Intergroup Conflict, Religious Fundamentalism, and Culture

Vassilis Saroglou[1]

Abstract

Kashima underlines the importance of considering religion as a major contemporary cultural source of intergroup conflict around the world. In this commentary, I first examine theory and psychological research either discrediting or crediting religion per se, including fundamentalism, as being a cultural *cause* of intergroup conflict and violence. The evidence is in favor of the latter. Second, I propose a model of cultural psychological *diversity of religious fundamentalism*, across monotheistic religions and denominations. I finally argue, following Kashima's global perspective on the person-culture-nature interactions, that cultural differences in religious fundamentalism may be understood as reflections of longtime interactions between natural and cultural environments and human animals, which, by creating religious (sub)cultures, rebuild, even if frequently with negative consequences, their ecological niches.

Keywords

Religion, morality, intergroup relations, prejudice, cultural psychology, fundamentalism

In his presidential address and subsequent article, Kashima (2016) very accurately underlines, among others, the importance of considering religion as one of the major contemporary cultural sources of intergroup conflict around the world. He reminds us of the classic paradox of religion having historically promoted both (a) prosociality, cooperation, and trust, even among strangers, and (b) intergroup conflict and violence, especially between people and groups that sacralize different non-negotiable objects, events, and values. In parallel, in his article, Kashima (2016) depicts the general trends that help to better understand the cultural psychological phenomena (a) as resulting not only from short-term but also macro-level processes in time (e.g., history) and (b) as reflecting continuous and bi-directional interactions between natural environments (e.g., genes, biology, ecology) and human animals who create culture through building or shaping their niches under selective evolutionary pressures.

In the present brief comment, given the considerable importance of religious intergroup conflict in the world today, an effort will be made to deal with two questions related to the above considerations that could help us to significantly deepen our understanding of the religion-intergroup conflict associations. Is religion a cultural source of intergroup conflict? Moreover, can religious intergroup conflict be understood as a cultural product of niche constructionism?

[1]Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

Corresponding Author:
Vassilis Saroglou, Department of Psychology, Université catholique de Louvain, Place du Cardinal Mercier 10, B 1348, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.
Email: Vassilis.Saroglou@uclouvain.be

Is Religion a Cultural *Cause* of Intergroup Conflict?

People debating in the public domain, as well as scholars across disciplines, often disagree on whether, behind intergroup conflict and violence between different religious groups, one should consider religion per se, that is, religious beliefs, attitudes, practice, or groups, as a *cause* of this conflict.

Discrediting Religion

There is a series of theoretical or empirical arguments which are typically used against the idea that religion plays such a causal role in intergroup prejudice and conflict. First, religions basically preach compassion and altruism; therefore, religious conflict and prejudice should be attributed to "human nature"—or, in psychological terms, to underlying personality factors other than religiosity, such as authoritarianism or cognitive rigidity, or even to socio-demographic variables such as low education. Indeed, several past studies have shown that it is authoritarianism rather than religiosity or even fundamentalism that predicts religious intergroup prejudice (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2005; Hall, Matz, & Wood, 2010).

Second, in a more nuanced line of argumentation, religion or religiosity does not play the/a main role in predicting prejudice, but only amplifies the negative impact of individual dispositions typical of closed-mindedness which lead to outgroup derogation. Indeed, some past studies have shown that the main predictors of religious prejudice are personality dispositions (authoritarianism, need for closure and structure), with religiosity or fundamentalism explaining only some additional variance (e.g., Brandt & Renya, 2010; Hill, Terrell, Cohen, & Nagoshi, 2010). Moreover, experimental evidence indicates that religious ideas alone may be insufficient to activate antisocial behavior, but it is, rather, the interaction between closed-minded personality tendencies (e.g., authoritarianism, submissiveness) and religious primes that boosts, for instance, antisocial moral rigidity (Van Pachterbeke, Freyer, & Saroglou, 2011) and revenge following the experimenter's suggestion (Saroglou, Corneille, & Van Cappellen, 2009).

Third, in a distinct line of argumentation, it is not religion per se—assumed to be intrinsically good, given its devotional dimension—that provokes or amplifies intergroup prejudice and violence, but the very specific, fundamentalist ways (i.e., literal, orthodox, rigid, coalitional) of selecting or interpreting religious ideas, practices, and norms which cause this to happen. Furthermore, many religious believers consider the fundamentalist ways adopted by some believers to be non-authentically religious or even to constitute a perversion of their faith. Interestingly, several studies have confirmed the idea that it is the literal versus symbolic approach to religious ideas, and not the inclusion versus exclusion of transcendence, that predicts dualistic thinking, moral rigidity, foreclosed identity, and outgroup derogation (Duriez, Dezutter, Neyrinck, & Hutsebaut, 2007, for a review; but see Brandt & Van Tongeren, 2015, where religious belief predicts prejudice better than style of belief).

