**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE HUMANITY & MANAGEMENT RESEARCH**

ISSN (print) 2833-2172, ISSN (online) 2833-2180

Volume 05 Issue 10 October 2026

DOI: 10.58806/ijsshmr.2026v5i10n09, Impact Factor: 7.888

Page No. 2567-2577

# The Racialisation of God and its Implications for Black Identity, Psychological Emancipation, and Socioeconomic Development: A Critical Examination of Eurocentric Religious Imagery, Colonial Socialisation, and Structural Inequality

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**ABSTRACT: Background**: Religious imagery has historically influenced perceptions of authority, morality, identity, belonging, and human worth. Within European colonial Christianity, representations of Jesus Christ and God through European physical characteristics became influential visual conventions in societies populated predominantly by people of African descent. **Objective**: This study critically examines whether the historical privileging of White religious imagery has contributed to racialised perceptions of authority, cultural alienation, and barriers to psychological and socioeconomic empowerment among Black populations. **Methods**: A theory-informed integrative critical review synthesises historical scholarship, theological analysis, social psychological research, and development literature, incorporating direct experimental evidence concerning White religious iconography and a Jamaica-specific historical assessment.

**Findings**: Existing evidence supports the historical association between racialised sacred representation and colonial authority, while experimental research identifies possible short-term effects on racial attitudes. However, available findings do not establish that Eurocentric religious imagery independently causes diminished educational attainment, economic performance, or national development.

**Research gap**: The relationships among religious imagery, racial identity, institutional socialisation, and measurable developmental outcomes remain insufficiently integrated and causally established in Caribbean contexts.

**Discussion**: The study refines the Religious Representation, Racial Identity, and Development Framework by distinguishing symbolic exposure, psychological mediation, institutional influences, structural inequalities, and developmental outcomes. **Conclusion**: Eurocentric religious imagery may contribute to the reproduction of racialised symbolic hierarchies under institutional conditions, but its developmental consequences require direct empirical testing. Historical literacy, cultural inclusion, theological diversity, and equitable institutions provide defensible foundations for strengthening Black identity and collective empowerment.

**KEYWORDS**: Eurocentric religious imagery; Black identity; colonial Christianity; racial socialisation; psychological emancipation; cultural representation; socioeconomic development.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background and context

Religious beliefs and representations constitute important dimensions of cultural life because they influence understandings of morality, authority, identity, human dignity, and social belonging. In Christian societies, visual representations of Jesus Christ have frequently reflected the artistic traditions, political institutions, and cultural identities of the communities producing them. European religious art commonly portrayed sacred figures through European physical characteristics, and these images subsequently circulated through colonial institutions, missionary education, churches, and religious publications. In African and Caribbean societies shaped by European colonial expansion, such representations sometimes existed within broader political and economic systems that privileged European authority and subordinated African cultural traditions. The resulting relationship between religious imagery and racial hierarchy raises important questions about whether representations of sacred authority have contributed to the internalisation or contestation of racialised social values. These questions require careful historical and empirical analysis because religious images acquire meaning through social contexts, and their effects cannot be determined solely from the physical characteristics of the figures depicted (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997; Mbembe, 2001; Said, 1978).

The historical significance of European religious imagery becomes especially important when sacred representations are encountered alongside institutions that assign unequal social value to different racial and cultural identities. Within colonial settings,

religious education could transmit theological teachings while also communicating expectations concerning obedience, civilisation, authority, and social hierarchy. Nevertheless, Christian institutions were not ideologically uniform, and religious teachings were sometimes employed to challenge slavery, racial domination, and political exclusion. Black Christian communities also developed independent theological interpretations, religious practices, and institutions that affirmed dignity and collective agency. These contrasting historical experiences indicate that the consequences of religious representation depend on its interpretation, institutional use, and relationship to broader structures of power. A rigorous investigation must distinguish the historical reproduction of Eurocentric authority from the diverse ways Black populations have understood, resisted, and transformed inherited Christian traditions (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Cone, 1975; Freire, 1970; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; West, 1993).

### 1.2 Statement of the problem

The central problem addressed in this study concerns the possible consequences of repeatedly presenting divine authority through White or European imagery within societies historically subjected to racial domination. When sacred figures are represented predominantly through the appearance of a historically privileged racial group, some observers may interpret these representations as reinforcing associations between whiteness, goodness, authority, beauty, and legitimacy. Such associations may become especially consequential when religious imagery operates alongside educational materials, institutional leadership, cultural narratives, and social hierarchies that marginalise African histories and identities. Nevertheless, the interpretation of religious imagery is not uniform, and individuals may distinguish theological symbolism from claims concerning racial superiority. Furthermore, Black Christian communities have historically adapted, challenged, and transformed inherited religious traditions, demonstrating that Christianity cannot be reduced to an instrument of colonial domination. The scientific problem is to determine under which historical and institutional conditions Eurocentric religious imagery may contribute to racialised self-perceptions, how such influences might be mediated, and whether they have measurable consequences for collective empowerment and development (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Cone, 1975; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

