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The Relationship between God's Gender, Gender System Justification and Sexism

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Abstract

Behavioral scientists and feminist theologians have long theorized that religions that primarily conceptualize God (and other divine authority figures) as male can legitimatize the social and political authority of men in society, as well as legitimatize and rationalize gender inequality. In the current study, we examined the relationship between gendered God concepts, Gender Specific System Justification and Ambivalent Sexism. In Studies 1 and 2 we found that individuals with male God concepts were higher in Gender Specific System Justification, hostile sexism (Study 1 and 2) and benevolent sexism (Study 2). In Study 3 we explored the causal relationship between gendered God concepts, Gender Specific System Justification and Ambivalent Sexism using a priming manipulation. Results revealed that individuals primed to think about God as male (vs female) were more likely to

support the gender status quo. The effects found across all three studies did not differ across participant gender. Both men and women who conceptualized God as male or were primed with a male image of God were higher in Gender Specific System Justification than other gendered conceptualizations of God. Taken together these results suggest that male God concepts may reinforce the gender status quo. Implications, limitations and future research directions are discussed.

> "For a man indeed ought not to cover *his* head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man." Corinthians 11.7

> "Religions centered on the worship of a male God create 'moods' and 'motivations' that keep women in a state of psychological dependence on men and male authority, while at the same time legitimating the political and social authority of fathers and sons in the institutions of society" – Carol Christ

Beliefs and attitudes about male and female gender roles in the United States have gotten less conservative and more egalitarian in recent years relative to earlier decades. The percentage of men and women who endorse traditional gender roles has dropped substantially since the 1970's (Galinsky et al., [18]), and people are more likely to challenge gendered divisions of labor inside and outside the home (Bolzendahl & Myers, [4]). In addition to changes to societal beliefs and attitudes regarding traditional gender roles, in the last decade women have also experienced social, political, and economic advances. For example, a record number of women ran for public office in 2012, the 116th Congress has the highest percentage of women serving in Congress in U.S. history and the gender pay gap has narrowed (Desliver, [14]; Geiger & Parker, [20]). Despite these advances however, significant gender disparities still remain. Only 23.7 percent of the Congress is made up of women despite women making up more than half of the U.S. population and women continue to be paid less than their male counterparts (i.e., on average a woman earns 80 cents for every earned dollar by a man; Brown, [5]).[1]

Social scientists and feminist theorists suggest one reason gender inequality is able to persist and coexist with social progress in the United States is because ideological patriarchy (i.e., a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property) is deeply embedded in the social fabric of society. Consequently, patriarchy is perpetuated by socializing agents and institutions and reinforced daily across a variety of contexts (Andersen et al., [2]; Valdes, [39]).

Religion in particular, has been identified as one of the major perpetuators and reinforcers of patriarchal ideology (Albee & Perry, [1]; Daly, [11]; Klingorova & Havlíček, [33]). Conservative beliefs, attitudes and practices centered around gendered authority in institutions such as marriage, family, home, church and politics have historically been endorsed by the world's major religions (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) across various societies around the world (Klingorova & Havlíček, [33]). Furthermore, feminist theologians and behavioral scientists alike have argued that religions that primarily conceptualize God as male (and other divine authority figures) versus other gendered conceptualizations, serve to legitimize male authority across various social and political contexts (Christ, [10]; Daly, [11]; Howard et al., [29]; Whitehead, [40]). Thus, it can be theorized that individuals with masculine conceptualization of God, versus other conceptualizations of God, may be more likely to legitimatize and rationalize unequal treatment between men and women as just and appropriate.

In the current research, we aim to advance the conceptualization of God literature by examining the relationship between gendered God concepts, Gender Specific System Justification, and sexism. In particular, we examine whether male conceptualizations of God are related to Gender Specific System Justification and sexism (i.e., Studies 1 and 2). Additionally, we assess the causality of this relationship through the use of a priming manipulation (i.e., Study 3). Research suggests that the way individuals conceptualize God reflects their explicit and implicit moral and philosophical worldviews (Davis & Federico, [12]; Froese & Bader, [17]; Greeley, [23]; Heiphetz et al., [27]); thus it is important to examine how gendered God concepts are related to individuals' beliefs regarding gender equality, especially given that most individuals who believe in God believe that God has a gender (Harris Poll, [26]).

Gendered God concepts and rigid ideologies

A growing body of literature in sociology, psychology and political science has become interested in exploring the relationship between gendered God concepts and rigid ideologies. This work has primarily focused on exploring whether a masculine conceptualization of God is related to more conservative or rigid attitudes or beliefs. For example, using the 2007 Baylor Religion Survey (BRS), Whitehead ([40]) examined the relationship between gendered God concepts and traditional gender ideology (i.e., believing most men are better suited for politics than women, a preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works, it is God's will that women care for children, and a husband should earn a larger salary than his wife). He found that individuals who conceptualize God as a male, relative to other conceptualizations of God, were the highest in traditional gender ideology. This relationship remained significant even when controlling for variables that often influence religious and gender related attitudes (e.g., frequency of church attendance, frequency of prayer/meditation, frequency of reading sacred scriptures, socioeconomic status). Using the same BRS dataset, Whitehead ([41]), also found that individuals who believe God is male held less favorable attitudes toward same-sex unions, which is often viewed as a threat to traditional gender roles and patriarchal family values, than those who do not view God as masculine. As with his earlier work, this relationship remained significant when controlling for frequency of church attendance, frequency of prayer/meditation, frequency of reading sacred scriptures, and socioeconomic status.