Finally, going even further, it has been argued, in interpreting the results of multiple regressions, that personal, intrinsic religiosity, that is, the devotional dimension of religion, even among fundamentalists, predicts low intergroup conflict and tolerance of various outgroup, including those who threaten religious values (e.g., homosexuals, atheists, feminists). Partialing out the rigid/coalitional dimension of religion or the underlying closed-minded personality dispositions has often revealed outgroup tolerance among the religious, even fundamentalists—a finding that was hidden in zero-order correlations (e.g., Blogowska & Saroglou, 2011; Shen, Haggard, Strassburger, & Rowatt, 2013).

Crediting Religion

These arguments, based on study results and interpretations of findings, demonstrate not only how fascinating the research on religious prejudice is but also how complex the interpretation of

findings can be. However, the above ideas, overall discrediting, at least partially, religion from its causal role in intergroup conflict, seem terribly disconfirmed by real life, that is, strong historic and current evidence on the pervasiveness, strength, and deleterious outcomes of religious violence.

One way to deal with this discrepancy could be to acknowledge that most psychological research on religion and prejudice has been carried out among "ordinary" participants, most often university students, whose high scores on religiosity or fundamentalism do not represent the "real" religious fundamentalists who may come to kill others or be killed in the name of God. Nevertheless, whereas this may be partly true, it seems insufficient. Several studies carried out among adults, in particular those living in places that are prototypical of ethnoreligious conflict such as Israel and Palestine or India and Pakistan (e.g., Ginges, Hansen, & Norenzayan, 2009; Tausch, Hewstone, & Roy, 2009), show results similar to those from studies carried out among U.S., Canadian, or European students.

I will argue here, for both theoretical and empirical reasons, that Kashima (2016) is right to underline the importance of considering religion as a major contemporary cultural source of intergroup conflict around the world. Below I detail the corresponding arguments.

First, inspection of the content of various radical ideologies that attract people who show uncommon zeal leading to radical acts—that is, being killed and/or killing others—suggests that religious radical ideologies are among the most common, together with political-nationalist and political-moral ideologies (e.g., communism, radical environmentalism). It is, thus, problematic to claim that people only "exploit" religion for "bad" motives. On the contrary, considerable affinities exist between certain underlying personal dispositions and some key religious ideas and/or practices. Religious fundamentalism, for example, is certainly not in opposition to, and seemingly not orthogonal to, central religious motives for (a) meaning and absolute truth, (b) behavioral correctness and spirit of sacrifice, and (c) personal and collective self-esteem and feelings of wholeness by belonging to a group perceived as prestigious, eternal, and superior to its competitors; it actually constitutes an intensification of these same motives.

Second, past studies having shown that rigid/conservative personality dispositions, rather than religious attitudes or fundamentalism, explain religious intergroup prejudice have often not controlled for possible multicollinearity between these variables simultaneously entered in the multiple regressions. In other words, results having discredited religiosity or some of its forms (fundamentalism, orthodoxy) as a cause of intergroup conflict may have been artifacts of strong conceptual and empirical overlap between the underlying constructs (see Mavor, Macleod, Boal, & Louis, 2009).

Third, and more importantly, even if such results were not technically due to multicollinearity, it is psychologically problematic to discredit so quickly, in interpreting the findings, one series of predictors, that is, religious variables, from being responsible for intergroup prejudice because of the more central role of the other set of variables, that is, personality differences (see also, Saroglou, 2014). In other words, it is psychologically meaningful and socially important to acknowledge that, and try to understand why, people with conservative, dogmatic, or group-essentialist dispositions find in religion (and not, or less easily, in other domains) beliefs, rituals, emotions, norms, and groups that seem to correspond well to these dispositions and to, at least partly, satisfy the underlying motives.

Fourth, a series of more recent studies have shown that the role of religion in intergroup conflict should no longer be considered global and homogeneous: It importantly depends on the type of outgroup in consideration. In fact, distinctions are to be made between (a) ethnic and racial, (b) other religious, (c) moral (e.g., homosexuals), and (d) fundamental convictional (i.e., atheists) outgroups. Predictors and underlying processes of conflict, or at least the hierarchy of these predictors or processes, may be different as a function of the type of outgroup. This has been found consistently across studies in monotheistic religious contexts (Brandt & Van Tongeren, 2015; Mavor, Louis, & Laythe, 2011; Shen, Yelderman, Haggard, & Rowatt, 2013) or when comparing

the East and the West (Clobert, Saroglou, & Hwang, 2015; Clobert, Saroglou, Hwang, & Soong, 2014). These studies show that, partly because of increased social and religious emphasis on the importance of prohibiting racism and xenophobia and promoting tolerance and religious ecumenism (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Hall et al., 2010), religious prejudice against ethnic and several religious outgroups, at least when prejudice is measured through self-reports among ordinary participants, is not prominent today. Personality dispositions are the main predictors of this kind of prejudice which is often, though not necessarily, present among people who are high in religious fundamentalism. On the contrary, religiosity, even intrinsic religiosity and not only fundamentalism, typically predicts, beyond some impact of personality dispositions, prejudice and discrimination—even when measured by self-reports—against homosexual persons and atheists, both perceived to threaten basic religious-moral values.

