001; Haidt et al., 1993) and the World Values Survey (Inglehart, 1997) can tap into implicit cognitions. As we will see, American participants are much more likely than members of other wealthy democracies to view moral values in black and white terms (Baker, 2005). Although this sense of moral absolutism is consciously reportable, it is at the same time implicit in the sense that Americans are unaware of the influence that their Puritan-Protestant heritage has on their view of morality. In other words, they are unconscious of the source of their moral absolutism (Gawronski, Hofmann, & Wilbur, 2006; Wilson, 2002). And values can also operate implicitly, for example when the conscious

belief that moral principles are absolute unconsciously influences the extent to which unsavory political allies are recharacterized as morally upstanding (Gawronski et al., 2006; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995).

Supporting the profound impact of culture on implicit cognitions, studies show that subtly activated cultural concepts exert a powerful influence on judgments and behaviors (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Dijksterhuis & van Knippenberg, 1998; Kawakami, Dovidio, & Dijksterhuis, 2003). For example, unscrambling sentences containing words related to stereotypes of the elderly (e.g., *Florida, bingo*) led college students to walk more slowly as they left the laboratory (Bargh et al., 1996), and subliminal exposure to pictures of skinheads led them to endorse more negative attitudes toward immigrants and racial minorities (Kawakami et al., 2003). These striking findings suggest that cultural ideas can prime actions without the individual's awareness of their influence (Bargh & Ferguson, 2000; Bargh & Chartrand, 1999).

More stable implicit beliefs likewise reflect the cultural context (Banaji, 2001; Blair, Judd, & Fallman, 2004; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998; Rudman, 2004). The pervasiveness of implicit racial stereotyping is an excellent example. Exposure to cultural stereotypes of Black Americans creates a mental association between Black Americans and crime. This association can lead individuals to discriminate under conditions in which it is difficult to consciously override the tendency to stereotype. Consistent with this, White Americans playing the part of a police officer in a virtual reality game accidentally shoot Black civilians when obliged to respond quickly (Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002; Greenwald, Oakes, & Hoffman, 2003).

Prominent cultural researchers have speculated that most cultural influences are similarly implicit (e.g., Cohen, 1997; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Sanchez-Burks, 2002, 2005; Sperber, 1985; Weber, 1904/1958). Although general principles of how the mind works suggest that implicit cognitions are especially likely to reflect traditional cultural values (Banaji, 2001; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Rudman, 2004), the content of those values is based on each country's cultural history. In the case of the United States, that history is especially unique and interesting (Sanchez-Burks, 2002, 2005).

AMERICA'S UNIQUE CULTURAL HISTORY

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber (1904/1958) argued that Protestantism was a major factor in encouraging the development of modern capitalism. He suggested that a Protestant ethic of everyday behavior emphasizing hard work, productivity, honesty, diligence, seriousness,

rationality, and saving facilitated the growth of businesses and economies. The Calvinist principle of predestination also played a role, by helping to remove some of the stigma surrounding the open pursuit of material wealth. Because economic success suggested that one was among God's elected, pursuing it was not only moral, but even mandatory.

The economic effects of the Protestant Reformation were tremendous. Before the Reformation, southern Europe was better off than northern Europe in economic terms. But over the next three centuries, capitalism flourished in Protestant countries but not in Catholic countries (Inglehart, 1997; Landes, 1998). For the first century and a half of the Industrial Revolution, industrialization was confined to the historically Protestant countries of northwest Europe, Protestant regions of historically Catholic European countries, and the Protestant regions of the Americas (Inglehart, 1997). As Inglehart and Welzel (2005; p. 75) note, industrialization was "overwhelmingly concentrated in predominantly Protestant societies and among the Protestant segments of mixed societies."

Typically, as a society becomes more affluent, the influence of religion fades and is replaced by secular values (Inglehart, 1997). Because of this process, in most of the world, Protestantism has become a victim of its own (material) success. Predominantly Protestant countries industrialized and developed economically earlier and to a greater extent than Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, and other countries (Landes, 1998). As a result, they also secularized earlier (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). Protestantism has become something of a fading light in its birthplace of Northwest Europe.

The most prominent exception to this process is the United States, which is virtually as religious as it enters the new millennium as it was sixty years ago (Gallup & Lindsay, 1999; Greeley, 1991; Norris & Inglehart, 2004). In 2000, 50% of Americans rated God's importance in their life at the maximum of 10 on a 10-point scale, and 60% attended church at least once a month (Baker, 2005). The same proportion of Americans (40%) attended church in a given week in March 2003 as had in a given week of March 1939. In both 1947 and 2001, 94% of Americans believed in God. Out of all nations surveyed, only the United States and Brazil did not experience a drop in the percentage of people who believe in God between the years 1947 and 2001 (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). The percentage of Americans who believed in life after death actually rose from 68% in 1947 to 76% in 2001. Seven in ten Americans believe in the devil, as compared to one-third of British people and one-fifth or less of West Germans, French, and Swedes (Lipset, 1996). More than half of the American public, and 79% of Christians, expect that Jesus will return to Earth, and 44% of Americans believe this will occur within the next 50 years (Harris, 2006; Sheler, 2006). Over half of Americans believe the universe was

created 6,000 years ago (Harris, 2006). A 1999 Gallup poll found that Americans were more willing to vote for a Roman Catholic (94%) and homosexual (79%) candidate for political office than for an atheist (49%; Dawkins, 2006). President George Bush senior, when asked if atheists could be legitimate citizens and patriots, responded "No, I don't know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God" (as quoted in Dawkins, 2006, p. 43).