Building upon Whitehead's ([40], [41]) work, Cassese and Holman ([8]) explored the relationship between belief in a masculine God, preferences for traditional gender roles, and political conservatism. They also examined how adherence to gendered notions of divine authority influenced political identity and policy preferences. Not only did Cassese and Holman replicate Whitehead's ([40]) results which found that masculine God concepts were a strong predictor of support for traditional gender roles, they also found that masculine images of God were associated with more conservative partisan and ideological identifications, even when controlling for religious denomination, biblical literalism, and religious intensity. They also found that masculine God concepts were also related to more conservative attitudes regarding policies associated with marriage and family (i.e., gay marriage and reproductive choice).

In addition to being strongly correlated with conservative traditional gender roles and political conservatism, masculine God concepts have also been found to be positively correlated with right-wing authoritarianism ([RWA] Howard et al., [29]). RWA is a multidimensional ideological variable characterized as adherence to a broad set of social attitudes and moral values (Duckitt, [15]; Duckitt et

al., [16]). RWA comprises three social attitude dimensions: conventionalism (i.e., attitudes favoring conformity to established group norms and values), authoritarian submission (i.e., attitudes favoring obedience to group leaders and authorities), and authoritarian aggression (i.e., attitudes favoring harsh, coercive social control; Duckitt et al., [16]). Across two studies, one conducted at a Catholic university and the other with a national sample, Howard and colleagues found that individuals who believed God to be male had higher levels of RWA-Aggression (Study 1 and 2), RWA–Submission (Study 1 and 2), and RWA–Conventionalism (Study 2) than individuals with other gendered or nongendered conceptualizations of God.

Recently, work by Baker and Whitehead ([3]) has also demonstrated believing God is male is also strongly correlated with punitiveness and militarism. After accounting for other God concepts, other religious identification (e.g., fundamentalism) and religious practices (e.g., frequency of religious attendance) Whitehead found that believing God is male increases support for harsh domestic social policies targeting criminals and general militarism and foreign policy campaigns targeting individuals who were seen as terrorists.

Taken together, the literature reviewed in this section supports the theory that a masculine conceptualization of God may serve to legitimatize the social and political authority of men in society, as well as legitimatize and rationalize unequal treatment between men and women as just and appropriate. Although the burgeoning gendered-God concept literature has examined the relationship between masculine God concepts and traditional gender ideology (Cassese & Holman, [8]; Whitehead, [40]), there have been no studies to date that have examined the relationship between gendered God concepts and support for the system of gender inequality specifically. In other words, the relationship between gendered God concepts, Gender Specific System Justification and sexism have not yet been examined.

Gendered God concepts, gender system justification and sexism

Recent theorizing suggests that "an important but underappreciated function of religion is to provide ideological justification for the existing social order, and to establish the perception that prevailing institutions and arrangements are legitimate and just, and therefore worth obeying and preserving" (Jost et al., [31], p. 2). And as the opening quote from Carol Christ illustrates, women studies scholars and feminist theologians have been making similar arguments, specifically regarding the justification for gender inequality, for decades (Christ, [10]; Daly, [11]). Although no studies have examined the relationship between religion, specifically gendered God concepts, and Gender Specific System Justification directly, several empirical investigations have examined the relationship between religion and sexism more broadly (e.g., see Cassese, [7]). However, due to ambivalent attitudes toward women, the results of these studies have been mixed (Hannover et al., [25]). Because traditional relationships between men and women are complementary (i.e., strong interdependence), sexist attitudes toward women are ambivalent and include both benevolence and hostility (Glick & Fiske, [21]). Whereas, hostile sexism is characterized with hostility and resentment toward women who reject (or are perceived to reject) conventional gender roles and/or women who are believed to be trying to take power away from men, benevolent sexism reflects loving, protective, but patronizing attitudes toward women who adhere to traditional gender roles (Glick & Fiske, [21]). Empirical studies typically demonstrate that conservative religious beliefs and religiosity is associated with these different

components of sexism (Burn & Busso, [6]; Hill et al., [28]; McFarland, [34]). For example, although Hill et al. ([28]) found that those high in religious fundamentalism were more likely to be higher in *both* hostile and benevolent sexism than those low in religious fundamentalism, most studies only demonstrate a positive correlation between religiosity and benevolent sexism (Gaunt, [19]; Glick et al., [22]; Mikołajczak & Pietrzak, [35]).

Thus, in addition to gendered conceptualizations of God being related to gender system justifying beliefs, they may also be related to just benevolent sexism, hostile sexism or both. Because masculine images of God may symbolize male superiority (i.e., associating maleness with Godliness, Daly, [11]), those with a masculine image of God versus other gendered images of God, may also endorse hostile sexism. Masculine images of God may also be related to benevolent sexism because a male is in the role of authority and is viewed as a protector. For example, in Catholicism, the Church itself is gendered as female and it is male priests' responsibility to take care of and protect her (Glick et al., [22]). And although priest are not God, in Catholicism they are expected to adhere to *in persona Christi*, a Latin phrase meaning "in the person of Christ."

