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# Collective Experience: Race and Perceptions of Christian Suffering Amongst College Students

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Collective Experience: Race and Perceptions of Christian Suffering Amongst College  
Students

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## ABSTRACT

This research sought to examine the relationship between race and perspectives of Christian suffering amongst college students. A total of 1073 respondents participated in a mixed methods survey. Results indicate that race amongst college students is not as influential on perspectives of Christian suffering as predicted. There was, however, a significant relationship ( $F=11.09$ ) between race and college students' level of agreement with God's role of protection in suffering. Black students were most likely to agree that God protects Christians from suffering ( $\bar{x} = 2.97$ ), while White students were the least likely ( $\bar{x} = 2.47$ ). This data did not support the hypothesis that White students would be more likely than students of color to agree that God does protect Christians from suffering. However, further examination suggested that religious affiliation growing up likely has greater influence than race in shaping how students understand suffering in the Christian faith. This has implications for understanding the intersectionality of race and religion in modern contexts.

*Keywords:* Christian suffering, race, college students

### **Introduction**

Partaking in suffering has been part of the universal human experience since the beginning of time. History documents the countless stories of individuals, communities, ethnic groups', and religions' entanglement with the inevitable hardships of life. While these hardships can be largely different in their context, the desire to find a purpose amidst the pain tends to be a common thread. In specifically examining Christianity, followers often wrestle with why they must suffer. If God is good, why is there suffering present in the lives of his children? It is further noted that the nature and understanding of this suffering within the framework of Christianity can be compounded by a number of correlates, two of the most prominent being race and age of individuals.

Furthermore, a wide array of literature has sought to understand the role of collective experience that has characterized various social status such as race as well as the general intersectionality of race and the Christian faith (Pollack, 2003; Krause & Hayward, 2015). Other literature divulges the various aspects of faith amongst university students (Schindler & Hope, 2013; Dalessandro, 2016). However, few researchers, if any, have examined specifically the interaction between race and understandings of Christian suffering. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore this relationship between race and perspectives of Christian suffering amongst college students.

### **Review of Literature**

This literature review will seek to define Christian suffering, examine how the various denominations have viewed and experienced it, divulge the correlates that impact these perspectives, and understand how young adults specifically interact with suffering. However, it is important to note that the presented review is brief given the limited amount of information

available on the direct relationship between race and theological understandings of suffering as applied to a young adult context. Instead, this review sought to provide a foundation that will serve as the basis for adaptation and understanding.

### **Christian Suffering**

The concept of Christian suffering is one that poses great difficulty in defining. Suffering, outside of a religious framework, calls attention to the realities of experiencing the results of pain (Hollon, 1979). From the Christian believers' perspective, suffering is noted to be particularly difficult to define, as it cannot be completely understood; at the very least, conceptual understanding includes the very fact that ultimately it cannot be grasped (Jungel, 1988). Furthermore, the role of evil and suffering poses an uncomfortable contradiction, as it is noted that Christians believe God to be all good and all powerful, yet both physical and moral evil exist in tangible and seemingly unjustifiable ways in the world (Hollon, 1979). As suffering persists, it is noted to separate individuals further from each other, as well as create a loss of self-identity (Jungel, 1988). There is a fear of others pain that has infiltrated the Christian framework, where suddenly one is left alone in misunderstanding (Schmutzer, 2016; Jungel, 1988).

Yet, despite this, some assert that a certain level of pain and suffering are needed for the growth of human morals. Hollon (1979) noted that pain associated with a guilty conscience is one of the most direct ways to repentance and relief from anxiety for the Christian. However, in light of this, it becomes important to consider the notion of purpose and the idea of unwarranted versus warranted suffering that exists in the Christian belief framework. Hollon (1979) differentiates between the two with concepts of "non-gratuitous suffering" and "gratuitous suffering," the first being suffering necessary for spiritual growth, and the latter being suffering that is not necessary. The author further notes that non-gratuitous suffering has a clear purpose to

bring one to repentance or to allow one to identify spiritually with the pain of others. Jungel (1988), while not using the same terminology, largely agrees with Hollon's distinction, but further notes that warranted suffering has the potential to protect an individual from what would be considered even more painful suffering. From the Christian perspective, unwarranted and gratuitous suffering are noted to only find solutions in the suffering of Jesus Christ and the belief that God has the ultimate word (Hollon, 1979; Jungel, 1988).