What makes America exceptional is not its high level of religiosity, which is no greater than that of many Latin American and Islamic countries, but that it has retained high levels of religiosity in the face of enormous economic prosperity. As Wald (1987) points out, over half of Americans say that religion is very important to them personally, but based on economic development, the prediction would have been that only *five percent* of Americans would see religion as central to their lives.

The most likely reason is America's unique cultural heritage as a nation founded, to no small degree, by Puritan-Protestants fleeing religious persecution. These devout immigrants hoped to create a religious utopia in the New World. In some cases, entire congregations emigrated to New England together (Bellow, 2003). This process of self-selection led to extraordinary levels of religiosity in the new colonies (Fisher, 1989). And although the early English settlers were followed by others pursuing economic goals, it was the devout Protestants who laid the foundation of American culture. Because religiously devout settlers got in on the "ground-floor" of a new society, they enjoyed an enormous influence over what eventually became known as the American creed.

Many scholars have argued that Protestantism continues to play a powerful—and often implicit—role in the values of contemporary Americans (Baker, 2005; Landes, 1998; Lipset, 1996; Sanchez-Burks, 2002, 2005). We now turn to the first major way in which America's unique cultural history has shaped the contemporary values of its populace: the ideal of individual merit.

AMERICANISM AS IDEOLOGY: THE ETHIC OF INDIVIDUAL MERIT

Lipset (1991, p. 16) writes that "Americanism, as different people have pointed out, is an 'ism' or ideology in the same way that communism or fascism or liberalism are 'isms.'" And, as Richard Hofstadter states, "It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one" (as quoted in Kazin & McCartin, 2006). Ralph Waldo Emerson and Abraham Lincoln described American ideology as a "political religion" (Baker, 2005), and Robert Bellah

refers to America's "civic religion" (Bellah, 1980). Whereas most national identities are based on ancestry, history, language, customs, and/or religion, American identity is based on shared values. To fail to endorse certain moral principles is to be "un-American." One of the most important and interesting American values is the ideal of individual merit. Although an individualistic ethos is based in part on the Protestant emphasis on a personal relationship with God, belief in meritocracy derives in part from the Protestant tenet of earthly reward and punishment.

Individualism

Scholars from a variety of fields consider individualism one of the critical dimensions of national character (Hofstede, 2001; Inglehart, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Mead, 1967; Triandis, 1988, 1995). America's strong individualism sets it apart from most of the world, which is more collectivistic or group oriented (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Inkeles, 1983; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Large-scale international surveys reveal that the United States is more individualistic than even other Western European countries. In a landmark study, Hofstede (1980, 2001) compared the values of IBM employees in over 50 countries around the world. Individualism was one of the primary dimensions of culture that his work revealed, and the United States scored as more individualistic than any other country.

Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars' (1993) survey of 15,000 senior managers in 12 wealthy European and East Asian Nations further highlighted the American conviction in individualism. Seventy-four percent of Americans believed that working for a company simply involves the exchange of pay for the individual's successful completion of her assigned functions. In contrast, only 29% of Japanese, 35% of French, and 41% of Germans endorsed this view. Members of these other cultures took the position that working for a company involves a group of people cooperating and forming strong relationships. Notably, dramatic differences were found not only between the United States and East Asian countries, but also between the United States and other Western countries.

Of course, any cultural dimension as important as individualism is multiply determined. Factors as diverse as having an agrarian economy, open frontier, level of immigration, geographic mobility, and urbanization contribute to a culture's level of individualism (Kitayama, Ishii, Imada, Takemura, & Ramaswamy, 2006; Nisbett et al., 2001; Triandis, 1988). However, one of the roots of American individualism clearly lies in Protestantism's rejection of certain aspects of the Catholic faith (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Weber, 1904/1958). Partly in response to the perceived corruption and deviance from scripture of the Catholic Church, Protestantism emphasized a personal

connection with God. Whereas Catholics focused on the community of believers, Protestants sought a more individual covenant. Martin Luther, for instance, wrote that each individual is "a perfectly free lord, subject to none" (as quoted in Sampson, 2000, p. 1427). Empirically, historically Protestant countries are more individualistic than Catholic countries (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998).