Present research

In three studies, we examined the relationship between gendered God concepts, Gender Specific System Justification and sexism. Studies 1 and 2 examined the relationship between gendered God concepts, Gender System Justification and Ambivalent Sexism in undergraduates at a Catholic university in the United States and an online national sample in the United States, respectively. In light of recent theorizing and research on the influence of gendered God concepts on traditional gender ideology and attitudes, we hypothesized that individuals (i.e., both men and women) with male conceptualizations of God (a) would be more likely to endorse gender system justifying beliefs than those with other gendered conceptualizations. Given the mixed nature of research on the relationship between general religiosity and Ambivalent Sexism, and to our knowledge, no research yet investigating the association between gendered God concepts and Ambivalent Sexism, we refrained from formulating a directional hypothesis specifying differences on hostile and benevolent sexism based on individuals' gendered conceptualizations of God.

In Study 3 we primed undergraduates at a Catholic university in the U.S. to examine whether there was a causal relationship between gendered God concepts and gendered system justifying believes and Ambivalent Sexism. Participants read a passage lightly revised from a passage in bible, where God was described using gendered pronouns. It was hypothesized that individuals primed with a male conceptualization of God will be more likely to endorse Gender Specific System Justification than those primed with a female conceptualization of God. As in Studies 1 and 2, we also refrained from formulating directional hypotheses specifying differences on hostile and benevolent sexism based on biasing individuals' gendered conceptualizations of God. Collectively, these studies shed new light on how gendered conceptualizations of God shape gender beliefs and attitudes.

Study 1

Methods

Participants

Two hundred four participants from a midsized, private Catholic university participated in this study for partial course credit. Data from fourteen participants were removed from the analyses due to excessively incomplete surveys (*n* = 7), excessively fast responding (defined as less than one-third of the completing time, *n* = 6) and inconsistent responding (*n* = 1), resulting in a sample of 190 participants. The mean age of the participants was 18.94 years (SD = 1.24, Median = 19 years). Approximately half of the participants were women (*n* = 95), 89 were men, and 6 did not provide a gender. The majority of the participants were White (*n* = 129, 67.9%), 7 reported African American ethnicity (3.7%), 25 indicated Asian ethnicity (13.2%), 15 indicated Latino/a ethnicity (7.9%) and 14 reported other ethnicities (7.4%). The majority of the participants indicated they were heterosexual (n = 178, 93.7%). Most of the participants indicated Catholic religious affiliation (n = 129, 68%), 9 indicated evangelical Christian affiliation (4.7%), 11 indicated mainline protestant affiliation (5.8%), 8 reported not being religious (4.3%) and 28 participants indicated a different religious affiliation (14.7%). For a comparison of demographics for all three samples in the current paper and the Baylor Religion Survey see Table 1.

Table 1. Comparisons across samples across all studies and the Baylor religion survey for male God conceptualization and other demographic information.

	Undergraduate Sample (Study 1)	National Sample (Study 2)	Undergraduate Sample (Study 3)	National Sample (Baylor)
Total Sample	190	373	228	1572
Mean Age	18.94 (1.24)	39.14 (13.12)	18.86 (1.10)	45.40 (21.02)
Female	50%	55.2%	52.2%	53%
Male	46.84%	44.5%	47.8	47%
American Indian* (Native American)	1%	1.60%	1%	2.09%*
Asian or Pacific Islander	13.2%	7.8%	9.6%	1.46%
Black/African American	3.7%	7.5%	4.4%	12.4%
White	67.9%	75.3%	72.4%	74.49%
Latino (ethnicity any race)	7.9%	5.6%	15.4%	12.65%
View God as a Man (or Fatherly*)	67.9%	38.3%	– –	67.5%
Catholic/Roman Catholic	68%	17.6%	62.3%	24.1%
Evangelic Christian	4.7%	18%	6.1%	29.7%
Mainland Protestant	5.8%	12.6%	2.2%	16.3%
Jewish	1.7%	2.1%	1.1%	1.5%
No Religious Affiliation	4.3%	11.5%	9.2%	15.6%

Measures

Ambivalent sexism inventory
The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, [21]) was used to measure hostile and benevolently sexist attitudes. The scale consists of 22 items that get at hostile (e.g., "Women are too easily offended," "Women seek to gain power by getting control over men") and benevolently sexist beliefs (e.g., "No matter how accomplished he is, a man is not truly complete as a person unless he has the love of a woman," "Women should be cherished and protected by men"), measured on a 5-point scale (*1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree)*. The Cronbach alphas demonstrated adequate reliability: benevolent sexism =.77 and hostile sexism =.86.

Gender specific system justification
The Gender Specific System Justification (Jost & Kay, [32]) consist of eight items measured on a 9-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 9 = Strongly Agree). The Cronbach alpha was.81. Sample items includes "In general, relations between men and women are fair," and "Society is set up so that men and women usually get what they deserve."