The methodological difficulty arises because racial identity and socioeconomic development are influenced by multiple historical, institutional, psychological, and economic processes. Colonial exploitation, educational inequality, discrimination, political exclusion, access to capital, and public policy can affect development independently of religious imagery. The evidence that White religious representations influence racial attitudes would not establish that those representations independently determine educational achievement, income, employment, or national development. The distinction between immediate psychological responses and long-term developmental outcomes is essential to avoid overstating the explanatory significance of religious imagery. A rigorous analysis must identify observable mediating mechanisms, relevant confounding variables, and the conditions under which symbolic representations may influence behaviour. This study addresses that requirement by combining direct psychological evidence with historical interpretation and a conceptual framework designed for subsequent empirical testing (Coleman, 1988; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997; Sen, 1999; Woolcock, 1998).

### 1.3 Research gap

Existing scholarship provides substantial analyses of colonial religious institutions, racial representation, internalised oppression, Black theological thought, and cultural identity. Postcolonial scholarship examines how European power shaped cultural authority, while social psychology investigates how repeated representations can influence identity and social expectations. Black theology challenges interpretations of Christianity that legitimise racial domination and instead emphasises liberation, dignity, and justice. Historical scholarship also documents the complex roles of churches in colonial expansion, education, anticolonial resistance, and Black community organisation. Nevertheless, these traditions do not by themselves establish the magnitude of any independent relationship between White representations of divine figures and contemporary outcomes such as educational achievement, economic participation, political agency, or institutional trust. This study addresses that conceptual and empirical gap by integrating religious representation, racial identity, institutional socialisation, and socioeconomic development into a framework that identifies testable pathways while distinguishing symbolic influence from structural causation (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Cone, 1975; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

A further gap concerns the limited contextualisation of direct experimental findings within the historical experiences of Black populations outside North America. Experimental research can identify whether exposure to religious representations influences attitudes under controlled conditions, but such findings may not generalise automatically to Jamaica, other Caribbean societies, or African populations. These societies differ in religious traditions, racial composition, colonial histories, educational institutions, and contemporary understandings of racial identity. Moreover, psychological responses to religious imagery cannot be assumed to produce corresponding differences in civic participation or socioeconomic outcomes without additional evidence. The present study distinguishes a theoretically addressable integration gap from an unresolved empirical gap concerning causation and external validity. Its contribution is to refine an explanatory framework and identify a Jamaica-relevant research agenda rather than claim

that the causal relationship has already been demonstrated (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997; Sen, 1999; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

### 1.4 Aim and research questions

The primary aim is to critically examine the historical and contemporary implications of Eurocentric representations of God and Jesus Christ for Black identity, cultural empowerment, and collective development. The first research question examines how European religious imagery became established and circulated within colonial and postcolonial institutions. The second investigates how racialised representations of sacred authority might influence perceptions of identity, dignity, cultural legitimacy, and social power. The third considers the roles of religious education, family socialisation, institutional leadership, and historical memory in mediating these relationships. The fourth evaluates competing interpretations of Christianity as an instrument of cultural domination and a resource for Black liberation and collective organisation. The fifth develops an explanatory framework for investigating whether religious representation contributes independently to measurable developmental outcomes after accounting for structural inequalities and other social influences (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Cone, 1975; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997; Sen, 1999).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

### 2.1 The historical construction of a White Jesus

The widespread representation of Jesus Christ as a White European figure must be understood as a historical and artistic development rather than an established description of his physical appearance. Jesus was a first-century Jewish figure from Roman Palestine, and the canonical Gospels do not provide a detailed physical portrait from which a historically definitive racial appearance can be reconstructed. European artists frequently represented biblical figures through familiar local conventions, producing religious images that reflected the cultural settings of their creators. These conventions acquired additional significance when European colonial institutions exported religious materials and educational practices into African, Caribbean, and American societies. Blum and Harvey (2012) document how representations of Christ became intertwined with competing ideas about racial authority, political power, and liberation in American history. Their historical analysis demonstrates that images of Jesus have served different political and religious purposes, making it necessary to examine how representations are used rather than assuming that every White depiction communicates an identical racial message (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997; Said, 1978; West, 1993).

The distinction between representations of God and representations of Jesus also requires theological and analytical precision. Christian traditions differ in their understandings of divine representation, and some discourage or reject pictorial depictions of God. The historical Jesus, however, is understood within Christianity as a person who lived in a geographical and cultural setting, making representations of his human appearance especially relevant to discussions of racial imagery. A White depiction of Jesus does not necessarily imply that its creator or viewer believes Europeans possess greater moral or spiritual worth. Nevertheless, such imagery may acquire racial significance when repeatedly presented as the exclusive or authoritative representation within institutions shaped by racial hierarchy. The present study examines the racialisation of sacred imagery as a social process rather than making theological claims about the racial identity of God (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Cone, 1975; Hall, 1997; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; West, 1993).

