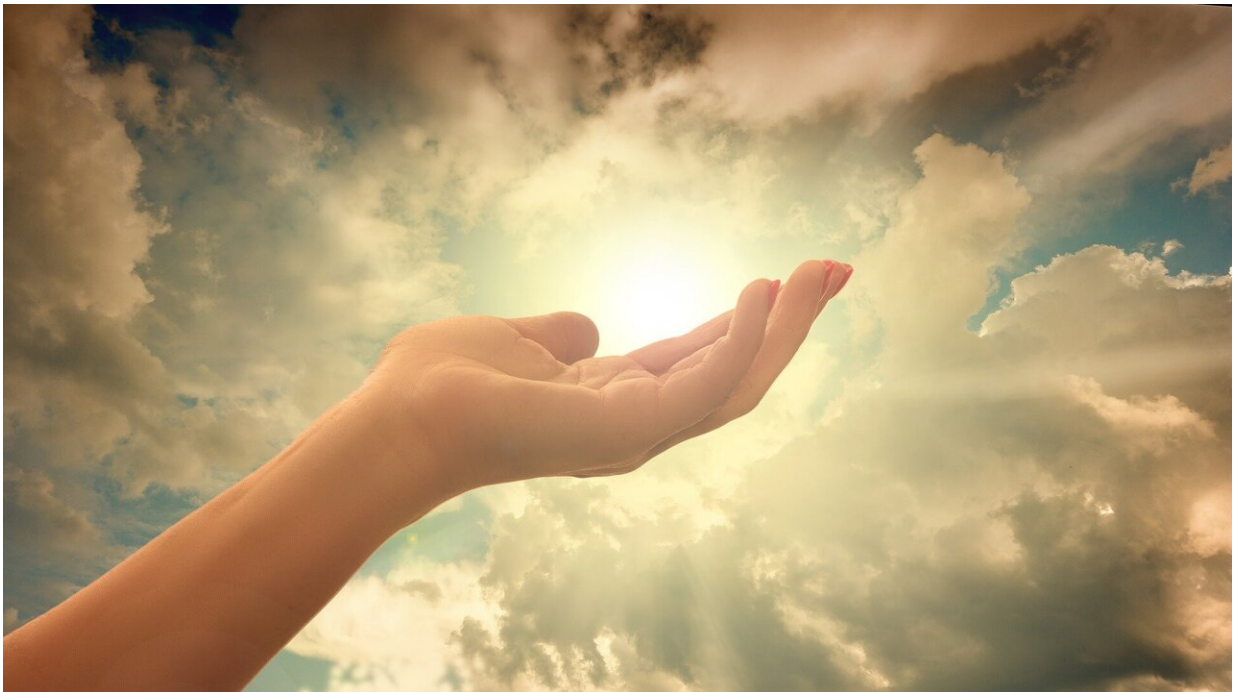


# How U.S. Christians imagine God contributes to discriminatory hiring practices

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How people visualize God can have real consequences to life on Earth, Stanford research has found.

The researchers, led by Stanford psychologist Steven O. Roberts, conducted a series of studies with U.S. Christians and found that when people conceptualize God as a white man, they are more likely to

perceive white male job candidates as more fit for leadership than black and female applicants, Stanford research has found.

Their data, published Jan. 30 in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, reveals the consequences of intuiting a particular identity to God and how those beliefs manifest in everyday life.

"Basically, if you believe that a white man rules the heavens, you are more likely to believe that white men should rule on Earth," said Roberts, an assistant professor of psychology in the Stanford School of Humanities and Sciences.

## **How U.S. Christians imagine God**

Roberts and his team conducted seven different studies, including two experiments with atheists and agnostics, that tested perceptions about God and leadership.

"People are constantly exposed to the image of God as a white man," Roberts said.

As part of their first study, the researchers analyzed images resulting from a Google search engine query for the word "God." They found that of the images that depict God in a [human form](#), 72 percent were of a white man (6 percent were images of actor Morgan Freeman, who portrayed God in the 2003 film *Bruce Almighty*).

Given the pervasive depiction of God as a white man, Roberts wanted to see whether people believed that to be true. The researchers recruited 444 U.S. Christians and showed them 12 pairs of faces that differed in age, race and gender. They were asked which face in the pair looked more God-like.

Overall, the researchers found that participants reported that God was more male than female. They also found that white Christians were more likely to say God was white and black Christians were more likely to say God was black.

"It was somewhat shocking that our participants explicitly attributed a gender and a race to God," Roberts said.

Roberts wanted to test that finding with beliefs about who should be in leadership.

For their second study, the researchers recruited a new sample of 1,012 U.S. Christians. In addition to completing the same set of questions and exercise administered in the first study, respondents were asked to imagine that they worked for a company that was hiring a new supervisor. They were then shown faces of 32 job applicants and asked to rate how well each applicant would fit the supervisory position.

Roberts found that when Christians conceptualized God as white and male, they rated white male job applicants more favorably than white female candidates, who were rated more favorably than black male and black female candidates. This result was found with white, black, male and female respondents.

"The conception of a white male God, which we are constantly exposed to, has important consequences for who we think should and should not be in charge," Roberts said.

## **What children think God looks like**

Given the prevalence of the image of God as a white male among adults, Roberts was also curious to know how these effects unfolded with U.S. Christian children.

"If kids think of God as a white man, they may grow up thinking that only [white men](#) should lead," Roberts said. "If true, we would want to early on encourage children to see everyone as potential leaders, regardless of their race or gender."

The researchers recruited 176 children between the ages of 4 and 12 at their Sunday school at eight churches—five in Northern California and three in North Carolina.

Some of these children were asked to draw a picture of God. They were given a blank piece of paper and 14 crayons that included a variety of skin tones and colors.

These images were then shown to a sample of 224 adults who were asked to identify each image by age, race and gender (for example, they were asked whether they thought the drawing depicted an old or young person, black or white, male or female). To ensure that people were objective in their ratings, religious imagery was scrubbed out of the drawings so it was unclear they were illustrations of God.

Overall, adults rated the children's drawings as more male than female and more white than black.

These ratings also corresponded with how children selected leaders. Children were shown 12 faces of different people, male and female, black and white, and asked: "There are lots and lots of people at the place where I work. But only three of them are bosses. Which three do you think are the bosses?"

Roberts found that the whiter the child's picture of God was rated, the more that child rated white people as more boss-like.

"Even early in life, the belief that God is white shapes how children

evaluate actual human beings," Roberts said.

## Beyond Christianity, race and gender

The other four studies reported in the paper extended beyond the context of a Judeo-Christian God. These studies introduced adult Christians and atheists as well as preschoolers who had never heard of God to a made-up deity from a fictitious planet. The researchers found that participants still used a god's identity to draw conclusions about who is suitable for leadership.

"Collectively, our data provide robust support for a profound conclusion: Beliefs about who rules in heaven predict beliefs about who rules on Earth," the researchers wrote in the paper.

**More information:** Steven O. Roberts et al. God as a White man: A psychological barrier to conceptualizing Black people and women as leadership worthy, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/pspi0000233](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000233)

Provided by Stanford University

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