

# Sin and Implicit Bias

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that implicit bias is a form of sin, characterized most fundamentally as an orientation that we may not have direct access to or control over, but that can lead us to act in violation of God's command. After noting similarities between certain strategies proposed by experimental psychologists for overcoming implicit biases and certain disciplines developed by Christians on the path to sanctification, I suggest some ways in which the Church might offer its resources to a society struggling to overcome bias and discrimination, and ways in which its teaching and ministry might be informed by the latest research on implicit bias.

On July 18 of 2016, an autistic man wandered from his care facility in North Miami, and his behavioral therapist, a black man named Charles Kinsey, went to retrieve him. A woman observing them called 9-1-1 and reported that the autistic man looked mentally ill and might have a gun. Another observer began filming the scene when three police officers arrived. In the video, Kinsey can be seen lying on his back with his hands in the air, trying to talk his patient into doing the same, telling the officers that he works in a group home, and saying, "All he has is a toy truck in his hand. A toy truck... That's all it is. There is no need for guns." One of the officers, Jonathan Aledda, shot Kinsey in the leg. Kinsey was then handcuffed, and, according to his lawyer, left bleeding on the pavement for 20 minutes. Kinsey reported that when he asked Aledda why he had shot him, the officer answered, "I don't know." In a statement released later, Aledda said, "I took this job to save lives and help people... I did what I had to do in a split second to accomplish that and hate to hear others paint me into something I am not" (Alvarado 2016).

What others have painted him as, is, we might suppose, a kind of racist—the kind who would see a black man lying on the sidewalk with his hands in the air as a threat. Of course, one cannot prove in an individual case like this that race was a motivating factor in the shooting<sup>1</sup>; Aledda later claimed he was trying to *protect*

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, one study conducted in Spokane, WA from 2012 to 2013 found that police officers "were slower to shoot armed Black suspects than armed White suspects, and... were less likely to shoot unarmed Black suspects than unarmed White suspects." However, the researchers theorized that the hesitancy of the officers (who had high measures of implicit bias against black Americans) to shoot black Americans was due to "reverse racism," "rooted in people's concerns about the social and legal consequences of shooting a member of a historically oppressed racial group... paired with the awareness of media backlash that follows an officer shooting a minority suspect" (James, James, and Vila, 2016).

Kinsey from the autistic man, who he thought was armed (Alvarado 2016). However, there is mounting evidence that in the US, police officers are more likely to use force against blacks than whites in similar circumstances (Fryer, 2016)—evidence that strongly suggests that race often *does* play a role in officers' behavior.

And yet, evidence *also* suggests that an officer whose behavior is so affected by race may not be consciously racist at all; indeed, he may be as Aleda describes himself: someone who took his job to save lives and help others—someone personally committed to equality and justice for all. Why, then, are such officers more likely to use force against blacks than whites?

One theory that has recently come to the fore in explanations of police officers' use of excessive force involves a phenomenon called "implicit bias." Implicit biases are "evaluations of social groups that are largely outside of conscious awareness or control" (Brownstein and Saul 2016). As Michael Brownstein and Jennifer Saul explain, these biases are thought to involve associations between social groups (such as black Americans) and concepts (such as violence), and result at least in part from stereotypes that are common in the culture of those who hold them. One measure of implicit bias is the Implicit Association Test, which requires a subject to "sort words or pictures into categories as fast as possible while making as few errors as possible" (Brownstein and Saul 2016, 4). For instance, a subject may be presented with an image of a face—either white or black—and asked to sort the image to the left, under the word "white," or to the right, under the word "black," while below each color word is the word "good" or "bad." Most white subjects (more than 70%) are quicker and better at the task when the word "white" is paired with "good" and "black" with "bad" than the other way around. Michael Brownstein and Jennifer Saul write, "Researchers consider this to represent an 'implicit preference' for white faces over black faces" (2016, 5-6). Surprisingly, such preferences are found not only among those who explicitly disavow racial prejudices and devote their lives to counteracting them, but also among those who are "targeted" by them: roughly 40% of blacks show an implicit preference for white faces over black faces (Brownstein and Saul 2016, 6). (This may explain why some *black* police officers use greater force against blacks as well.)