### 2.2 Colonialism, religion, and racial hierarchy

European colonialism involved systems of political domination, economic extraction, racial classification, and cultural authority that profoundly affected African-descended populations. Christian missionary institutions operated within these settings, sometimes reinforcing colonial hierarchies and at other times providing resources through which enslaved or colonised people challenged oppression. Religious teaching could legitimise established authority when biblical interpretation was used to justify obedience, racial subordination, or the supposed superiority of European civilisation. However, the same religious traditions could support emancipation, educational development, community organisation, and resistance to racial injustice. The relationship between Christianity and colonialism must be understood as historically contested rather than uniformly oppressive or liberating. Within this context, Eurocentric religious imagery becomes analytically significant when it is connected to institutional messages that portray European identity as naturally associated with moral or spiritual authority (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Cone, 1975; Fanon, 1952/2008; Freire, 1970; Hall, 1997).

The Jamaican experience provides an important historical example of the contradictory relationship between Christianity and colonial power. George Liele, a formerly enslaved Black Baptist preacher from North America, was instrumental in establishing an early Baptist community in Jamaica during the eighteenth century. Indigenous Black Baptist organisation preceded the arrival of some later British Baptist missionaries, demonstrating that Christian religious activity in Jamaica cannot be understood exclusively as a European institutional imposition. Samuel Sharpe, a Baptist deacon, subsequently emerged as a central figure in the resistance associated with the 1831–1832 Baptist War. Historical theological research demonstrates that Sharpe's interpretation of scripture informed his understanding of freedom and resistance to enslavement. These developments indicate that Christianity could provide

both a language through which colonial authority was defended and a framework through which Black Jamaicans challenged that authority (Fiddes, 2024; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Cone, 1975; Freire, 1970; West, 1993).

### 2.3 Religious imagery and racial attitudes: Direct empirical evidence

A relevant contribution to this subject is the experimental study by Howard and Sommers (2017), entitled Exposure to White Religious Iconography Influences Black Individuals' Intragroup and Intergroup Attitudes. Published in Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, the study examined whether exposure to White religious imagery influenced racial attitudes among Black participants. The researchers included 120 Black participants who were subliminally exposed to religious or nonreligious images before completing measures of intragroup and intergroup attitudes. Exposure to images of a White Jesus, unlike exposure to generic White men, churches, or nonreligious objects, increased explicit pro-White attitudes and was associated with greater devaluation of the participants' own racial group. The results concerning implicit attitudes were less consistent, indicating that the psychological effects varied according to the outcomes examined. These findings provide direct empirical support for investigating religious iconography as a potential influence on racial attitudes, although the experimental design does not establish permanent psychological changes or subsequent socioeconomic consequences (Howard & Sommers, 2017).

The scientific importance of Howard and Sommers (2017) lies in its ability to distinguish the immediate influence of White religious imagery from exposure to certain nonreligious comparison images. This distinction strengthens the argument that sacred representation may have psychological significance beyond ordinary visual exposure to White individuals. Nevertheless, the study's sample, experimental setting, and short-term outcome measures constrain its external validity and the conclusions that can be drawn about wider populations. Its findings do not demonstrate that all Black individuals interpret White religious imagery in the same manner or that Christian religious affiliation necessarily produces internalised racial inferiority. Furthermore, the study did not establish relationships between religious iconography and educational attainment, employment, income, entrepreneurship, or national economic performance. Accordingly, its findings should be interpreted as evidence concerning a specific psychological mechanism rather than proof that Eurocentric religious imagery independently obstructs Black socioeconomic development (Howard & Sommers, 2017; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997; Sen, 1999; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

Subsequent scholarship provides additional grounds for investigating the relationship between racialised religious representation and social attitudes. Howard and Sommers (2019) examined the influence of White religious iconography on anti-Black attitudes, extending the research programme beyond the original investigation of Black participants' intragroup and intergroup responses. Howard et al. (2022) subsequently examined relationships between beliefs concerning Jesus's race, racial attitudes, and ideologies associated with the maintenance of racial hierarchies. These publications indicate that religious imagery can be examined through multiple psychological mechanisms rather than a single experimental outcome. Nevertheless, the interpretation of such research requires attention to differences between experimentally induced responses, self-reported beliefs, and longer-term behavioural outcomes. Associations between beliefs about religious figures and racial attitudes cannot automatically establish the direction of causation. This emerging evidence strengthens the rationale for empirical investigation while leaving the relationship between religious representation and socioeconomic development unresolved (Howard & Sommers, 2017, 2019; Howard et al., 2022; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997).