### **How it Varies by Denomination**

Because suffering has been part of the Christian narrative since the time of Adam and Eve, it is important to consider how the concept of suffering varies among different denominations of the faith. While Judaism is not strictly a Christian denomination, it is still important to consider given the connection found in the writings of the Old Testament. Judaism has viewed suffering from changing perspectives. In ancient times, Jewish writers and theologians asserted that suffering was punishment for a person's evil behavior. It is explained as a problem of ethics and response, rather than that of simply existing (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). However, that understanding has changed over time in light of the Old Testament account of Job, which is noted to have displayed that suffering is not always linked to sin (Vitulo, 2014). Regardless of its perceived origin, suffering is not to be complacently accepted, but rather actively responded to (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). Modern Judeo-Christian's are noted to differ slightly in that their beliefs incorporate the realities of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ is what is noted to be the explanation for suffering, as being united with him in difficulty creates a deeper understanding of divine love and the greatest explanation for "why" (Vitulo, 2014).

Protestant and its subsect Evangelical Christians express similar views; they too place Christ at the center of the understanding of suffering. However, in this, the humility of Jesus is what is emphasized as necessary to imitate in hardship. The victory of God came through the humility of his son, just as the victory of God will come through the humility of the suffering believer, formulating a pattern for disciples of Christ (Myers, 2017; Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). Furthermore, it has been recognized that suffering is present in the life of Protestant and Evangelical Christians because of the opposition that exists towards God and his word, which Christians express obedience to. As a result of this, suffering is tied to blessings in this denominational framework, changing the emotion of it from fear to expectation; expectation of becoming more like Jesus Christ (Myers, 2017). In the realities of the Cross that forms the foundations of Christianity, God is said to have shown his goodness in suffering, reconciling human beings to himself (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). This provides the encouragement to endure in the current circumstances (Myers, 2017). Furthermore, it is noted that this human suffering is what reveals that somethings are not right as they are in the world, thus prompting individuals to search for God. Without this, there would seem to be no solution to the current human condition (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016).

More so than Judeo-Christians, Protestants, and Evangelicals, it is noted that the Catholic response to suffering goes much deeper than other denominations, shedding light on the profound need amongst humanity to make sense of suffering. Uniquely, Catholic teaching emphasizes the responsibility of human beings to fulfill their vocation of good deeds. However, just as Christ encountered suffering as he lived out his calling on Earth, those who follow him can expect the same (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). This is traced all the way to the consequences of the fall of Adam and noted to be an explanation as to why the purpose of suffering is not known.

Moreover, the Catholic tradition emphasizes a unity in suffering that is not expressed amongst other denominations: a unity between believers in the Church. There is greater solidarity that finds its roots in the nature of Christ's suffering, which was to redeem *all* sin (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). Therefore, Catholics are stated to be called to take on not just their own individual sufferings, but the sufferings of all. This helps to deepen the understanding of the redemption of the entire sinful humanity (Eberl, 2012).

### **Correlates of Christian Suffering**

Literature identifies other factors that have an impact on the way that Christian believers view suffering. Those correlates are discussed below.

#### **Race and Ethnicity**

As with various denominations in Christianity, different races and ethnicities express varying perspectives on suffering in Christianity. It is noted that African Americans are largely more religious than whites, placing a greater reliance on both the importance of church attendance and religious beliefs (St. George & McNamara, 1984). Furthermore, blacks are said to appear more grateful to God and more humbly committed to their faith, making them of greater virtue than the white race (Krause & Hayward, 2015). Krause and Hayward (2015) concluded in their work that African Americans are also more forgiving, which in conjunction with gratitude and commitment, has the potential to alter perspectives on Christian suffering.