And there is further evidence that these preferences, or biases, do affect social behavior. In one study involving a computer simulation, participants have been found "more likely to shoot an unarmed black man... than an unarmed white man" (Brownstein and Saul 2016, 2). Indeed, the effects of implicit bias may be quite pervasive, affecting everything from "micro-behavior" such as eye contact and ease at conversing, to hiring and promotion decisions, to medical diagnosis and treatment (Brownstein 2016), and so serve to justify the sense many black Americans have that—in the words of the Black Lives Matter movement—there is "virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society" (About the Black Lives Matter Network, 2016).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, as Neil Levy notes, implicit bias may not be as pervasive as the IAT suggests, or at least it might not play as significant a role in explaining behavior as researchers think, since "*explicit* bias may be more common than we tend to think" (2015, 73)—or than those taking the test are willing to admit. While Levy further cautions against attributing too much behavior to implicit bias since "the range of cases in which it makes a decisive difference is limited," he acknowledges that such cases—those in which "the considerations of which the person is conscious are relatively evenly poised," as well as

One question being raised by the more philosophically inclined researchers on implicit bias is whether those who hold these biases and whose actions are affected by them are morally responsible, for the biases themselves or for the affected actions. Arguments have been offered on both sides, but my guess is that the answer will not be a simple “yes” or “no” to either question, since whether an individual is responsible for a particular attitude or for the behavior caused by that attitude would seem to depend on whether she was consciously aware of the attitude, and whether the formation or suspension of that attitude was under her control, as well as, in the case of behavior, whether she had control over the effects of the attitude; and both awareness and control seem to come in degrees.<sup>3</sup> Given the characterization of implicit biases just discussed, though, as well as the research showing how difficult they are to counteract, I would hazard to say that implicit biases and the actions they affect are not *paradigm* loci of responsibility.

Rather than wade into the murky waters of moral responsibility here, however, I propose that we think of implicit bias under the category of *sin*. Some Christian philosophers and theologians have argued that sin is not a moral category at all. Marilyn McCord Adams, for instance, contends that “sin” is fundamentally not a moral but a *theological* notion, since it signifies “some sort of impropriety in the relationship between created persons and God” (2009, 255) and since the relationship between God and creatures is not a moral one. While I do not want to deny that God and humans may have a moral relationship, and so that sin might also be a moral category, I appreciate Adams’s point that “the Biblical catalog of sin” includes much that we do not freely choose, and for which we would not seem to be fully responsible: the list includes “not only (i) conscious voluntary actions, but also (ii) emotions (e.g., anger) and cognitive states (e.g., belief) not within our (direct) voluntary control, (iii) dispositions, habits, inclinations that resist the normative ordering of the self, and (iv) states or conditions of uncleanness (e.g., the abominations of Leviticus)” (2009, 255).

Considering such biblical data, I think it is helpful to distinguish two ways we might conceive of sin. First, there are what we might call “discrete sins”<sup>4</sup>—those decisions we make or actions we take that manifest a particular kind of will—perhaps best characterized as disobedient or in violation of God’s command. And second, there is a state of being or orientation *toward* such disobedience which, Ian McFarland explains, is “prior to any decision of the will,” but which “causes” or “conditions” our sinful acts of will (2007, 152, 154). McFarland characterizes *original sin* as such a state of being, though he notes that among western churches this phrase refers more particularly to “the first sin of Adam” as well as “the congenital sinfulness inherited by Adam’s posterity as a consequence of his primordial transgression” (2007, 141). The idea that human sinfulness is inherited as a consequence of some “primordial

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high-pressure situations which reduce “opportunities for effortful control,” are common enough in “situations that matter” to be concerning (2015, 73, 74).

<sup>3</sup> Others who have defended the idea that responsibility comes in degrees include Coates and Swenson (2013) and Nelkin (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this terminology.

transgression” is controversial, and here I do not assume a particular historical origin of our orientation toward disobedience, but only that we have such an orientation.