### 2.4 Psychological emancipation and the internalisation of racial hierarchy

The concept of psychological emancipation concerns the ability of individuals and communities to challenge inherited beliefs that associate social legitimacy, beauty, authority, or intellectual achievement with a historically dominant group. Fanon's work provides a foundational account of the psychological dimensions of colonial racial hierarchy, and the ways social domination can shape self-perception and interpersonal relationships. Within this perspective, Eurocentric religious imagery may become problematic when it forms part of a wider symbolic environment that systematically privileges European appearance and marginalises African identities. Repeated exposure to such representations could influence perceptions of cultural legitimacy, especially when educational institutions and religious authorities present these images without historical explanation or alternative traditions. However, individuals are not passive recipients of visual messages, and religious images may be interpreted through family beliefs, theological commitments, cultural identities, and experiences of racial discrimination. The potential psychological consequences of White religious imagery should be investigated through observable measures of racial identity, self-esteem, internalised racial attitudes, and institutional trust rather than inferred from religious affiliation alone (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

### 2.5 Black theology and the reconstruction of religious identity

Black liberation theology provides an important intellectual response to religious interpretations that have been used to legitimise racial domination. James H. Cone argues that Christian theology must be interpreted in relation to the historical experiences of oppressed communities and the struggle for human liberation. His work challenges the assumption that European theological

perspectives constitute the universal or exclusive expression of Christian truth. Rather than simply reversing racial hierarchies, liberation theology examines how religious meaning can be reconstructed around dignity, justice, historical experience, and resistance to oppression. This approach is important because it demonstrates that Black communities can reinterpret Christian traditions without necessarily abandoning their religious identities. The implications for development concern the possibility that religious institutions may strengthen cultural confidence, collective organisation, ethical leadership, and social participation when their teachings affirm equal human dignity and challenge structures of exclusion (Cone, 1975; Freire, 1970; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; West, 1993; Young, 1990).

### 2.6 Religion, development, and the problem of causal attribution

The relationship between religious representation and socioeconomic development requires methodological caution because development outcomes arise through numerous interacting historical and institutional processes. Educational opportunity, access to capital, public infrastructure, political representation, discrimination, healthcare, and economic policy can influence development independently of religious beliefs or imagery. Colonial institutions may have shaped both religious representations and economic inequalities, creating potential confounding relationships that complicate causal interpretation. An observed association between Eurocentric religious imagery and social attitudes would not demonstrate that religious imagery caused differences in income, educational attainment, entrepreneurship, or national development. Research must instead identify the psychological and institutional pathways through which representation might influence specific behaviours, while accounting for alternative explanations. The defensible hypothesis is that racialised sacred imagery may contribute to the reproduction of symbolic inequality under certain conditions, not that it explains the development trajectory of Black populations as a whole (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Coleman, 1988; Fanon, 1952/2008; Sen, 1999; Woolcock, 1998).

## 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 3.1 Research design

This study adopts a theory-informed integrative critical review to investigate relationships among religious representation, racial identity, colonial socialisation, and development. The approach combines historical interpretation, theological scholarship, social psychological evidence, and institutional theories of inequality. Historical scholarship is used to examine the production and circulation of religious imagery, while empirical research is considered when evaluating possible effects on racial attitudes and identity. Theoretical publications are used to identify explanatory mechanisms, but their arguments are not treated as empirical confirmation of developmental outcomes. The review does not involve primary data collection, a completed systematic search, or a quantitative meta-analysis. Its principal objective is to construct an analytically coherent framework and generate hypotheses that can subsequently be tested through appropriately designed empirical investigations (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Cone, 1975; Fanon, 1952/2008; Snyder, 2019; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

### 3.2 Literature identification and source verification

The literature incorporated into the revised manuscript consists of foundational publications retained from the original study and additional scholarly sources identified through targeted searches addressing religious iconography, racial attitudes, and Jamaican religious history. Publication details for the experimental study by Howard and Sommers (2017) were verified against the United States National Library of Medicine's PubMed record and institutional bibliographic sources. The verified record identifies Simon Howard and Samuel R. Sommers as the authors, confirms publication in volume 23, issue 4, pages 508–515 of Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, and provides the digital object identifier 10.1037/cdp0000152. Additional targeted searches identified related publications concerning White religious imagery and racial attitudes, as well as historical scholarship addressing Black Baptist resistance in Jamaica. These searches improve the traceability and contextual relevance of the review, but they do not constitute an exhaustive search of all relevant bibliographic databases. The present manuscript reports a targeted evidence-identification process rather than claiming that comprehensive systematic screening or formal study-level quality appraisal has been completed.