However, Jones (1973) calls to mind the hardships over the course of history that are associated with the African American race. These unique and contextual difficulties pose a particularly challenging contradiction to blacks overall overtly expressed gratitude to God (Krause & Hayward, 2015). Because of this, in order to understand Black theology, it is necessary to view God very specifically in light of what He has done or is doing for black people

(Jones, 1973). This view raises a profound contradiction surrounding God's asserted benevolence and how events, such as slavery, have occurred that interrupt the safety and livelihood of the African American race. Despite this question, St. George and McNamara (1984) assert that religiosity plays a great role in black's subjective view of their well-being, which helps to combat the historical hardships (Jones, 1973).

From another ethnic perspective, the Asian culture views suffering rather differently than black culture. While the overall concept of context is still incredibly important, the specifics create unique ways of viewing hardship in Christianity. Thus, the Asian Christian population has expressed their perspective at large in light of issues that have plagued various nations over time. Specifically, Darly Ooi (2016) speaks of the atrocities and disasters of Asia, such as the Japanese tsunami and genocide in Cambodia, through the Christian framework. In doing so, he emphasizes the similarities of the communal approach to suffering in both Asian and Christian frameworks, calling for an embrace of suffering for the purpose of transformation modeled after Christ. Similarly, Franklin Rausch (2016) examines the Korean theodicies formulated under the context of national issues of violence in the nation. Thus, suffering for the purpose of transformation is also noted; however, rather than just becoming more like Jesus Christ, there is also a notion of societal and moral transformation as well.

Similarly, Hispanic theological perspectives hinge on the crux of both religion and culture. Virgil Elizondo, a prominent U.S. Hispanic Roman Catholic theologian, notes the historically rejected nature of Hispanics. This nature reveals itself in the common customs and practices that vividly remember Good Friday and the image of Jesus Christ portrayed on that day: one that identified with His people who are suffering (Garcia, 1998). This further illuminates the role of Christology in the Hispanic belief in providence where the Cross, a point

of such suffering, is a sign of God's providence and a possibility for deliverance (Epsin, 2013). Furthermore, Krause and Bastida (2009) provide some examples of Elizondo's emphasis on the role of culture in Hispanic theology through their discussion of Mexican history, which includes numerous wars and struggles. Rather than focusing on Jesus Christ, these authors speak of Our Lady of Guadalupe, who relied heavily on her faith in hardship, setting a precedent in Mexican culture. Both of these highlight the important of faith in suffering in Hispanic communities.

### **Gender**

In examining the correlates of Christian suffering, gender is also important to consider. Women are noted in particular to face the prospect of theodicy with greater challenge, given their unique position in society. From one perspective, women express the same confusion over the presence of suffering and evil in the world, in light of the fact that God is portrayed to be all knowing, all powerful, and good. Yet, an interesting dimension is included in consideration of patriarchy, which creates suffering and hardship for women, despite the fact that men and women were created as equals by God (Hernandez, 2014). Thus, women's understanding of suffering as it pertains to theodicy is tied to men's use of power over time to create inferiority.

However, it is also noted that religion and spirituality are used by women to bring positivity and peace during hardship. Unlike Graper Hernandez's perspective, Williams, Jerome, White and Fisher (2006) focus on the suffering and coping of women that may not be directly tied to patriarchy. These authors note that women use religious strategies for coping far more than men but highlight the importance of sensitivity to the women's perspective, which is lacking in Graper Hernandez's strictly feminist perspective.

### **Young Adults and Suffering**

Finally, it is also important to examine existing research surrounding young adults and their dealings with suffering from both a religious and non-religious perspective. Smeets, Neff, Alberts and Peters (2014) note that from a non-religious perspective, college students who are resilient in the face of suffering employ techniques of self-compassion. These techniques created more drive within students to make positive changes and to not repeat the same mistakes that resulted in said suffering. From a religious perspective, Frankel and Hewitt (1994) note in their study of the health and happiness of college students, that those individuals who belonged to a faith group were both healthier and happier than those who were not. They suggest that there could be a correlation between religious practices and inward religiosity and the ability to cope with stress in more productive ways.