The United States, however, is significantly more individualistic than even other historically Protestant cultures (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). The United States is, uniquely, a Protestant country with many sects, in which people are willing and able to select the church most suited to their individual spirituality (Lipset, 1996). Weber (1904/1958) theorized that sectarian Protestantism was especially likely to contribute to individualistic behavior. Tocqueville (1840/1990) further noted that American Protestant sects are congregational rather than hierarchical, which contributes to individualism by further emphasizing a personal covenant with God not mediated by church representatives.

Earthly Reward and Punishment

Although many religions promise that the faithful will be rewarded in the afterlife, relatively few make hard promises for the present one. The major exception is of course certain strains of Protestantism—most notably the Calvinist belief that everything is predetermined, only God's chosen people can achieve paradise, and that material success is evidence of this grace. Calvin went so far as to argue that Christ died only for a select few rather than for all of humanity.

The Calvinist principle of earthly rewards made a significant contribution to the American conviction in individual merit. A full 96% of Americans believe that the principle that "with hard work ... anyone can succeed in America" should be taught to children (Baker, 2005). Such beliefs can be adaptive to the extent that they motivate children to pursue success. However, they are difficult to defend as empirically correct (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Of the scores of nations included in the World Values Survey, Americans were the most likely to believe that individuals should be paid based solely on job performance (Lipset, 1996). Pay based on individual merit is so fundamental to how Americans do business that it is easy to forget that other countries have very different ideals regarding who should get hired and promoted. For example, promotion in Japanese companies is based largely on seniority. Whereas 79% of Americans believe that a boss's authority is based on the ability to do his or her job, only 27% of Japanese believe this. Japanese, Dutch, Australians, Britons, and others are considerably more likely than Americans

to view a boss's authority as stemming from power over others (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993).

Although Americans believe universal rules based on merit should be applied to everyone, perceived norms and values in many other societies lead people to choose loyalty to friends over the merit principle. Pearce, Branyiczki, and Bigley (2000) found that Hungarian workers viewed their companies as less likely to apply the same rules to everyone than American workers did. The perception that success was unfair (i.e., based on nepotistic connections rather than merit) mediated Hungarian workers' low level of trust in the company and low organizational commitment. In contrast to the prior study of *perceived norms* among Hungarian workers, a comparison of the *values* of American and Mexican bank employees revealed that Mexicans were considerably more likely to do what was best for their friend as opposed to act on the merit principle (Zurcher, Meadows, & Zurcher, 1965). For example, Mexican participants were more likely than Americans to believe that you should give a friend an unearned passing grade in a class, overlook a friend's cheating on an exam, and write a positive review of a friend's lousy stage play. Tellingly, Americans construed the survey as a measure of honesty, whereas Mexicans viewed it as an assessment of their loyalty as a friend.

Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars' (1993) aforementioned survey of over 15,000 senior managers in 12 countries highlighted Americans' conviction in an impersonal morality based on the merit principle. Managers were presented with ethical dilemmas that involved choosing between the merit principle and personal loyalties. Of the nations surveyed, Americans were typically the most merit-oriented. For instance, one dilemma involved a longtime subordinate whose recent work was unsatisfactory and showed no signs of improvement. Seventy-seven percent of Americans believed that the employee should be fired, compared with 19% of Koreans, 26% of French, 27% of Italians, 31% of Germans, and 42% of Britons. Members of these other cultures believed that the subordinate's 15 years of loyal service should not be repaid with a dismissal (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993). In additional surveys involving over 30,000 managers from 55 countries, Americans consistently chose merit-based principles over personal loyalties, and exhibited differences with other cultures as large as 60 percentage points (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998).

It seems likely that America's commitment to meritocracy contributed to its ascent as an economic superpower (Fukuyama, 1995; Landes, 1998, 2000). It is clearly the case that historically Protestant nations dominate the world economically. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some Asian companies are

actively seeking to abandon practices such as seniority-based hiring in favor of the individualistic American business model. And as noted earlier, the Protestant work ethic may be adaptive in the sense that it leads individuals to pursue educational and vocational success. However, the legacy of Protestant faith in earthly punishments and rewards has multifold effects, not all of which are clearly welcome. The (often implicit) belief that bad people are punished on earth contributes to ideologies that justify social inequality (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Katz & Hass, 1988; Lerner, 1980; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Americans are more likely than members of many other cultures, including other wealthy democracies, to endorse the belief that people get what they deserve (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). Eighty-two percent of Americans believe that what happens to people is their own doing, as compared to only 33% of Venezuelans, and 39% of Chinese. It is of course relatively unsurprising that people in poor countries—where life is arguably less fair than it is in America—view the world as unfair. However, more Americans believe in a just world than do Japanese, Germans, and Swedes (63%, 66%, and 71%, respectively).