While the biblical descriptions of (and prescriptions about) sin are many and varied, when we focus on passages that speak of sin as an orientation or state of being, we see that sin is something that has *dominion over* human beings, something that “puts the will... in bondage,” as McFarland says (2007, 152). One finds this emphasis especially in Paul’s writings, such as his letter to the Romans. Speaking from his own experience, Paul says in chapter 7 (14-23):

... I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.... Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.<sup>5</sup>

It bears noting that Paul’s picture of sin as something that overpowers and enslaves seems to be in tension with his insistence that the infliction of divine wrath on sinners is entirely justified (cf. Romans 3:5-6, 9:14-24). I think Paul was a kind of compatibilist about the lack of ability to do otherwise and moral responsibility, but those who have strong incompatibilist intuitions face a choice when confronted with such passages: either accept Paul’s suggestion that sin is something for which we are ultimately responsible (in Galen Strawson’s “heaven and hell” sense of responsibility) and for which we deserve punishment, and take his talk of the unavoidability of sin as hyperbole, *or* take his emphasis on the unavoidability of sin quite literally, and interpret his discussion of divine wrath in light of the larger biblical corpus—including Paul’s own writings—that highlight God’s compassion and mercy.

I am inclined to go the latter route, understanding sin as a state of being in which we find ourselves before we are fully formed as rational and responsible agents. I find very plausible the analysis of original sin offered by Thomas Talbott, who contends that the environment in which we develop as persons, in combination with our natural-born instincts, “virtually guarantees” that we will sin, in the sense of acting “in egocentric ways” and in disobedience to divine command (2008, 306). On the basis of this view of human nature, Talbott insists, with the Psalmist, “that the Lord ‘does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.’ Why not? ‘Because he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are but dust’” (2008, 311).<sup>6</sup> Adams paints a similar picture of human development, writing:

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<sup>5</sup> All biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV.

<sup>6</sup> Derk Pereboom (2009) also argues for universalism, citing the following passages from the Pauline letters: Romans 5:18 and 11:32, 1 Corinthians 15:22, and Colossians 1:19-20. So does Lynn Rudder Baker (2003), citing 1 Timothy 2:4.

We... start life ignorant, weak, and helpless, psychologically so lacking in a self-concept as to be incapable of choice. We learn to... become people capable of choice only with difficulty over a long period of time and under the extensive influence of other non-ideal choosers. Further, human development is the interactive product of human nature and its environment, and from early on we humans are confronted with problems that we cannot adequately grasp or cope with, and in response to which we mount (without fully conscious calculation) inefficient adaptational strategies. Yet the human psyche is habit-forming in such a way that these reactive patterns, based as they are on a child's inaccurate view of the world and strategic options, become entrenched in the individual's personality.... Having begun thus immature, we arrive at *adulthood* in a state of *impaired freedom*, as our childhood adaptational strategies continue to distort our perceptions and behavior. (1998, 231-232)

Of course, if freedom and responsibility come in degrees, as I have already suggested, then the imperfect freedom we develop may leave room for some degree of responsibility for our actions, making blame and punishment of each other appropriate—perhaps justified in part by considerations of our own moral reform as well as the consequences of blame and punishment for the rest of society.<sup>7</sup> But such blame and punishment will no doubt be tempered by significant sympathy for fellow humans who share our sinful condition, and prompt us to forgive those who trespass against us, as we, too, need to be forgiven.

In any case—to set aside (again) the issue of moral responsibility—Paul is insistent that our sin is not only something we cannot understand and do not, in some sense, will, but (perhaps because of this) is something from which we cannot free ourselves, but from which we need liberation. Paul's letter to the Romans continues: "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (7:24-25)

Now if we take some recent cases of police officers' use of excessive force against black Americans as cases in which implicit bias was at play, the descriptions of these cases fit well with Paul's characterization of sin—both phenomenologically (what it feels like, "from the inside"), and realistically (what is going on, "behind the scenes").<sup>8</sup> First, to return to the example with which we started: Jonathan Aledda, the

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<sup>7</sup> While Pereboom considers himself a free will skeptic and denies "ultimate desert" responsibility, he endorses "an answerability notion of moral responsibility that invokes three non-desert involving and forward-looking moral desiderata: protection of potential victims, reconciliation in personal relationships and with the moral community, and reform and formation of moral character" (2016). I believe that such considerations can justify certain of our practices of blaming and punishing each other (though likely not others).