### **Hypothesis**

Therefore, considering the relevant literature, the hypothesis that will be tested states that white college students will be more likely than students of other races to agree that God protects Christians from suffering, as well as be more likely to agree that God does not cause human suffering. The hypothesis that students of color (non-white) will be more likely than white students to agree that God causes suffering so that good may result will also be tested.

### **Theory**

Within the examination of the interaction between race and perspectives of Christian suffering lies a multifaceted search for meaning. Christian's want to find meaning in their suffering that brings purpose, comfort, and justification. This search for meaning also applies to the collective experiences of different races that create specific patterns of socialization.

Subsequently, these patterns impact one's approach to understanding suffering within the framework of Christianity through the lens of one's racial identity.

Symbolic interactionism, a term coined by Henry Blumer, separates human beings from other animals by their use of symbols (as cited in Milliken & Schreiber, 2012). Symbols can be understood as abstract representations of social objects that form the basis for communication and a framework for interpreting others' intentions and actions (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012). These include things like language and ritual, the interaction and interpretation of which help to create meaning (Collins, 2011; Hollingsworth, 1999). This is a largely social process and meanings become shared through collective experiences as one develops a self that is formed in these meaningful interactions (Collins, 2011; Hollingsworth, 1999).

In the consideration of race and Christian suffering, the symbolic interactionist perspective draws attention to the different patterns of meaning and socialization that exist within the confines of different racial identities. Research has been conducted on the various meanings that have formed within different races, but there is still room for explanation of how this process of self-construction interacts with specific experiences, such as suffering (Hollingsworth, 1999). Additionally, symbolic interactionism can be used to explore the shared meanings of religions, such as Christianity, that help bring understanding to experiences of suffering. By examining the interaction of these two concepts, race and perspectives of Christian suffering, the role of collective experience can be further explored.

## **Methods**

### **Procedures**

Because of this exploratory study's focus on obtaining information about college students and their understandings of Christian suffering, a survey was distributed to every full time

undergraduate student at Abilene Christian University through the Spiritual Formation Office. The survey was part of a larger project studying Vicarious Religion that was funded by a Cullen Grant as well as the Office of Undergraduate Research. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board under expedited review. The large survey was then sent by email to the account given to each student by the university upon enrollment. Each individual was presented the opportunity to take said survey but was not given a requirement to do so by the university. Students were offered the incentive of one spiritual formation credit to take the survey. The survey collected demographic information, measured current spiritual and religious practices, examined perspectives of theological notions, including suffering. Additional data was collected but is not relevant to this study and is not reported here. Confidentiality was maintained in this process by having the survey data de-identified and keeping the data on a password protected computer.

### **Participants**

One thousand and seventy-three students completed the survey distributed by the university. Because each survey was completed in full, none of the responses were discarded. Thus, the sample size for this research was one thousand and seventy-three.

The average age of participants was 19.89 years old, with the youngest participant reporting to be 18, and the oldest 41 years old (data not shown). Females comprised 802 (74.74%) of the total 1073 responses. This left 262 male responses (24.42%) and 9 (.84%) participants who preferred not to disclose their gender. 747 (69.62%) of the overall respondents reported their ethnicity to be White or Caucasian, with Hispanic (12.12%), multi-ethnic (9.32%), and Black (5.68%) representing the next largest categories. One student did not disclose their race and 6 (.56%) reported 'other.' 424 of the 1,073 students (39.53%) reported their current

religious affiliation to be Non-Denominational Christian. Church of Christ (23.58%), Baptist (16.31%), Catholic (3.26%) and no religion (3.26%) also composed notable percentages of the overall count. 26 other denominations were reported to be current religious affiliations of students at Abilene Christian University.