Gendered image of God
Participants were asked "Based on your understanding of God, is God:" with response options of a male, a female, both male and female, something else, don't know. Participants indicated their one response.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from a psychology department participant pool and participated in the study for partial course credit. Participants completed the study in a private testing room in a department laboratory. All surveys were provided online via Qualtrics. Participants first answered the question about their view of God, then completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory and Gender Specific System Justification measures (randomly presented), and demographics were completed last. These data were collected as part of a larger, study about images of God (Howard, Oswald, & Kirkman, [29]).

Study 1 results

Participants largely held a masculine image of God, with 129 indicating that they believed God was a male (67.9%), 3 indicated God was a female (16%), 11 believed God to be both male and female (n = 5.8), 35 indicated something else (18.4%) and 5 indicating they did not know (2.6%). Seven participants did not provide a response about their gender image of God. For data analysis purposes we created two groups, those who believe in a masculine god (n = 129) and all others (n = 54).

The three measures of interest were all positively correlated. Gender Specific System Justification was positively correlated with benevolent sexism (r =.18, *p* <.01) and hostile sexism (r =.58, *p* <.01). Hostile and benevolent sexism were positively correlated (r =.39, *p* <.01). A 2 (participant gender) x 2 (gendered God image: masculine or other) ANOVA were examined for each of the three variables of interest.

For Gender Specific System Justification, we found a main effect of participant gender which indicated that men (M = 5.50, SD = 1.40) endorsed this belief more than did women (M = 4.72, SD = 1.33), $F(1, 145)$ = 7.41, p <.01, partial η^2 =.05. We also found a main effect of God concept, which indicated that those with a masculine image of God (M = 5.16, SD = 1.37) endorsed Gender Specific System Justification more than did those individuals with a different gendered image of God (M = 4.72, SD = 1.50), $F(1, 145)$ = 4.07, p <.01, partial η^2 =.03.

For hostile sexism, the main effect of participant gender indicated that men (M = 2.29, SD =.87) endorsed this belief marginally more than women (M = 1.94, SD =.93), $F(1, 145)$ = 3.69, p =.06, partial η^2 =.03. The main effect of God image indicated that those with a masculine image of God (M = 2.20, SD =.91) endorsed hostile sexist beliefs more than did those individuals with a different gendered image of God (M = 1.75, SD =.85), $F(1, 145)$ = 8.72, p <.01, partial η^2 =.06.

For benevolent sexism, the main effect of participant gender indicated that men (M = 2.60, SD =.72) endorsed this belief more so than women (M = 2.13, SD =.78), $F(1, 145)$ = 10.01, p <.01, partial η^2 =.07. The main effect of God image was not significant indicating that those with a masculine image of God (M = 2.36, SD =.78) did not differ on benevolent sexism from those individuals with a different gendered image of God (M = 2.25, SD =.81), $F(1, 145)$ =.99, p =.32, partial η^2 =.007.

Discussion

The results from Study 1 are the first, to our knowledge, to provide some initial evidence that gendered conceptualizations of God are associated with gender system justifying beliefs and sexism. Specifically, in line with our predictions, we found that individuals who conceptualized God as male are more likely to view the current gender status quo as fair. These results are in line with previous research that has found that a masculine image of God is associated with traditional gender ideology (Cassese & Holman, [8]; Whitehead, [40]). We also found that individuals with masculine conceptualizations of God were also more likely to endorse hostile sexist beliefs than individuals with a different gendered image of God, however, gendered God concepts were not related to benevolent sexist beliefs.

As stated earlier, general trait religiosity (e.g., self-reported measures of overall religious devotion or participation in religious activity) and conservative religious ideology (e.g., religious fundamentalism) is usually related to benevolent sexism, but not hostile sexism (cf. Hill et al., [28]), however, we found that male God concepts were positively related to hostile sexism, while having no relationship with benevolent sexism. Our results may suggest that God concepts, particularly masculine images of God, are differently associated with sexism than conservative religious ideologies (e.g., religious fundamentalism) and general trait religiosity.

Past research has demonstrated that God concepts and religiosity can have distinct relationships with attitudes and behaviors. For example, trait religiosity is not associated with an individuals' cheating behavior contrary to theoretical predictions that increased religiosity would be associated with less cheating behavior (Grimes & Rezek, [24]; Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, [37]). The way an individual conceptualizes God, however, is associated with cheating behavior (Shariff & Norenzayan, [38]). Individuals who conceptualized God as angry and punishing are less likely to cheat than those who conceptualized God as loving and compassionate. Thus, a masculine image of God which has been

theorized to associate maleness with Godliness (i.e., suggesting male superiority and non-male inferiority) may be positively related to hostile but not benevolent sexism. On the other hand, given that many religions prescribe traditional gender-role divisions and promote messages of protective paternalism, complementary gender differentiation, and heterosexual intimacy, while explicitly rejecting hostile sexism (Glick et al., [22]), trait religiosity may be more likely to be associated with benevolent sexism. Further research is necessary to explore this possibility. Additionally, because our sample consisted of undergraduate students at a Catholic University, our results may not generalize beyond this sample.

To address the limitation of our sample in Study 1 being relatively homogeneous in regards to religious affiliation, we designed Study 2 in an attempt to replicate our main finding of interest (i.e., those who conceptualize God as male are more like to justify the gender status quo) with a national sample more diverse in terms of age and religious affiliation. Additionally, we were interested to further explore the relationship between gendered God concepts and Ambivalent Sexism.