Both correlational and experimental studies support a role for Protestant work values in promoting prejudice against members of low-status social groups. In studies done with American participants, individual differences in endorsement of Protestant work values predicted negative attitudes toward Black Americans (Katz & Hass, 1988) and negative stereotypes of the obese (Quinn & Crocker, 1999). Priming Protestant work values by having participants complete relevant questionnaire items led White Americans to endorse negative stereotypes of Black Americans (e.g., as lazy and undisciplined; Katz & Hass, 1988). Similarly, listening to a speech about Protestant work values led White participants to perceive a Black person as less competent than a White person, even though these individuals were identically described (Biernat, Vescio, & Theno, 1996). Also, reading a passage about meritocracy caused obese women to feel badly about themselves (Quinn & Crocker, 1999). Suggesting that consciousness is not a necessary condition for these effects, implicitly priming statements like “judge people on merit” using a sentence unscrambling task (Srull & Wyer, 1979) led American participants to justify unfair treatment of low-status group members (McCoy & Major, 2007). Indeed, the belief that America is a meritocracy leads to a strong consistency pressure to further believe that individuals and groups who do less well lack the traits needed for success. Importantly, the influence of traditional Puritan-Protestant values on the feelings, judgments, and actions of contemporary Americans is frequently implicit (Quinn & Crocker, 1999).

Summary

The ethic of individual merit is among the most important and noteworthy aspects of the American creed, and reveals the strong influence of traditional Puritan-Protestant moral values. Specifically, the Protestant emphasis on a personal relationship with God is one important source of American individualism, whereas the Protestant notion of earthly reward and punishment contributes to the American conviction in meritocracy.

AMERICAN TRADITIONALISM

A considerably less studied—but no less important—way in which America is exceptional is its systematic departure from the developmental path that most other societies are following. Whereas other historically Protestant countries have secularized as their economies developed, America maintains an extremely high rate of religiosity in the face of enormous prosperity. A self-selection process, in which especially devout Protestants left England to settle in the New World, helps explain the persistent prominence of religion in American life (Bellow, 2003; Fisher, 1989). High rates of religiosity in turn explain contemporary Americans' strikingly traditional values and absolutist view of morality.

Traditional Values

High levels of religiosity go hand-in-hand with traditionalist positions on many key moral issues. Although America has become the world's wealthiest country and an economic superpower, in many respects, its values remain as traditional today as they were many years ago (Baker, 2005; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). This includes not only an emphasis on religion, but also traditional family values, nationalism, sexual repression, moral absolutism, and a tendency to reject divorce, homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, and suicide. (These values make up the index of “traditional values” from the World Values Survey; Inglehart, 1997.)

In *America's Crisis of Values*, Baker (2005) argues that, contrary to popular myth (not to mention the title of his own book), there is no real crisis of values in America. Comparing across countries, the United States is one full standard deviation above the mean when it comes to traditionalism. American values are more traditional than those of any other industrialized country, and in fact more traditional than most countries in the world. As data from the World Values Survey further indicate, Americans were just as traditional in 2000 as they were in 1981. Other wealthy countries all became less traditional over this same period, and were further less traditional than America

even in 1981.² And, in contrast to other wealthy countries, in which young people are less likely to endorse traditional values than older people, young Americans are just as traditional as their parents' generation. Among other things, this suggests that American moral exceptionalism should persist well into the future. Below, we discuss an aspect of traditional American morality that is particularly pertinent to the issues and conflicts of today.

Moral Absolutism

A key aspect of moral thinking is whether ethical dilemmas are characterized as black and white, or in shades of gray. Religions that make unambiguous moral prescriptions (e.g., Judaism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam) contribute to absolutism (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Lipset, 1996). Several waves of the World Values Survey asked participants to choose between an absolutist and relativist position on morality:

- A. There are absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil. These always apply to everyone, whatever the circumstances.
- B. There can never be absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil. What is good and evil depends entirely upon the circumstances at the time.

In contrast to position A, position B suggests that morality depends greatly on the vantage point of the observer (see Baumeister, 1997). As expected, people from impoverished, highly religious societies were more likely to endorse an absolutist position on morality than people from wealthy, secular societies (Baker, 2005; Hofstede, 2001). For example, while 60% of Nigerians endorsed the absolutist position, only 19% of Swedes did.

Consistent with the high levels of religiosity observed in the United States, Americans today score closer to Nigerians than they do to Swedes. Once again, American values depart markedly from what would be expected based on level of economic development. Americans have actually become *more* absolutist over the years covered by the World Values Survey. Whereas, in 1981, one-third of Americans were moral absolutists, by the 1990s, half were. This increase in absolutism occurred among Americans from all walks of life—men

² Ireland is a partial exception to this process, having retained its traditional values despite an increase in wealth. However, Ireland has been torn by political turmoil for over half a century. The sense of insecurity fostered by such social upheaval leads to the adoption and preservation of traditional values (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). At the same time, Ireland is a historically Catholic country, and Catholic countries are on average more traditional than Protestant countries (Baker, 2005).

and women, wealthy and poor, and all races and ages (Baker, 2005). Walter Lippman insightfully called sharp distinctions between good and evil "one of the great American traditions" (as quoted in Singer, 2004, p. 209).