### **Measures**

The survey given to students contained multiple sections of Likert Scales pertaining to various topics of theology. In order to measure perspectives of Christian suffering specifically, statements were offered about both God's role and God's purpose in suffering. The three under examination for this paper are "God protects Christians from suffering," "God causes suffering so that good may result," and "God does not cause human suffering" (see Appendix A for survey). Students were then given the opportunity to express their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. To measure race, the six racial and ethnic categories defined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) were presented to students. The researchers also included an option labeled 'other' to allow for races not identified or the presence of multiple races. Appropriate statistics were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

### **Results**

Analyses for this study center around the three variables that were stated above. Frequencies were run on the overall sample to examine the distribution of race, gender, classification and age (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Demographics**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>n=/Percent</b>
<b>Race</b>	
White	747/69.6
Hispanic	130/12.1
Black	61/5.7
Other	135/12.6
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	802/74.7
Male	262/24.4
Prefer Not to Say	9/.84
<b>Classification</b>	
Freshman	363/33.8
Sophomore	278/25.9
Junior	264/24.6
Senior	168/15.7
<b>Mean Age</b>	<b>Range</b>
19.89	18-41

**Table 2: Comparing Means ANOVA**

<b>God Does Not Cause Human Suffering</b>			
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Mean Value</b>	<b>F-Value</b>
God does not cause human suffering.	White	3.24	0.75
	Hispanic	3.38	
	Black	3.16	
	Other	3.26	

To examine differences in perspective between races and level of agreement with “God does not cause human suffering,” an ANOVA comparing means was run (see Table 2). There were no statistically significant differences between groups.

**Table 3: Comparing Means ANOVA**

<b>God Causes Suffering So That Good May Result</b>			
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Mean Value</b>	<b>F-Value</b>
God causes suffering so that good may result.	White	3.20	2.39
	Hispanic	3.41	
	Black	3.43	
	Other	3.39	

To examine differences in perspective between races and level of agreement with “God causes suffering so that good may result,” an ANOVA comparing means test was run (see Table 3). There were no statistically significant differences between groups.

**Table 4: Comparing Means ANOVA**

<b>God Protects Christians From Suffering</b>			
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Mean Value</b>	<b>F-Value</b>
God protects Christians from suffering.	White	2.47	11.09*
	Hispanic	3.03	
	Black	2.97	
	Other	2.59	

\*significant at .05

To examine differences in perspective between races and level of agreement with “God protects Christians from suffering,” an ANOVA comparing means test was run (see Table 4).

This noted that white students were least likely to agree that “God protects Christians from suffering” with a mean of 2.47. Black students averaged over .50 higher than White students in their likelihood of agreement and Hispanic students averaged exactly .50 higher in their likelihood of agreement than White students. Students of other racial categories fell in the middle with a mean of 2.59. To determine if these differences were statistically significant, an ANOVA with an F-test was then calculated. With an F-Value of 11.09, the differences were statistically significant at the .05 level.

To further explore this relationship, an ANOVA comparing means was run to examine if there were significant differences between religious affiliation growing up and level of agreement with “God protects Christians from suffering.” This test revealed that students who grew up Evangelicals (Non-denominational and Church of Christ) are less likely to agree that God protects Christians from suffering than students who grew up Catholic and Methodist (data not shown). Non-denominational students’ (N=239) mean was a 2.45 out of 4 and Church of Christ students’ (N=290) mean was 2.33 out of 4. Catholic students’ (N=92) mean was 3.08 out of 4 and Methodist students’ (N=55) mean was 3.07 out of 4. In conjunction, a cross tab was run to determine the breakdown of race and religious affiliation growing up. This revealed that 35% of Hispanic students grew up Catholic, 28% of Black students grew up Baptist, 18% of White students grew up Church of Christ and 21% of White students grew up non-denominational.