### 3.3 Reproducible database search strategy

A reproducible literature search strategy is to identify scholarship examining Eurocentric religious imagery, colonial Christianity, racial attitudes, cultural identity, and socioeconomic development. Searches would be undertaken across Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, PsycINFO, ATLA Religion Database, JSTOR, and other relevant scholarly repositories, with search terms adapted to the indexing requirements of each database. The first group of terms would include “White Jesus”, “White God”, “religious iconography”, “Christian imagery”, “racialised religious representation”, and “Eurocentric Christianity”, while the second would include “Black identity”, “African identity”, “internalised racism”, “racial attitudes”, “self-esteem”, and “psychological emancipation”. A third group would examine historical and institutional contexts through “colonialism”, “missionary education”,

"religious socialisation", "racial hierarchy", and "cultural domination", while a fourth would identify developmental outcomes through "educational attainment", "economic development", "political agency", "community empowerment", and "collective action". Boolean operators would be used to combine related terms, with OR connecting alternatives within conceptual groups and AND connecting selected groups when their intersection is required. Separate searches would examine historical, psychological, theological, and developmental relationships to avoid excluding relevant publications that do not address every dimension simultaneously. The screening process would include duplicate removal, title and abstract assessment, full-text eligibility evaluation, evidence appraisal, and documentation of exclusion decisions, but these procedures are not represented as having already been completed (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Cone, 1975; Fanon, 1952/2008; Snyder, 2019; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

### 3.4 Analytical framework and evidence appraisal

The analytical framework distinguishes four levels of explanation: religious representation, psychological interpretation, institutional mediation, and developmental outcomes. Religious representation concerns the visual characteristics and cultural meanings associated with divine figures in religious materials, worship settings, and educational resources. Psychological interpretation concerns perceptions of racial identity, legitimacy, authority, self-worth, and belonging, which may be measured through validated attitudinal instruments. Institutional mediation concerns the influence of churches, schools, families, media organisations, and community structures on the interpretation and transmission of religious imagery. Developmental outcomes concern measurable dimensions of educational participation, civic engagement, economic opportunity, leadership, and collective organisation. The review gives greater evidential weight to directly relevant empirical studies when assessing behavioural effects, while treating historical scholarship and theological arguments as essential sources for understanding context and meaning rather than as proof of causal relationships (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Cone, 1975; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997; Sen, 1999).

The appraisal approach further distinguishes experimental evidence, observational research, historical documentation, theological interpretation, and conceptual scholarship according to the conclusions each source can support. Experimental studies are relevant to identifying immediate effects of exposure to religious imagery, although their external validity and long-term implications require separate assessment. Observational studies can identify associations between beliefs, attitudes, and social outcomes, but they cannot establish causation without appropriate research designs and assumptions. Historical sources provide essential evidence concerning institutional development and the use of religion within political and cultural settings. Theological and philosophical works clarify contested meanings of religious representation, racial identity, liberation, and justice without independently demonstrating measurable psychological effects. This differentiated approach strengthens interpretative transparency while recognising that a formal risk-of-bias assessment of a comprehensively selected study set remains a requirement for any subsequent systematic review (Howard & Sommers, 2017; Fiddes, 2024; Snyder, 2019; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005; Sen, 1999).

### 3.5 Jamaica-specific evidence and contextual assessment

The Jamaica-specific assessment draws on historical scholarship concerning Black Baptist organisation, the relationship between Christianity and emancipation, and official demographic information on religious affiliation. Fiddes (2024) examines the scriptural interpretation associated with Samuel Sharpe and provides a documented example of Christian religious belief being used to challenge enslavement in nineteenth-century Jamaica. The Statistical Institute of Jamaica's 2011 Population and Housing Census provides information on religious affiliation, documenting the diversity of Christian denominations and the presence of respondents reporting no religious affiliation. These sources establish the historical importance and contemporary diversity of religious institutions within Jamaican society, but they do not directly measure exposure to White religious imagery or its psychological effects. The present analysis treats them as contextual evidence rather than as proof of a relationship between religious iconography and socioeconomic development. A direct Jamaican investigation would require new data on religious imagery, racial attitudes, institutional practices, educational experiences, and developmental outcomes before causal claims could be evaluated (Fiddes, 2024; Statistical Institute of Jamaica, 2011; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997; Sen, 1999).

### 3.6 Ethical considerations and methodological limitations

The study relies on previously published scholarly literature and official documentary sources and does not involve direct recruitment, interviews, experiments, or the collection of identifiable personal information. No new human-participant data have been generated, although institutional requirements concerning research ethics should be confirmed before submission. The principal methodological limitation is that the literature was identified through targeted searches rather than a completed systematic search with independently screened records. A second limitation concerns the small and context-specific body of direct experimental evidence connecting White religious imagery with racial attitudes. A third limitation is the absence of Jamaican empirical data measuring the relationship between religious representations and developmental outcomes. These constraints require that the framework be interpreted as a theoretically grounded contribution requiring empirical validation rather than as a demonstrated causal

explanation of Black socioeconomic development (Howard & Sommers, 2017; Snyder, 2019; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005; Sen, 1999; Woolcock, 1998).

## 4. FINDINGS: CRITICAL THEMATIC SYNTHESIS

### 4.1 The racialisation of sacred authority

The first finding concerns the historical association between European religious imagery and broader systems of racial authority. Representations of Jesus as White acquired social meanings that extended beyond artistic convention when they circulated within institutions shaped by racial inequality. Historical research demonstrates that such imagery could be employed to legitimise established hierarchies, although it could also be reinterpreted by communities resisting racial oppression. The significance of these findings lies in the possibility that sacred representation can reinforce existing social distinctions when religious authority and racial privilege become symbolically connected. Nevertheless, the meaning of an image depends on its institutional presentation, theological interpretation, and reception by audiences. The evidence supports examining the racialisation of sacred authority as a historically significant social process rather than assuming that every White depiction of Jesus necessarily communicates racial superiority (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Cone, 1975; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997; Said, 1978).