American absolutism even spills out in everyday evaluations. Consistent with the Buddhist and Confucian emphasis on finding a "middle way" in response to dilemmas (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Nisbett et al., 2001), Japanese and Chinese were more likely to use the midpoint on response scales than were Americans and Canadians (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1995). But, at the same time, Americans were more likely than even the *Canadians* to mark the extreme values on the scale. This is striking, given the strong cultural influence the United States exerts on Canada, which renders comparisons between Americans and Canadians among the most conservative tests of American exceptionalism (Lipset, 1990).

This evaluative extremism contributes to the American tendency to moralize social and political conflicts (Lipset, 1991). It is not enough for American foreign policy to serve the national interests; a broader moral justification or rationalization is required. When World War II broke out, Churchill openly stated that he was willing to work with Stalin, and would even ally himself with Satan if it helped destroy the Nazis. In contrast, U.S. leaders and propaganda characterized Stalin positively—as "Uncle Joe"—and described the Soviet Union as a free country.

Moral absolutism is especially relevant to the issues of present-day America, among them two close presidential elections and the war on terror. In *The President of Good and Evil*, Singer (2004) documented the moral absolutism of President George W. Bush. Singer noted that President Bush had used the word evil in 319 speeches, about 30% of the speeches since he took office. The President has stated, "Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place," and even uses evil as a proper noun: "We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name" (both as quoted in Singer, 2004, p. 1). The President's willingness to characterize issues in terms of good and evil may have played a role in his political victories over the less absolutist Senator John Kerry and Vice President Al Gore. The American public may perceive politicians who consider multiple perspectives on moral issues as wishy-washy and unprincipled (Tetlock, 1998).

Further examples of American moral absolutism include the U.S. policies of never negotiating with terrorists, demanding the unconditional surrender of nations with which it is at war (e.g., Japan and Germany in World War II; Lipset, 1996, 2001), and refusing to officially recognize governments perceived as enemies (Lipset, 2001). Of course, America's foreign policy has been shaped not only by idealists but also by realists such as Henry Kissinger, who openly sought to preserve American interests. It is often observed,

however, that American leaders tend to frame foreign policy initiatives as part of a battle of good versus evil (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Lipset, 1996; Singer, 2004). Regardless of whether their true motives are idealistic or realistic, that American leaders feel it necessary to characterize foreign policy as a moral crusade highlights something important about American values.

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) argued that the American willingness to characterize individuals as evil contributes to the explosive growth of the U.S. prison population. If an individual is intrinsically evil, he or she must be separated from non-evil people for as long as possible. This essentialistic view of evil may further explain why America is the only wealthy nation that still employs the death penalty. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) are not alone in suggesting that a distinct streak of retributive justice exists in American moral cognition (for empirical evidence, see Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002).

In sum, America has an absolutist mentality regarding morality along with the economic, political, and military might of a global superpower. Although tempered somewhat by pragmatic concerns, this combination of absolutism and power has implications for both America's friends and enemies. It means that the United States can be as quick to demonize moral opponents as it is capable of destroying them. We have therefore identified another implicit manifestation of Puritanism in contemporary American culture.

IMPLICIT PURITANISM IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

As noted earlier, America is the only major Protestant country that has not secularized. This is critically important because, as research on implicit social cognition has demonstrated, the prevailing attitudes of the broader society powerfully influence the feelings, judgments, and actions of each and every member of that society (Dijksterhaus & Bargh, 2001; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Prentice & Miller, 1996; Rudman, 2004). Even individuals who do not consciously endorse prevailing attitudes nonetheless internalize them at an implicit, intuitive level.

This leads to the prediction that contemporary Americans should exhibit implicit responses surprisingly similar to those of the early colonists. In addition, non-Protestant and less religious Americans should show implicit reactions similar to those of devout Protestants. In contrast, members of other cultures should not exhibit implicit Puritanism—either because their culture is not historically Protestant, or because it was at one time but has since become predominantly secular. Our recent research has tested this hypothesis regarding beliefs about work as a means of divine salvation, as well as the relationship between work and sexual morality.

Linking Work with Divine Salvation

Perhaps the most strikingly unique aspect of traditional Protestant beliefs is the explicit link made between work and divine salvation. Calvin, most notably, believed that material success revealed that the individual was among God's chosen. Although Protestants eventually did away with Calvin's doctrine of predestination, his emphasis on work as a source of divine salvation remained. Unlike other religions, which typically frowned on the accumulation of personal wealth, Protestantism actively encouraged it. The Protestant work ethic made an important contribution to the economic success of Northwestern Europe and the United States (Landes, 1998).