Study 2

Participants
Three hundred and ninety-four people completed the survey online. Twenty-one people were removed from the sample due to unreasonably fast responding (defined as less than one third of the median completion time). This resulted in a sample of 373. Two hundred six participants were women (55.2%), 166 were men (44.5%), and one person did not identify a gender. Almost half of the sample had a bachelor's ($n = 123$, 33%) or graduate degree ($n = 55$, 14.7%), 55 had an associates degree (14.7%) 93 people had completed some college (24.9%), 44 had completed high school or a GED (11.8%) and two did not have a college degree. The sample was predominately White ($n = 281$, 75.3%), 28 people identified as Black/African American (7.5%), 29 as Asian or Pacific Islander (7.8%), Latino/a ($n = 17$, 5.6%), and 18 reported another ethnicity (4.8%). For religious affiliation, 66 (17.7%) indicated being Catholic, 67 (18%) indicated Evangelical Christian, 47 (12.6%) indicated mainline Protestant, 8 (2.1%) indicated Jewish, 4 (1.1%) indicated Muslim, 5 (1.3%) indicated Buddhist, 19 (5%) indicated another religions, 51 (13.7%) indicated Atheist, 52 (13.9%) indicated agnostic, 43 (11.5%) indicated no religious affiliation, and 3 (.8%) preferred not saying. The majority of the participants reported being heterosexual ($n = 337$, 90.3%). The median age was 39.14 (SD = 13.12) ranging from 19 to 77 years.

Measures
Participants completed the same set of measures as in the first sample. This included the Gender Specific System Justification scale (Jost & Kay, [32]; study Cronbach α =.92), and the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, [21]) with Hostile Sexism (Cronbach α =. 92) and Benevolent Sexism (Cronbach α =.88) subscales. These surveys were randomly presented as part of a larger study on gender images of God. However, in this study the question about gender image of God was placed at the end with the demographics to ensure that it did not have any unintended priming effects when placing the question before the gender belief measures.

Procedure

Data were collected using Qualtrics. Participants were recruited via MTurk and were paid 0.50 USD for their completion. Participants completed the survey online in a location and at a time convenient to them.

Study 2 results

Gender Specific System Justification was correlated with benevolent sexism $(r = .21, p < .01)$ and hostile sexism $(r = .41, p < .01)$. Hostile and benevolent sexism were correlated $(r = .45, p < .01)$.

Because of the larger range of gender-related images of God we were able to classify people into additional groups. Specifically, we created four groups: those with a male image of God $(n = 143, 38.3\%)$, those whose image included a female God $(n = 35, 9.4\%)$, those who viewed God as "something else" $(n = 117, 31.4\%)$ and those who reported "don't know" for the gender of God image question $(n = 78, 20.9\%)$. Thus, we did a 2 (participant gender) x 4 (gender image of God) ANOVA on the three dependent variables of interest (See Table 2 for means across the gender of God image groups).

Table 2. Means for study 2 comparing across gender image of God groups.

	Male Image	Feminine image	Something else	Don't know
Gender Specific System Justification	5.92 (1.52)a	4.46 (1.65)b	5.03 (1.69)b	5.20 (1.81)b
Hostile Sexism	2.26 (1.09)a	1.76 (1.16)b*	1.65 (1.19)b	1.50 (1.04)b
Benevolent Sexism	2.43 (1.06)a	2.15 (1.14)b	1.84 (1.07)b	1.89 (1.12)b

Different subscripts indicate significant differences, Tukey post hoc $(p < .05)$. b indicates significantly different at $p < .05$. b* indicates marginally significantly different at $p = 07$.

For Gender Specific System Justification, there was a significant main effect for Gender of God Image $(F(3, 364) = 11.30, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .09)$ and post hoc tests indicated that those with a male image of God were higher on Gender Specific System Justification than all three of the other groups. However, the other groups did not differ from each other. The main effect for participant gender was not significant $(F(1,364) = .73, p = .40, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .002)$ indicating that men $(M = 5.50, SD = 1.65)$ and women $(M = 5.23, SD = 1.75)$ in this sample had similar levels of Gender Specific System Justification.

For hostile sexism, there was a significant main effect for Gender of God Image $(F(3, 364) = 11.01, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .08)$ and post hoc tests indicated that those with a male image of God were marginally $(p = .08)$ higher than those with a female included image of God and significantly higher than those who did not know or think of God as something else. The other groups did not differ significantly from each other. There was also a significant main effect of participant gender $(F(1,364) = 6.35, p = .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .02)$ such that men $(M = 2.05, SD = 1.15)$ reported higher levels of hostile sexism than did women $(M = 1.71, SD = 1.15)$.

For benevolent sexism, there was a significant main effect for Gender of God Image $(F(3, 364) = 8.70, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .07)$ and post hoc tests indicated that those with a male image of God were significantly higher in benevolent sexism than those who reported believing in something else or that they don't know. There were no other significant comparisons. There was also a significant main effect

of participant gender ($F(1,364) = 10.17$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$) and men ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.05$) reported higher levels of benevolent sexism than did women ($M = 1.92$, $SD = 1.13$).