<sup>8</sup> One question raised by an anonymous reviewer, regarding the categorization of implicit bias as sin, is whether sin can come in degrees, since implicit bias evidently can. I think the answer to this question depends on the kind of sin we are talking about. As McFarland emphasizes, *original sin* "cannot be measured on an axiological scale that allows for comparative judgments of more and less: all stand equally guilty" (though, he insists, guilt should not be equated with blameworthiness) (2007, 152). This suggests that, while implicit bias shares several features with original sin—as most fundamentally

officer who shot Charles Kinsey, seemed puzzled by his own behavior, as if some alien force had caused him to act against his consciously held values. Recall that when asked by Kinsey why Aledda had shot him, Aledda replied, “I don’t know.” Indeed, Aledda later insisted on what seems a plausible story: that he had good intentions—not to harm, but to help; that he did not (consciously, at least) view blacks as in any way inferior to whites, but that he was committed to egalitarian ideals, and that this commitment had motivated him to enter his line of work. One can almost imagine him uttering Paul’s famous words, as he considered what moved him to shoot an innocent man: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” This, I submit, is the phenomenology of behavior motivated by implicit bias.

And according to the latest research, the reality is we cannot overcome implicit biases directly on our own, by intentional efforts to suppress them. Such efforts may actually cause the biases to “rebound,” meaning that their effects on our behavior are *strengthened* as a result (Brownstein, 2016). Who, indeed, will save us from this wretched state?<sup>9</sup>

In fact, there seem to be some ways to mitigate the effects of implicit bias on behavior, and to weaken or eradicate the biases themselves. Research on this matter is still in its infancy, but it looks like the proposed mitigation strategies parallel those recommended by and for Christians in their struggle against sin. So let me begin with an overview of what I take to be the Christian response to sin, before going on to highlight similarities in the literature on implicit bias and to propose further practices, based on Christian spiritual teaching, for combating racial bias. As will be seen, my focus is not on what we should do about *them*—that is, those police officers who seem motivated by racial bias to use excessive force against black Americans—but on what we should do about *ourselves*, since if the research is right, many of us probably hold similar biases, which lead us to act in discriminatory ways without our even realizing it.

According to Christian teaching, the first step a person can take in her struggle against sin, and so on the path to sanctification, is to acknowledge her sinful condition. McFarland writes:

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a state of being (in the case of implicit bias, a disposition to make certain associations or evaluations, rather than a discrete act of will) and as something for which (many would argue) we are not fully responsible, it is not itself to be identified with original sin. McFarland goes on to note that while original sin does *not* come in degrees, what he calls “actual sins” *can* be compared against each other on an “axiological scale.” Both implicit biases themselves, and the behaviors motivated by them, share this in common with “actual sins,” on McFarland’s characterization.

<sup>9</sup> Another question raised by the reviewer regards the concept atonement—or the divine forgiveness of sin and reconciliation between humanity and God that is supposed to be accomplished through Christ’s death and resurrection. If implicit bias is characterized as sin, then does the atonement “set right” societal racism? While I do not have a well-worked out answer to this question, I think the question itself is not unique to the sin of implicit bias, since the connection between the atonement and humans’ relationships with each other is at issue in all cases of sin that involve injury or offense to one’s fellow humans. One possibility is that the atonement *makes possible* or *begins* the process of our sanctification, and, as outlined below, this process involves our making amends for past wrongs and achieving reconciliation with each other.