### **Discussion**

Prior research on Christian suffering has largely focused on different perspectives amongst the various denominations. Few, if any, researchers have explored the relationship specifically between races and perspectives of suffering within Christianity. Those who have studied pieces of this have centered around collective experiences and historical nuances that have had unique longitudinal impacts on the point of view of adults (Ooi, 2016; St. George & McNamara, 1984). This research sought to provide more information about the interaction between race and suffering in a more current context amongst young adults. Based on the theory of Symbolic Interactionism and the limited existing literature regarding the correlation of race and suffering, it was anticipated that white college students would be more likely than students of other races to agree that God protects Christians from suffering, as well as be more likely to agree that God does not cause human suffering. However, it was also hypothesized that students

of color (non-white) would be more likely than white students to agree that God causes suffering so that good may result.

Based on the evidence, race does not appear to have as strong of an impact on perspectives of Christian suffering as expected. There was no significant relationship between race and level of agreement with “God does not cause human suffering,” nor was there a significant relationship between race and level of agreement with “God causes suffering so that good may result.”

Yet, when controlling for other pertinent factors, race was significantly correlated with level of agreement of the statement “God protects Christians from suffering.” Hispanic students were most likely to agree with this statement, with White students being the least likely, and Black students falling just below Hispanic students. The majority of Hispanic students identified as Catholic (35%), which supports conclusions of prior research surrounding the importance of suffering within the denominational framework (Eberl, 2012; Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). Yet, these findings also contradicted existing conclusions (Eberl, 2012; Fitzpatrick et al., 2016; Garcia, 1998) because rather than believing in the greater good of suffering that historically characterizes both Hispanic and Catholic theologies, students agreement reflected a more distant relationship to suffering. Similarly, the perspectives of White students, who identified as Evangelical overall (39%) support the literature in that Evangelical denominations attribute suffering to becoming more like Jesus Christ (Myers, 2017).

These racial and denominational differences are also consistent with the theory of Symbolic Interactionism. As religion and culture continue to evolve with new generations, new collective experiences will bring unique meaning to both old and new symbols in the lives of individuals (Collins, 2011; Hollingsworth, 1999). The intersectionality of race, age, and religion

make predicting outcomes difficult because of the unregulated interaction of these three paradigms. Given the plethora of different life experiences amongst the sample, collective meaning contains many nuances and may suggest that religious affiliation growing up is more important than race in determining perspectives of Christian suffering.

As with all research, there are limitations to the above conclusions. One of the primary limitations lies within the sampling method that was used to collect the information. While the survey was distributed to all students at the university under study, an incentive of a chapel credit was offered to encourage participation. Freshman and sophomore students have the most rigorous chapel requirements, lending to a sample that was approximately 60% underclassman. In addition, in light of the longer length of the survey, the incentive may have increased students' level of participation while simultaneously decreasing their levels of accuracy and thoroughness in completing it.

The question order could have also biased the results of the study. "God protects Christians from suffering" was asked first, with the other two following. These questions were located in the third of three sections focused on theology. Between these three sections, approximately 65 statements were listed, and respondents were directed to select their level of agreement on a strongly disagree to strongly agree Likert Scale. Survey fatigue could have influenced the level of attention given to each question as the respondent moved through the section. Further research should focus specifically on Christian suffering and race without the distraction of other theological concepts.

Lastly, the university under examination for this study is affiliated with the Church of Christ. This largely influences the population of students that attend, and therefore, could have

influenced the sample. Further research should be conducted on the interaction of race and Christian suffering in other contexts, such as state schools and community colleges.

This research demonstrates that the interaction between race and perspectives of Christian suffering is dynamic and fluid. While race may not correlate with all facets of Christian suffering, it does have a relationship with students' level of agreement with Gods protection of Christians from suffering. The students examined with in this study were mostly white evangelicals but did have strong representations of other races and denominations as well. It will be important to continue to examine how perspectives of suffering change amongst young adults as they experience new things and thus establish new meaning in their lives.

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## Appendix A

<b>Question: How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?</b>	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
God protects Christians from suffering.					
God causes suffering so that good may result.					
God does not cause human suffering.					