Discussion

As in Study 1, we found that that gendered conceptualizations of God are associated with Gender Specific System Justification. We replicate the finding that individuals with masculine images of God are also more likely to endorse Gender Specific System Justification, thus providing more evidence that masculine images of God are associated with beliefs that the current gender status quo is fair and legitimate. Like Study 1, we found that those with masculine conceptualizations of God were also more likely to endorse hostile sexist beliefs than individuals with a different gendered image of God. However, unlike Study 1 where we found no relationship between gendered God concepts and benevolent sexism, we did find a significant relationship between the two constructs. We found that those with those with a male image of God were significantly higher in benevolent sexism than those who reported believing that God's gender was something other than male or female or that they did not know. One explanation for the difference in our findings across studies is religious affiliation. Whereas participants in Study 1 were primarily Catholic (68%), participants in Study 2 were more religiously diverse. Past research has found that different religious affiliations are related to Ambivalent Sexism (Hannover et al., [25]). Future research may want to examine whether certain religious affiliations lead to different relationships with Ambivalent Sexism and gendered God concepts more systematically.

Taken together, Studies 1 and 2 provide compelling evidence that a masculine conceptualization of God is associated with Gender Specific System Justification. Mary Daly has argued that "individuals who view God as masculine are signaling a belief in an underlying gendered reality that influences their perceptions of the proper ordering of that reality." If Daly and others are correct in their theorizing (Whitehead, [40], [41]), getting individuals to think about God as non-masculine, specifically as female, may disrupt that gendered reality and thus reduce Gender Specific System Justification. In Study 3 we aimed to examine a casual relation relationship between gendered conceptualizations of God and Gender Specific System Justification. Specifically we were interested in whether priming individuals to think about God as a woman, through the use of female pronouns, would lead individuals to endorse the gender status quo less than individuals primed with male gendered pronouns or no pronouns. Because Ambivalent Sexism was measured in both Studies 1 and 2, we also included measures of hostile and benevolent sexism although we did not have direction hypotheses regarding the effect of gendered God concepts on either dimension. However, one could reason based on the results from Study 1 and 2, that being primed with a female conceptualization of God may reduce both hostile and benevolent sexism.

Study 3

Participants

Two hundred thirty-five participants were recruited from a psychology department subject pool and completed the study as partial fulfillment of course requirements. Three participants data were eliminated due to excessive missing data and four were eliminated because of illogical response patterns. This resulted in a sample of 228 participants reported on in the analyses. There were 119

women (52.2%) and 109 men (47.8%) in the sample. The majority were White (n = 165, 72.4%), 10 were African American (4.4%), 22 were Asian or Pacific Islander (9.6%), 35 were Latino/a (15.4%) and 11 (4.8%) indicated other or biracial ethnicity. The majority indicated heterosexual orientation (n = 195, 85.5%). The majority indicated religious affiliation of Catholic (n = 142, 62.3%), 14 (6.1%) indicated Evangelical Christian, 5 (2.2%) indicated Mainline Protestant, 6 (2.6%) indicated Orthodox Christian, 23 (10.1%) indicated another religion, 14 (6.1%) indicated Atheist, 13 (5.7%) indicated Agnostic, 8 (3.5%) indicate other non-religion, and 3 (1.3%) preferred not to say. The mean age was 18.86 (SD = 1.10).

Measures

As in the first study, participants completed the Gender Specific System Justification scale (Jost & Kay, [32]; current study Cronbach alpha =.90), and the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, [21]) measuring hostile (Cronbach alpha =.89) and benevolent sexist beliefs (Cronbach alpha =.82). Demographics, including gendered belief in God, were collected last.

In order to manipulate people's perceptions of God's gender three passages were created. All passages were identical except for the gendered pronouns used in the passage (i.e., male or female pronouns). The control condition did not use pronouns and only referred to God as God or the figure. The passage was about Ezekiel's Vision of God by the River Kebar and was slightly adapted for brevity (e.g., Ezekiel 1:1 and 1:26; See Appendix A).

Procedure

Participants were recruited from the same private, Catholic university department subject pool as in Study 1A. All participants were tested on a computer in a private testing room and all study materials were programed in Qualtrics. Participants first read three short paragraphs supposedly as part of a "reading comprehension phase" of the study. To maintain the cover story, following each paragraph participants were asked to rate the quality of the paragraph and write 1–2 sentences about the paragraph topic. The third paragraph was the key paragraph and contained the experimental paragraph. Participants were randomly assigned to read a passage about either a feminine image of God, a masculine image of God, or (control) a neutral paragraph.

Following the reading comprehension phase participants were prompted to provide their "personal opinions" and then completed the Gender Specific System Justification survey (Jost & Kay, [32]) and Ambivalent Sexism scale (Glick & Fiske, [21]). The demographic section was completed last. Upon completion of the study participants were thanked and given their study participation card by the experimenter.

Study 3 results

We conducted a 2 (participant gender) x 3 (God image condition) ANOVA with Tukey post hoc tests (p <.05) for each on the three variables of interest.