### 4.2 Evidence of short-term racial-attitude effects

The second finding concerns direct experimental evidence that White religious iconography can influence racial attitudes under certain conditions. Howard and Sommers (2017) investigated the responses of 120 Black participants following subliminal exposure to religious and nonreligious images. Exposure to images of a White Jesus increased explicit pro-White attitudes and was associated with greater devaluation of the participants' own racial group, whereas the comparison images did not produce the same reported pattern. The findings concerning implicit attitudes were more mixed, indicating that the effects depended partly on the psychological outcomes measured. These results provide empirical evidence of a short-term relationship between religious iconography and racial attitudes within the experimental setting. However, the findings do not establish the duration of these responses or demonstrate subsequent effects on educational achievement, employment, income, institutional participation, or national development (Howard & Sommers, 2017; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

### 4.3 Religious resistance and Black collective empowerment

The third finding is that religious institutions and traditions cannot be characterised exclusively as instruments of racial domination. Black theological scholarship demonstrates how Christian ideas have been reinterpreted through the historical experiences of racial oppression and struggles for liberation. Religious communities have also served as settings for collective identity, education, mutual assistance, political organisation, and social leadership. These experiences challenge explanations that attribute the development of Black communities primarily to the acceptance or rejection of religious images. They also demonstrate that the consequences of religious socialisation depend on institutional practices, leadership, historical interpretation, and the opportunities available for collective action. Accordingly, any account of religious representation and Black development must consider both the reproduction of racial hierarchy and the capacity of religious communities to challenge that hierarchy (Cone, 1975; Freire, 1970; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Putnam, 2000; West, 1993).

### 4.4 The unproven relationship with socioeconomic development

The fourth finding concerns the absence of sufficient direct evidence establishing that Eurocentric representations of divine figures independently impede the socioeconomic development of Black populations. Psychological studies of racial attitudes provide valuable information, but attitudinal outcomes should not be equated with economic or national development. Development is influenced by education, capital formation, institutional quality, discrimination, political representation, healthcare, and historical patterns of resource distribution. These factors may interact with religious institutions, making it difficult to isolate the influence of visual representation. A scientifically defensible model must distinguish possible symbolic and psychological effects from the much broader structural causes of inequality. The evidence considered supports further investigation of these relationships, but it does not justify attributing the development challenges of Black communities to religious imagery as a single or dominant cause (Coleman, 1988; Fanon, 1952/2008; Ostrom, 1990; Sen, 1999; Woolcock, 1998).

### 4.5 Jamaican religious history and the limits of developmental inference

The fifth finding concerns the historical evidence that Christianity in Jamaica has operated as both an institution influenced by colonial power and a resource for Black resistance. Research concerning Samuel Sharpe demonstrates that biblical interpretation could inform organised resistance to enslavement rather than simply reinforce colonial obedience. The historical development of Black Baptist communities also challenges the assumption that Jamaican Christianity was exclusively imposed or controlled by European missionaries. Official census evidence confirms the continuing significance and diversity of religious affiliation in

Jamaican society, although affiliation data do not measure the racial characteristics of religious images encountered by worshippers. These sources establish the importance of religious institutions as subjects of Jamaican historical and sociological inquiry without demonstrating their independent contribution to present-day socioeconomic inequalities. The principal implication is that Jamaica-specific research must investigate the actual meanings, distribution, and effects of religious imagery rather than infer those effects from the country's colonial history or religious composition (Fiddes, 2024; Statistical Institute of Jamaica, 2011; Cone, 1975; Hall, 1997; Sen, 1999).

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Can the image of a White God obstruct Black empowerment?

The central proposition of this study is that Eurocentric religious imagery may contribute to racialised understandings of authority when it operates within institutions that systematically privilege European identities. The historical literature provides a basis for this concern because religious representation has sometimes been associated with racial domination and the legitimisation of unequal social arrangements. Experimental evidence also indicates that exposure to White Jesus imagery can influence explicit racial attitudes among some Black participants under controlled conditions. However, these findings should not be interpreted as demonstrating that Black people who worship within Christian traditions necessarily experience diminished self-worth or reduced developmental capacity. Nor should they be used to characterise Black communities as psychologically deficient or collectively incapable of advancement. The appropriate scholarly conclusion is that racialised religious representation may constitute one potentially modifiable dimension of a broader system of symbolic inequality, whose long-term effects require empirical investigation (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Cone, 1975; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997; Howard & Sommers, 2017).