Whereas members of other cultures—most notably, East Asian cultures—have likewise developed a strong work ethic, it is typically a secular one. For example, the famed Japanese work ethic was and is based on collectivistic nationalism and family responsibility, not religion (Fukuyama, 1995; Landes, 1998). During the Tokugawa period, the Japanese people lacked a strong national identity. The imperial state tried to both increase patriotism and link it to work (Landes, 1998, 2000; Sanchez-Burks, 2002). One 1930s Japanese textbook advised, "The easiest way to practice one's patriotism [is to] discipline oneself in daily life, help keep good order in one's family, and fully discharge one's responsibility on the job" (as quoted in Landes, 2000, p. 10).

The unique Protestant link between work and divinity, coupled with contemporary America's unusual status as a devoutly religious Protestant country, leads to the prediction that Americans—but not members of other cultures—should implicitly associate work with divine salvation. To test this hypothesis empirically, Uhlmann, Poehlman, and Bargh (2007a; Experiment 3) implicitly primed American, Canadian, Italian, and German participants with words related to salvation (i.e., *divine*, *heaven*) using a sentence unscrambling task (Srull & Wyer, 1979). Other participants were primed with nonreligious words pretested to be equivalent in valence. Subsequently, all participants completed a task requiring them to solve anagrams. As expected, American participants primed with salvation subsequently worked harder on the anagram task, as evidenced by the number of anagrams they solved. Also consistent with expectations, Canadian, Italian, and German participants did not respond to salvation primes by working harder. Importantly, follow-up questions employing the funneled debriefing technique (Bargh & Chartrand, 2000) suggested that participants were not consciously aware of the influence of the primes. We interpret these results as reflective of implicit Puritanism in American moral cognition.

Further consistent with research on implicit social cognition, non-Protestant and less religious Americans were just as likely to work harder

in response to the salvation primes as were devout Protestants. (Indeed, only 15 of the 109 American participants in this particular study were Protestants, and the observed effects remained significant when the data from Protestant participants were removed.) This mirrors earlier work on implicit stereotypes and prejudice, which found that both consciously prejudiced and egalitarian individuals harbor implicit biases against Black Americans and other low-status groups (Greenwald et al., 1998). Automatic associations (e.g., between Black Americans and criminality, between work and divine salvation) are picked up from the environment and implicitly guide judgments and behaviors. This occurs because associations are readily learned from and implicitly activated by the surrounding environment (Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Rudman, 2004; Sperber, 1985). Dominant cultural values even influence individuals who consciously reject them (Banaji, 2001; Rudman, 2004). As a result, non-Protestant and less religious Americans exhibit implicit responses similar to those of devout Protestants.

An Implicit Link Between Protestant Work Values and Sexual Morality

Although many other countries—often economically underdeveloped ones, as it happens—share traditional attitudes regarding sexuality with the United States, American culture's implicit link between work and divine salvation is potentially unique. Because Americans link both sex and work to divinity, sex and work morality should likewise be linked as part of an overarching American ethos.

This hypothesis is derived from principles of cognitive balance (Greenwald et al., 2002; Heider, 1958). Heider's (1958) Balance Theory proposed that attitudes toward multiple target objects shift to remain consistent with each other. For example, if Larry likes Sue, and Sue likes folk music, Larry's attitudes toward folk music should shift in a positive direction to remain consistent (i.e., achieve balance). As Greenwald and his colleagues (2002) have shown using the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald et al., 1998), implicit cognitions obey the principles of cognitive balance. For instance, if a woman implicitly associates herself with the category Female, and the category Female with Humanities (as opposed to Math), she is likely to associate herself with the category Humanities rather than Math (Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002). To the extent that Americans associate sexual morality with divinity (an association shared with most other cultures), and work with divinity (an association that may be uniquely American), they should associate sexual morality and work morality with each other. If so, then priming work morality should implicitly activate sexual morality, and vice versa.

To examine this possibility, Uhlmann, Poehlman, and Bargh (2007b; Experiment 2) recruited a sample of bicultural Asian-American participants. Asian cultures are known for having conservative attitudes toward both work and sex, yet do not connect both sex *and* work to divine salvation. This makes them ideal for a conservative test of the hypothesis that American culture uniquely links work and sex morality. First, participants' Asian versus American identity was made salient using questions like "What is your favorite Asian food?" Next, they were primed with either work or neutral concepts using a sentence unscrambling task. Finally, participants reported their positions on a number of political issues. Mixed in among filler scenarios (e.g., the debate regarding hurricane relief) were scenarios designed to assess traditional attitudes toward sexuality. The first scenario dealt with a school principal who had canceled the annual prom because of sexually charged dancing the year before. A second scenario involved a debate over whether a stricter school dress code should be instituted to do away with sexually revealing clothing. As expected, priming traditional work values led Asian-American participants to endorse traditional values regarding sex, but only when they were first led to think of themselves as Americans. Although there was a sizable and statistically significant difference between the work and neutral prime conditions in the American identity condition, the work prime had no effect on sex values in the Asian identity condition. This experiment was a conservative test of our hypothesis because participants were, after all, Americans, and yet only displayed an implicit link between sex and work values when their American identity was made salient.