For Gender Specific System Justification, the ANOVA had a significant main effect for participant gender (F(1, 222) = 15.88, p <.01, partial η^2 =.07) such that men (M = 5.74, SD = 1.37) were higher than women (M = 5.05, SD = 1.28). The main effect for Gender Image Condition was also significant (F(2, 222) = 3.61, p =.03, partial η^2 =.03) and post hoc tests indicated that Gender Specific System Justification was significantly higher in the male God image condition (M = 5.63, SD = 1.35) than the

female God image condition (*M* = 5.07, *SD* = 1.18), although the control condition was not significantly different from the other two conditions (*M* = 5.46, *SD* = 1.50) (see Table 3 for condition means).

Table 3. Means for study 3 comparing across gendered pronoun God prime.

	Male Pronoun	Female Pronoun	No Pronoun
Gender Specific System Justification	5.63 (1.35)a	5.07 (1.18)b	5.46 (1.50)
Hostile Sexism	1.76 (.88)	1.57 (.97)a	1.91 (1.01)b
Benevolent Sexism	2.17 (.92)	1.97 (.97)a	2.30 (.82)b

Different subscripts indicate significant differences, Tukey post hoc (*p* <.05). b indicates significantly different at *p* <.05.

The main effect of participant gender was significant for both hostile sexism ($F(1, 222)$ = 24.81, *p* <.01, partial η^2 =.10) and benevolent sexism ($F(1, 222)$ = 19.22, *p* <.01, partial η^2 =.08). In both cases, men reported higher levels of sexism ($M_{hostile}$ = 2.06, *SD* =.85; $M_{benevolent}$ = 2.41, *SD* =.78) than did women ($M_{hostile}$ = 1.46, *SD* =.98; $M_{benevolent}$ = 1.90, *SD* =.96). The main effect of God image condition was marginally significant for hostile sexism ($F(2, 222)$ = 2.53, *p* =.08, partial η^2 =.02) such that people in the female image condition (*M* = 1.57, *SD* =.97) reported lower rates of hostile sexism than those in the control condition (*M* = 1.91, *SD* = 1.01), but the male image condition (*M* = 1.76, *SD* =.88) did not differ from the other two conditions. Similarly, there was a marginally significant main effect of God image condition for benevolent sexism ($F(2, 222)$ = *2.59, p* =.08, partial η^2 =.02) with the female god image condition (*M* = 1.97, *SD* =.97) reporting lower benevolent sexism than the control condition (*M* = 2.30, *SD* =.82), but the male condition (*M* = 2.17, *SD* =.92) did not differ from the other two conditions.

Discussion

We hypothesized that individuals primed to think about God as female would be lower in Gender Specific System Justification than individuals primed with masculine conceptualizations of God and those primed to think about God with no gendered pronouns mentioned. Our results partially supported our hypothesis. Although participants were lower in Gender Specific System Justification after being primed with female God than those primed with a male God, neither male nor female conceptualizations of God differed from a nongendered conceptualization of God. Given that individuals mental representations of God are most commonly male, even without the explicit mentioning of gendered pronouns (Jackson et al., [30]), we did not expect individuals primed to think about God as male to differ in their endorsement of Gender Specific System Justification than individuals primed to think about God without the explicit mentioning of gendered pronouns. Although, those primed with female gendered conceptualizations also did not differ from those primed with God without gendered pronouns in endorsement of system justification, the pattern of results were in the direction of our predictions.

Additionally, those primed with a female image of God were also lower in both hostile and benevolent sexism than individuals primed to think about God without an explicit mention of a gendered pronoun, although these effects were marginal. Taken together, these results provide some initial evidence that there is a casual influence of gendered God concepts on Gender Specific System Justification and to a lesser extent Ambivalent Sexism.

General discussion

Reported here are the first studies to examine the relationship between gendered God concepts and Gender Specific System Justification. In two correlational studies we find that individuals who conceptualize God as male are more likely to legitimatize the social and political authority of men in society, as well as legitimatize and rationalize unequal treatment between men and women as just and appropriate. In study 3, using priming methodologies we established a causal relationship between male God concepts and Gender Specific System Justification. However, we would like to note that this evidence is preliminary given that individuals primed with a female conceptualization of God did not differ in their endorsement for Gender Specific System Justification relative to individuals primed with God without explicitly mentioned gendered pronouns. Nonetheless, those primed with a male image of God were significantly higher in Gender Specific System Justification than those primed with a female God concept. Additionally, it is also important to note that the effects found across all three studies did not differ across participant gender. Both men and women who conceptualized God as male or were primed with a male image of God were higher in Gender Specific System Justification than other gendered conceptualizations of God.

We also examined the relationship between gendered God concepts and Ambivalent Sexism (i.e., hostile and benevolent sexism). Although we did find that gendered God concepts were positively associated with Ambivalent Sexism, the results for this relationship appear to be slightly less straight forward than the relationship between gendered God concepts and Gender Specific System Justification. In a Catholic sample (Study 1) we find that male God concepts were only associated with hostile sexism, however in an online nation sample, we found that male God concepts were associated with both benevolent and hostile sexism (Study 2). Additionally, in study 3, we found that individuals primed with a female image of God were lower in both hostile and benevolent sexism, although this was only in comparison to individuals primed with God without explicitly mentioned gendered pronouns and the effect was only marginal. Nonetheless, taken together these data suggests that there is a relationship between gendered God concepts and both benevolent and hostile sexism. Future research, however, will be necessary to determine whether the relationship between gendered God concepts and Ambivalent Sexism differs based on religious affiliation and/or other identification markers.