The empirical contribution of Howard and Sommers (2017) strengthens this argument by demonstrating that exposure to White religious imagery can affect racial attitudes within an experimental setting. Their findings provide a more direct basis for evaluating psychological mechanisms than historical interpretation alone. Nevertheless, short-term attitudinal effects should not be treated as equivalent to enduring internalised oppression or diminished economic agency. Individuals may respond differently according to their religious beliefs, racial identities, educational experiences, and interpretations of the images presented. The effects of religious representation may also depend on whether institutions portray European imagery as one cultural tradition among many or as the exclusive representation of sacred authority. The question of whether such imagery obstructs Black empowerment requires investigation of psychological responses, institutional practices, and developmental outcomes rather than reliance on a single explanatory factor (Howard & Sommers, 2017, 2019; Howard et al., 2022; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997).

### 5.2 Resolving the research gap: Religious Representation, Racial Identity, and Development Framework

The principal conceptual contribution of this study is the refined Religious Representation, Racial Identity, and Development Framework (RRRIDF). The framework integrates historical religious imagery, psychological interpretation, institutional socialisation, and measurable developmental outcomes into a single explanatory model. Its first component concerns exposure to religious representations and the meanings assigned to them within cultural settings. Its second concerns potential psychological responses, including racial identification, perceived legitimacy, internalised attitudes, and perceptions of authority. Its third concerns institutional processes through which religious education, leadership, historical knowledge, and community participation may reinforce or challenge these interpretations. Its fourth concerns developmental outcomes that can be independently measured, including educational engagement, civic participation, institutional trust, and economic agency (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Coleman, 1988; Cone, 1975; Fanon, 1952/2008; Sen, 1999).

The framework addresses the identified conceptual research gap by specifying the pathways through which religious representation might influence development rather than assuming a direct causal relationship. It proposes that the effects of imagery are mediated by psychological interpretation and institutional practices, while recognising that structural inequalities may independently influence both exposure and outcomes. The model also incorporates alternative pathways through which religious institutions may strengthen racial identity, cultural confidence, community organisation, and social participation. These competing pathways are essential because the same religious tradition may be experienced differently across communities and historical periods. The framework generates hypotheses that can be supported, modified, or rejected through empirical investigation. Its contribution is conceptual integration, not proof that racialised religious imagery independently determines Black developmental outcomes (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Cone, 1975; Fanon, 1952/2008; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; West, 1993).

The revised framework also clarifies the distinction between direct psychological effects, mediating mechanisms, moderating conditions, and longer-term developmental outcomes. Exposure to racialised religious imagery constitutes a potential explanatory variable, while racial attitudes, perceptions of legitimacy, and cultural identification represent possible mediating processes. Religious affiliation, denominational teaching, historical knowledge, family socialisation, and institutional leadership may moderate the direction or magnitude of these relationships. Structural inequalities, including differences in educational opportunity, economic

resources, discrimination, and political participation, must be considered as potential confounding influences. Developmental outcomes should be examined through measurable indicators rather than broad judgements concerning the advancement or supposed deficiencies of racial populations. This structure strengthens the scientific value of the framework by identifying relationships that can be investigated empirically without presuming that symbolic representation independently causes socioeconomic disadvantage (Howard & Sommers, 2017; Hall, 1997; Coleman, 1988; Sen, 1999; Woolcock, 1998).

### 5.3 Implications for Jamaica, the Caribbean, Africa, and the African diaspora

The framework is relevant to Jamaica, the wider Caribbean, African societies, and African-descended communities because these populations have experienced different combinations of European colonial influence, Christian missionary activity, racial hierarchy, and cultural transformation. Within Jamaica, religious institutions have historically occupied important positions in education, community life, social organisation, and public discourse. The representation of sacred figures offers a potentially useful subject for examining relationships between historical knowledge, cultural identity, and institutional authority. Nevertheless, the available evidence presented here does not establish that White religious imagery has caused lower educational attainment, economic performance, or political participation among Jamaicans. Comparative research should examine differences in religious imagery, historical interpretation, denominational practice, racial attitudes, and social outcomes across communities rather than presuming that these relationships operate uniformly. Such an approach would permit meaningful comparisons with African, Latin American, Caribbean, and North American settings while respecting their distinct histories and institutional arrangements (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Cone, 1975; Fanon, 1952/2008; Hall, 1997; Sen, 1999).

The Jamaican historical experience further demonstrates why religious institutions should be analysed through both their colonial associations and their contributions to Black collective agency. Samuel Sharpe's use of Christian scripture in the struggle against enslavement provides evidence that religious belief could support organised resistance rather than passive acceptance of racial hierarchy. The development of Black Baptist communities likewise illustrates the capacity of African-descended Jamaicans to establish and transform religious institutions according to their own experiences and aspirations. These historical examples do not eliminate the possibility that Eurocentric imagery may reinforce racialised perceptions of authority in contemporary settings. They do, however, challenge explanations that portray Black religious participation as inherently incompatible with psychological emancipation or socioeconomic advancement. Accordingly, the Jamaican contribution to this field should involve examining the interaction between inherited imagery, locally developed religious traditions, cultural identity, and institutional opportunities for collective development (Fiddes, 2024; Cone, 1975; Freire, 1970; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; West, 1993).