To affirm the doctrine of original sin is to confess that one's own sinfulness conditions one's every act. It is therefore not directly perceptible, but is known only in its being overcome. This side of glory, however, this overcoming remains in process and is never definitive, which means that the Christian must ever confess herself a sinner.... If this confession is not to be a mere formality, it must be shaped by a commitment to find out the hidden depths of one's own sin in ongoing dialogue with those whose suffering provides the necessary reference point both for naming sin and for correcting one's participation in it. (2007, 156-157)

A few things are noteworthy about this passage. First, McFarland says, the orientation to sin is not something that is "directly perceptible." What I take him to mean here is, at least, that we cannot by introspection alone become aware of all of the beliefs, desires, and other mental states that form this orientation. There is a kind of "hidden depth" to sin that may only be revealed in overt behavior. Second, and relatedly, our confession of sin must be both tentative and ongoing, as we uncover more and more of this hidden side of ourselves by interacting with others who may be the victims of our sinful ways.

Adams also writes about the process of sanctification, or "[t]he path to Christian maturity," which she describes as involving "a series of steps in 'taking responsibility' for things... that were not (at least to a large extent) products of our fully informed, well-considered conscious rational choice," including "(a) facing the truth about oneself, one's deeply entrenched adaptational strategies, one's attitudes and actions, (b) 'owning' that however one may have got that way these are one's own actions and that this is in fact the person one has become, and (c) choosing 'out of' or 'against' these patterns" (1998, 233-234). It is important to emphasize, as Adams does, that the confession of sin involves acknowledging that what might seem like an alien force governing our behavior, leading us to act against our most deeply-held values and personal commitments, is really a part of us; this is what "taking responsibility," in the first place, amounts to.

Another point to highlight, in both McFarland and Adams' writing, is that the human response to sin is to be an active process; McFarland speaks of "finding out" the hidden depths of our sin, while Adams counsels us to "choose 'out of' or 'against'" our sinful patterns of behavior. Of course, the process of sanctification is a God-initiated, -sustained, and -completed one. But Paul counsels us to "work out [our] salvation" as God is "at work in" us (Philippians 2:12). What this means is that after coming to see, through the grace of Christ, the depths of our sinfulness, we do not "continue in sin so that grace may abound" ("By no means!") (Romans 6:1-2); nor do we sit back and wait, as it were, for God to work in us. Rather, we respond to the divine promptings as best we can, actively engaging in the process of "finding out" and "choosing against" in which the Spirit is leading us.

The various traditions within the Christian faith have emphasized different disciplines as central to this process, but given my interest in implicit bias, I will focus here on just one, which may be especially relevant: the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. These "exercises" are a set of prayers and meditations which Ignatius

described as aimed at the “conquest of self,” and which he wrote for use under the guidance of an experienced spiritual director. Ignatius considered the psychological influences that affect our behavior to be “spirits” and developed a system for discerning the good ones, which lead to God, from bad ones, which lead to sin. On his view, good spirits can produce positive emotions and attitudes like love, joy, and peace, but also desolation (in order to induce positive changes of behavior), while evil spirits can produce confusion and doubt, but also contentment (to resist such changes). Thus the exercises are focused on examining one’s own psyche, interpreting one’s daily behavior for signs of the spirits, as well as cultivating one’s desires and passions so that they are in line with the will of Christ.

Part of this cultivation involves imaginative reading of biblical stories, in which the reader places herself within the scenes, experiencing for herself the events therein. For instance, in one meditation the subject is instructed to “form a mental image” of the Nativity, saying to herself: “I will become a poor, miserable, and unworthy slave looking upon [the holy family], contemplating them, and ministering to their needs, as though I were present there”; she then observes and considers “the journey and the suffering which they undergo in order that our Lord might be born in extreme poverty, and after so many labors; after hunger and thirst, heat and cold, insults and injuries, He might die on the cross, and all for me” (1964, 70-71).