Uhlmann and colleagues (2007b, Experiment 1) further investigated whether the link between Protestant work values and sexual morality in American moral cognition is bidirectional. In other words, would priming sexual values activate Protestant work values (just as priming work values had activated sex values in the previously described experiment)? We focused on values regarding conspicuous consumption, which is strongly linked to the Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1904/1958). Traditionally, American social norms have censured the public consumption of hedonic goods (Fisher, 1989). American students and French participants were recruited for the experiment. For some participants, traditional values regarding sex were subtly activated by having them read about a school that had recently instituted a more conservative dress code. Participants in the control condition read a similar article on an innocuous topic. Next, in an ostensibly unrelated task, participants rated the attractiveness of consumer products that were either utilitarian (e.g., vacuum cleaner, Timex watch) or hedonic (e.g., hot tub, Rolls-Royce), and either publicly consumed (e.g., Timex watch, Rolls-Royce) or privately

consumed (e.g., vacuum cleaner, hot tub). As expected, American participants primed with traditional sex values subsequently rated publicly consumed hedonic products as unattractive. There was no evidence of such an interaction when it came to French participants' ratings of the consumer products.

The implicit link between American work and sex morality was further explored using a memory error paradigm borrowed from Barrett and Keil (1996). Participants read vignettes about target persons who violated or upheld a traditional American value (Uhlmann et al., 2007b, Experiment 3). For instance, in one of the vignettes, participants read about Julia, a recent college graduate who lived with her parents and refused to get a job. Ambiguous information about Julia's sexual values was further provided—specifically, she had spent the night at a guy's house after a recent party he hosted. After completing a filler task, participants' memory was tested. As expected, American participants who read about a target person who violated traditional work values falsely remembered the target as violating traditional sex values, and vice versa. For example, they falsely remembered Julia as having had sex with the host of the party, even though that was not explicitly stated. These effects were not only statistically significant, but large (average $d = .84$). A comparison sample of Chinese participants evidenced no such pattern of memory errors.

Once again, non-Protestant and less religious Americans were just as likely to show the observed effects as were devout Protestants. This is again consistent with prior work on implicit social cognition indicating that the surrounding environment, and especially the cultural context, can influence judgments and behaviors independently of conscious endorsement (Banaji, 2001; Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Rudman, 2004).

In sum, both priming (Bargh et al., 1996) and memory error paradigms (Barrett & Keil, 1996) suggest that work and sex morality are linked together as part of an overarching American ethos. This ethos is rooted in America's heritage as a Puritan-Protestant nation and its current status as the only major Protestant nation that has not secularized. It also reflects the profound influence of culture on implicit feelings, judgments, and behaviors. Thus, contemporary Americans exhibit implicit responses that can be surprisingly consistent with those of their deeply religious forebears.³ We have therefore

³ Importantly, these effects were not limited to Americans from New England. Our samples of American adults were just as often from outside of New England (e.g., Georgia in the case of the Asian-American identity study) as from within it. In addition, the vast majority of American college student participants were freshmen and sophomores at Yale University, who come from all over the country.

again identified manifestations of Puritanism in contemporary American moral cognition, and provided evidence that their influence is implicit. Still, much has changed in American culture since the time of the early settlers, leading to a certain degree of a tension between traditional moral intuitions and contemporary social norms. It is to this tension that we now turn.

AMERICAN AMBIVALENCE

An obvious contrast can be made between traditional Puritan-Protestant values and certain contemporary American social norms. One has only to turn on a television to encounter evidence that America's religious heritage is losing some of its grip on popular culture. The empirical evidence suggests this change in American values has been somewhat exaggerated (Baker, 2005). Notably, cognitive biases lead people to perceive society as constantly devolving (Eibach, Libby, & Gilovich, 2003). Moreover, popular media designed to shock and titillate may not always reflect the average American's explicit moral values.

At the same time, it seems obvious that substantial changes in American values and norms regarding hedonism have occurred. Puritan-Protestant values regarding consumption and frugality began to be replaced by pro-consumption values in the 1920s (Henretta, Brody, Ware, & Johnson, 2000). Contemporary America is marked by a proclivity for excess (e.g., big houses, cars, and meals) and unparalleled mass consumption (Cohen, 2002; Schlosser, 2001). A typical American meal today is certainly a far cry from the joylessly nutritious food of the New England Puritans (Fisher, 1989; Schlosser, 2001). Americans' orientation toward hedonism appears ambivalent, as illustrated by the recent uproar when a television actress appeared in a sexually suggestive commercial for Monday night football. The commercial caused much consternation. But it was later revealed that those parts of the country that accounted for the majority of complaints were also the areas in which ratings for her television show rose most sharply.