### 5.4 Educational, theological, and institutional implications

The findings suggest that religious education could benefit from greater historical accuracy concerning the origins, cultural contexts, and diversity of Christian visual traditions. Educational institutions and churches may examine whether their teaching materials unintentionally present European appearance as the default representation of sacred authority. Such examination should encourage historical literacy and cultural inclusion rather than imposing a racial representation or restricting religious freedom. Theological education could also engage Black liberation theology, African Christian traditions, and other interpretations that affirm human dignity without reproducing racial hierarchies. Institutions should evaluate whether these approaches influence racial attitudes, belonging, and civic participation through appropriately designed research. The central objective is to ensure that religious representation and education support equal dignity, critical understanding, and cultural recognition rather than reinforcing assumptions of racial superiority or inferiority (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Cone, 1975; Freire, 1970; Hall, 1997; West, 1993).

### 5.5 Future empirical research

Future research should investigate the relationship between religious imagery and racial attitudes through experimental designs incorporating different representations and appropriate comparison conditions. Longitudinal studies could determine whether any observed psychological effects persist and whether they influence subsequent educational, civic, or economic behaviour. Comparative studies should examine how religious affiliation, denominational traditions, racial identity, historical education, and socioeconomic circumstances modify these relationships. Researchers should also investigate whether exposure to culturally diverse religious imagery affects perceptions of belonging, authority, and cultural legitimacy. Qualitative interviews could provide valuable insight into how Black participants interpret sacred images without assuming that their interpretations are determined by the images' racial appearance. These approaches would allow the framework to be tested against competing explanations and would establish whether religious representation contributes meaningfully to developmental outcomes beyond the effects of structural inequality (Howard & Sommers, 2017; Blum & Harvey, 2012; Fanon, 1952/2008; Sen, 1999; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

A Jamaica-specific research programme could combine surveys, experimental exposure studies, qualitative interviews, and institutional analyses to evaluate the relationships. Survey instruments could measure exposure to different religious representations, racial identification, perceived cultural legitimacy, religious affiliation, historical knowledge, and socioeconomic circumstances.

Experimental designs could compare responses to different culturally contextualised depictions of Jesus while incorporating appropriate ethical safeguards and measures of short-term racial attitudes. Longitudinal investigations could examine whether observed attitudinal changes persist and whether they predict subsequent educational engagement, civic participation, or other behavioural outcomes. Multivariable statistical analysis would be required to account for potential confounding influences, including age, sex, educational attainment, socioeconomic position, denomination, and experiences of discrimination. Such an approach would permit a direct empirical evaluation of the RRRIDF within Jamaica while avoiding unsupported assumptions about the developmental effects of religious imagery (Howard & Sommers, 2017; Hall, 1997; Sen, 1999; Snyder, 2019; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the proposition that Eurocentric representations of God and Jesus Christ may have contributed to barriers affecting Black identity, psychological emancipation, and socioeconomic development. Historical scholarship demonstrates that White religious imagery has sometimes been connected to systems of racial authority, although Christian traditions have also provided resources for resistance, liberation, and collective organisation. Direct experimental research by Howard and Sommers (2017) indicates that exposure to White Jesus imagery can influence certain racial attitudes among Black participants under certain conditions. Nevertheless, the evidence does not establish that these effects are permanent or that religious imagery independently causes lower educational achievement, economic opportunity, or national development. The principal concern is the possible interaction between racialised religious representation and broader institutional systems that reproduce symbolic and material inequality. This distinction supports a rigorous examination of religious imagery without attributing developmental disadvantages to the inherent characteristics, beliefs, or capacities of Black populations (Blum & Harvey, 2012; Cone, 1975; Fanon, 1952/2008; Howard & Sommers, 2017; Sen, 1999).

The study addressed its conceptual research gap by refining the Religious Representation, Racial Identity, and Development Framework, which specifies relationships among sacred imagery, psychological interpretation, institutional socialisation, structural conditions, and developmental outcomes. The framework identifies plausible mechanisms through which racialised religious representations may reinforce or challenge perceptions of authority, dignity, and cultural legitimacy. It also recognises that structural inequalities and institutional practices are essential explanatory factors that cannot be replaced by an exclusively symbolic account. The incorporation of verified experimental research and Jamaica-specific historical evidence strengthens the framework's empirical and contextual foundations without establishing its causal relationships. For Jamaica, the Caribbean, Africa, and the wider African diaspora, the practical implications concern historical literacy, cultural representation, educational inclusion, religious freedom, and institutional equality. Ultimately, the advancement of Black communities depends on equitable opportunities and collective agency, while critical engagement with inherited religious imagery may form one part of a broader process of cultural reflection and empowerment (Coleman, 1988; Cone, 1975; Fanon, 1952/2008; Freire, 1970; Sen, 1999).

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