An interesting feature of this sort of meditation is that it is aimed at developing in the subject such attitudes as sorrow for one’s sins and love for Christ—attitudes that may affect the subject’s subsequent behavior, as she aims to do Christ’s will and follow in his lead; and yet, the meditations do not focus the subject’s attention on her behavior or even on her attitudes, but simply on the biblical stories. This suggests that the imaginative reading of those stories, and the intellectual insights and emotional responses that the reading evokes, may effect changes in a person’s attitudes and behavior in ways she need not consciously or directly control.

The Christian response to sin, as summarized by McFarland and Adams and outlined in Ignatius’s spiritual exercises, seem in some ways to parallel the strategies contemporary psychologists propose for overcoming implicit bias. Patricia Devine explains that the process involves several steps: (1) “Becoming *aware* of one’s implicit bias,” (2) “Being *concerned* about the consequences of the bias,” and (3) “Learning to *replace* the biased response with non-prejudiced responses—ones that more closely match the values people consciously believe that they hold” (Law 2011). Devine conducted a study in which one group of non-black college students “learned about implicit bias and how it perpetuates discrimination,” and were taught strategies to combat bias, such as “empathizing with and imagining people as the opposite of their stereotypes.” They were then compared with a control group who started out with equivalent measures of implicit bias, but who were not given any educational intervention. After four weeks, the experimental group “showed a significant reduction” in their implicit bias over the control group; this difference “persisted through week eight” (Law 2011). In another study, Calvin Lai and a team of researchers “held a research contest to experimentally compare interventions for reducing the expression of implicit racial prejudice” (2014). Of the seventeen different interventions they looked at, the most effective—called “Vivid Counterstereotypic Scenario”—“involved the participant as the subject of the story”

vividly imagining herself in a threatening situation in which she was assaulted by a white man, and then rescued by a black man (2014).

There is more to be said about strategies for combating implicit bias, but the parallels with Christian practice should already be apparent: the importance of *confession*, in the sense of recognizing oneself as harboring implicit bias, and so potentially acting in ways that perpetuate discrimination; *repentance*, in the sense of expressing concern for the consequences of one's bias; and *amendment of life*, in the sense of learning and practicing strategies that can change one's mind and behavior. The particular combination of strategies Lai and colleagues found to be most effective bears interesting similarities to Ignatius's exercises of reading Scripture, especially the emphasis on putting oneself in the scene and vividly imagining it from a first-person perspective. Devine's study, in which the participants were not only exposed to counter-stereotypical images of black people, but also taught to empathize with them—presumably by trying to take on *their* perspective—also finds a parallel in the Ignatian spiritual exercises. For instance, in one Ignatian meditation, the reader takes the perspective of the Holy Trinity, looking down on “the face of the earth,” seeing the plight of the people, and saying, “Let us work the redemption of mankind” (1964, 70); in another, one imagines Christ hanging on the cross and asks for “pain, tears, and suffering with Christ suffering” (1964, 56, 54).

Many Christians see the relationship between their religion and secular culture as one of conflicting worldviews and values<sup>10</sup>—and surely there is some truth to this view. But when it comes to the question of how to approach implicit racial biases that are pervasive in and detrimental to our society at large, I don't see a conflict.<sup>11</sup> Rather, it seems to me that ancient Christian spirituality and modern experimental psychology have much in common, and that the Church can both serve as a resource to society and also learn from those outside it who are engaged in research and work for reform. In conclusion I will sketch a few ways in which it might do so.

First, the Church can offer its resources, in the form of its rituals of confession, prayer, meditation, and the like, which are integral to the process of overcoming sin in general, and which can be tailored to focus particularly on the sins of bias and discrimination. We might take, as a model, the way in which churches have helped those struggling with alcoholism. Alcoholics Anonymous, after all, emerged from a movement that modeled itself after first-century Christianity (Cheever, 2004), and involves a 12-step process of recovery that embodies the principles of Christian teaching on sin and sanctification. (As summarized by the American Psychological

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<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, the 2016 call for papers for the Society of Christian Philosophers Midwest Regional Conference, which invited “philosophers to speak to the pressing social issues that face Christians, *especially matters on which Christians find themselves in conflict with other groups*” (emphasis added) <http://www.evangel.edu/scp/>. This paper was first drafted for that conference.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, I have focused on a few strands of the Christian tradition—an Augustinian conception of sin, as developed by McFarland, the Ignatian spiritual exercises, etc.—that emphasize *engagement* with the world in ways that aim to reveal and mitigate the hitherto unknown depths of one's sin. Other strands, which urge separation from the world, might find some of the recommendations below—such as more exposure to diversity—problematic. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.) But I take there to be a biblical mandate for such recommendations, as I make clear below.