Research on implicit social cognition suggests that the influence of traditional values should be weakest at a deliberative, explicit level, and strongest at an implicit, intuitive level (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Rudman, 2004). Accordingly, we would expect that even Americans who explicitly endorse the pursuit of pleasure implicitly censure individuals who violate Puritan-Protestant values. This may lead to a degree of implicit-explicit ambivalence among contemporary Americans.

Uhlmann and colleagues (2007a) carried out several experimental tests of this hypothesis. In one study (Uhlmann et al., 2007a; Experiment 2), American participants were implicitly primed with either words related to

deliberation, intuition, or neutral concepts. These primes were designed to put participants in either a deliberative, intuitive, or neutral mindset. Next, in an ostensibly unrelated task, participants read about a young woman who had just informed her boyfriend she was either a virgin or sexually promiscuous. Participants in the intuition and neutral prime conditions reported much less respect for the promiscuous woman than the virgin. This bias was significantly reduced in the deliberation condition. Presumably, participants in a deliberative mindset were more likely to act based on their explicitly endorsed beliefs, and therefore less likely to judge in accord with traditional Puritan-Protestant intuitions.

In an additional study (Uhlmann et al., 2007a; supplemental study), American participants read about two potato peelers who recently purchased a winning lottery ticket together. The first potato peeler retired young, while the second continued to work peeling potatoes even though he was now a millionaire. Participants were asked to provide both their intuitive gut feelings toward the targets and their more deliberative judgments. Gut feelings toward the potato-peeling millionaire were significantly more positive than toward the early retiree. Yet, when providing deliberative judgments, participants viewed the two potato peelers as morally equivalent individuals. Taken together, these studies provide evidence that Americans exhibit—and perhaps also subjectively experience—a degree of conflict between their implicit and explicit moral values.

CONCLUSION

The unique cultural history of the United States has continuing implications for present-day social cognition. As we have argued throughout this chapter, this Puritan-Protestant heritage continues to implicitly shape the feelings, judgments, and behaviors of contemporary Americans. More so than even members of other Western countries, Americans maintain a conviction in individual merit. This stems from both the Protestant emphasis on an individual covenant with God and the Calvinist principle of earthly reward and punishment. At the same time, while wealth and democracy have given rise to secular values in other developed countries, Americans remain both deeply traditional in their moral values and absolutist regarding those values. Finally, as a consequence of living in the only major Protestant country that has not secularized, Americans are truly exceptional in certain implicit cognitions, for example in automatically linking hard work with divine salvation.

Consistent with prior theory and research on varieties of implicit social cognition (Bargh, 1994; Gawronski et al., 1996; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995),

different aspects of the American creed are “implicit” to varying degrees. The principle of individual merit is often consciously endorsed, but can also be implicitly primed and influence social judgments outside of conscious awareness. And, although Americans are aware of their absolutist view of morality, they are likely unaware that this is a culturally specific perspective on morality, implicitly shaped by the nation’s historic religiosity. It is empirically possible that certain aspects of implicit Puritanism—for example, the aforementioned link between work and salvation—are not accessible to conscious introspection at all. (It seems doubtful that even the most hardcore Calvinist would have consciously endorsed the idea that working hard on an anagram task would help her get into heaven!) But the unmistakable pattern is that Americans’ less deliberative, controlled, effortful, intentional, and conscious—i.e., “implicit”—cognitions are especially likely to reflect traditional Puritan-Protestant morality.

Perhaps most strikingly, non-Protestant and less religious Americans were just as likely as devout Protestants to exhibit implicit Puritanism. It is exposure to American culture, and not necessarily devotion to a particular religion, that underlies these phenomena. Although somewhat surprising, this is consistent with earlier work on the epidemiology of cultural beliefs (Blackmore, 1999; Sperber, 1985), the implicit use of cultural stereotypes by consciously egalitarian individuals (Banaji, 2001; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Rudman, 2004), and data from the World Values Survey and other sources indicating that national culture explains dramatically more variability in moral values than personal religion does (Baker, 2005; Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). For example, the values of German Catholics are more similar to those of German Protestants than they are to French and Italian Catholics (Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). In general, the values of people from Protestant cultures hang together, and the values of people from Catholic cultures hang together, much more so than people of the Catholic religion think alike and people of the Protestant religion think alike.

At the same time, there are important differences between American Protestants and non-Protestants in domains like implicit workplace norms (Sanchez-Burks, 2002, 2005). Thus, the present research by no means implies that there are no differences in the judgments of American Protestants and non-Protestants. What it does show is that, just as one *does not have to be* consciously prejudiced to engage in implicit racial stereotyping, one *does not have to be* an American Protestant to exhibit implicit responses consistent with traditional Puritan-Protestant values. One may only have to be an American.

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