Implications

The results of these three studies suggest that gendered conceptualizations of God, specifically masculine conceptualizations, are associated with attitudes and beliefs that reinforce ideological patriarchy. Organized religions who wish to champion more egalitarian gender beliefs and attitudes may wish to adopt more gender-neutral language when referring to God. Given religious institutions have historically been resistant to change, we know that such changes may be difficult to institute; however, some religious leaders who believe that referring to God as a man impedes gender equity have already been actively trying to get their religious order to use gender neutral language when referring to God (Zauzmer, [42]). For example, Wil Gafney a Reverend for the Episcopal Church and a professor of the Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School in Texas, is on a committee recommending a change to the gendered language in the Book of Common Prayer, a text used in every Episcopal congregation. She argues that "As long as 'men' and 'God' are in the same category, our work toward

equity will not just be incomplete. I honestly think it won't matter in some ways." Additionally, individuals could continue to use gendered language when referring to God but should also use female gendered pronouns (e.g., She, Mother) which could psychological weaken the strong association of men solely being associated with God.

Another implication of the present research is that it highlights the importance of using God concepts as a measure of religiosity. The majority of research in the field of the psychology of religion primarily uses trait religiosity measures (i.e., self-reports of individuals religiousness), religious behaviors and activities (e.g., frequency of church attendance, frequency of prayer) and religious beliefs (e.g., religious fundamentalism) to examine the relationship between religion and people's beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. However, in the last decade individuals' self-reported religiosity has been on the decline, church attendance has declined, and the number of individuals saying they do not have a religious affiliation is on the rise (Froese & Bader, [17]). God concepts may be a good alternative to these traditional measures of religious given more individuals say they believe in God than say they are religious (Froese & Bader, [17]) and most Americans (approximately 89%) say they believe in God (Pew Research Center, [36]). Despite these facts, God concepts and their relationship and influence on individuals' beliefs, attitudes and behavior have often been overlooked. Research on God concepts, particularly gendered God concepts given the ubiquity of the use of male pronouns to refer to God, is imperative.

Limitations and future directions

The current study, however, is not without limitations. First, our study was only conducted in the United States which is a western, primarily protestant country. Thus, we are unsure whether the relationship between gendered God concepts, Gender Specific System Justification and Ambivalent Sexism would hold in other countries with other religious demographics. Given past research has shown that conservative religiosity is associated with conservative gender ideology across cultures (Klingorova & Havlíček, [33]), we expect to see a similar pattern of results, particularly in other westernized countries and societies with monotheistic religious beliefs where it is common to refer to God with masculine pronouns (e.g., Judaism, Islam, Sikhism). It is possible that a different pattern of results for individuals raised in Eastern societies or those raised in societies with polytheistic religions that have many Gods and Goddesses (e.g., Hinduism) or treat God more androgynously. The relationship between gendered God concepts, Gender Specific System Justification and Ambivalent Sexism may be much weaker or nonexistent in these societies given individuals in these societies are exposed to more diverse representations of God (s). The association between maleness and Godliness may not be as strong as it is in monotheistic western countries, thus male God concepts may not be positively associated with Gender Specific System Justification and Ambivalent Sexism. Future research conducted with more religiously diverse samples outside the United States is warranted to address these questions.

Another area for future research is to explore the influence of gendered God concepts on individual's behavior. For example, future research could explore whether priming individuals with female God concepts influences their voting behavior. Individuals primed to think about God as female may be more likely to vote for more gender egalitarian policies or female political candidates. We know from a growing body of literature that there is a strong relationship between Gender System Justification,

Ambivalent Sexism and religiosity in terms of individuals' political behavior, particularly support for women (Cassese, [7]; Cassese & Holman, [8]). Understanding the role that gendered God concepts may add to our understanding of this relationship.

Lastly, because individuals' God concepts develop as early as age 4 (De Roos et al., [13]), future research should also explore the influence of gender God concepts on children's gendered related attitudes and beliefs. Because children are likely to form strong associations between gender and God it is likely that their gendered God concepts influence their attitudes, beliefs and behavior too.

Conclusion

Overall, the present findings demonstrate a relationship between male God concepts and ideologies that legitimatize the social and political authority of men in society, as well as legitimatize and rationalize unequal treatment between men and women as just and appropriate. This work sheds light on how religion, specifically portrayals of God, can influence individuals' beliefs regarding gendered hierarchy, even outside of their awareness. As society begins to "lose their religion," but belief in God stays relatively constant research on the influence of God concepts will become even more important. The present study's findings add to our understanding of the complex relationship between gendered God concepts, support for the gender status quo and sexism, while identifying additional research questions for future exploration.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Appendix A. Gendered God priming manipulation

In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. ... High above the throne was a figure **[like that of a man/woman]**. I saw from what appeared to be **[the figures'/his/her]** waist up, **[the figure/he/she]** looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down **[the figure/he/she]** looked like fire; brilliant light surrounded **[the figure/him/her]**. Like the appearance of a rainbow, so was the radiance around **[the figure/him/her]**. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God and when I saw **[God/him/her]** I fell upon my face

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Footnotes

The pay gap is even larger for nonwhite Latina (i.e., $0.58) and Black women (i.e., $0.61; Brown, [5]).