Association, the process involves: “admitting that one cannot control one’s alcoholism,” “recognizing a higher power that can give strength,” “examining past errors with the help of a sponsor,” “making amends,” and “learning to live a new life with a new code of behavior” (VandenBos, 2007). The Church could similarly open its doors to those who would like to learn about, and work to overcome, implicit bias, perhaps inviting psychologists and other researchers with the most cutting-edge knowledge of the issue to teach and counsel alongside its priests and pastors. However, unlike in the case of AA, which serves a relatively small population within and outside of the Church, in the case of implicit bias the training offered by the Church would need to be undergone first by Church leaders themselves—since, as one anonymous reviewer has noted, for their teaching to be effective, priests and pastors must be aware of and have worked to overcome their *own* implicit biases. (To borrow language from this reviewer, education and reform is a “positive duty” of Church leaders and members, and not simply an issue of “potential resources that could be put to work.”)

Important in the Church’s efforts will be encouraging people not only to learn about implicit biases and adopt practices like prayer and meditation to counteract them, but also to *interact* with members of other racial groups, as such interactions, and efforts to “individuate” by “seeking specific information about members of other racial groups,” are also known to reduce implicit racial biases (Tropp and Godsil, 2015). Such efforts, starting with the attempt to better racially integrate our own churches, make sense in light of (and may be framed in terms of) the biblical images of renewed humanity, in which the categories of race and ethnicity no longer divide us (cf. Colossians 3:11 and Galatians 3:28).

The strategies to combat implicit bias just mentioned have critics, however, and the Church should pay heed to their criticisms as well. A team of researchers studying strategies aimed at “prejudice reduction” in South Africa found that such strategies may distract “from the main causes of, and solutions to” problems of racial discrimination, and may even exacerbate these problems by “diminish[ing] the extent to which social injustice is acknowledged, rejected, and challenged” (Dixon et al, 2013). They note that prejudice reduction typically involves the “reduction of the salience of intergroup boundaries,” and the “creation of ‘positive’ intergroup emotions such as liking and trust,” whereas collective action, which “strives to rupture the status quo” and bring systemic change to unjust social institutions, tends to involve a strengthening of intergroup boundaries and the intensification of feelings of anger and outrage, which increase group conflict (Dixon et al 2013, 245-246). The authors do not recommend abandoning attempts at prejudice reduction, which they acknowledge “may be crucial for producing change in some contexts,” but they caution against taking prejudice reduction to be the exclusive model of social change, particularly in societies “characterized by historically entrenched patterns of inequality” (Dixon et al 2013, 239). The Church would do well to attend to this point, too, and continue its prophetic role in raising consciousness of racial inequality, as well as supporting collective action groups like Black Lives Matter.

In this paper, I have summarized some research on implicit bias and proposed that we think of it as a form of sin, characterized most fundamentally not as an act but

as an orientation that we may not have direct access to or control over, but which can lead us to act against our “better selves” or consciously held values and commitments. I have also noted the similarities between the strategies proposed by experimental psychologists for overcoming implicit biases and the disciplines developed by Christians as steps on the path to sanctification. Finally, I have suggested some ways in which the Church might offer its resources to a society struggling to overcome bias and discrimination, and ways in which the Church’s teaching and ministry might be informed by the latest research on implicit bias. My proposals and suggestions may go against the grain of some contemporary Christian thinking, with its emphasis on conflict between religion and secular culture, but I think it is in the spirit of biblical teaching, both in its emphasis on the universality of our sinful condition, and on the ways in which the Spirit may be at work in the world.

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