Nevertheless, there are two final, and possibly stronger, empirical arguments in favor of the idea that the religion-intergroup conflict link is "real," and possibly exists across all kinds of outgroups and among ordinary participants in psychological studies. First, some studies have investigated religious prejudice not in terms of self-reported attitudes, where self-control and social desirability may create bias in favor of reported tolerance, but in terms of implicit attitudes (usually through the Implicit Association Test) and indirect behavioral measures (e.g., unwillingness to help, which is often discriminatory in comparison with ingroup targets; physical aggression). These studies confirmed the existence of the religion (mostly fundamentalism, sometimes intrinsic religiosity)—prejudice link against not only ethnic and/or religious outgroups (Rowatt & Franklin, 2004; Rowatt, Franklin, & Cotton, 2005) and against moral outgroups, typically homosexuals, but also feminists and single mothers, even when these persons act in contexts which do not imply their "immoral" orientation (Batson, Floyd, Meyer, & Winner, 1999; Blogowska & Saroglou, 2011, Study 1; Blogowska, Saroglou, & Lambert, 2013, Study 2; Jackson & Esses, 1997; Tsang & Rowatt, 2007).

Second, and more importantly with regard to the causal direction issue, a series of recent studies has revealed that subtle religious primes—concepts or symbols presented supraliminally or subliminally—increase/activate negative stereotypes, prejudicial attitudes, and/or discrimination toward various kinds of outgroups, that is, ethnic, religious, moral, and convictional outgroups, as well as women, and do so even in the context of Western secularized countries (Haggard, Kaelen, Saroglou, Rowatt, & Klein, 2015; Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2010, 2012, Study 2; LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, & Finkle, 2012; Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamoa-Nir, 2015). It is interesting to note that in the above-mentioned studies, the religious primes were not selected to be negative in valence or to refer to an institutional-coalitional context but were representative of religion in general and, in some cases, were even previously used in other studies to activate (ingroup) prosociality.

Religious Fundamentalism and Intergroup Conflict as a Cultural Product of Niche Constructionism

Kashima's (2016) idea that niche constructionism offers an explanation for the continuous interaction between (a) human cultural-animal organisms and (b) natural environments that are niches progressively reconstructed by the former may apply to, and help to deepen, our cultural psychological understanding of religions and related intergroup conflicts.

To understand religious intergroup conflict, it is important to take into account three series of factors and their respective interactions: (a) *personality and individual differences*, that is, genetic and biological influences, personality traits, socio-cognitive styles, and emotional regulation abilities (Rowatt, Shen, LaBouff, & Gonzalez, 2013); (b) *current situational environmental factors*, that is, education, socio-economic and socio-developmental factors, society's values, experiences of frustration, minority-majority dynamics, language, and other cultural psychological

Table 1. Cultural Diversity of Religious Fundamentalism Across Monotheisms.

Dimensions of religion	Cultural products	Goals, motives	Types of radicalism	Underlying processes	Fundamentalisms by religion	Cultural niches
Believing	Beliefs, worldviews	Meaning, truth	Dogmatic	Literalism, dogmatism	Protestant	Northern Europe, the United States
Bonding	Rituals, emotions	Emotional self-control, inner peace	Ritualistic	Negative emotionality, magical thinking	Jewish, Christ. Orthodox	East Europe, Mediterranean
Behaving	Norms, moral code	Moral self-control, purity	Moralistic	Rigorism, collectivistic morality	Catholic, Islamic	West. Europe, Middle East
Belonging	Community, groups	Social self-esteem	Identitarian	Ingroup/outgroup separation	Jewish, Christian Orthodox	East Europe, Mediterranean

characteristics; and (c) *long-term cultural, ecological, and historical influences*, that is, geography, ecology, physical threats, ancestral traditions, theological and philosophical traditions, and historical events integrated into collective narratives (Saroglou & Cohen, 2013; see also Neuberg et al., 2014, for the impact of group status).

Although research looking at cultural influences on the ways individuals' fundamentalism and prejudice may be expressed differently between religions or cultures is still needed, it may be interesting to speculate on the idea of religious fundamentalism and related intergroup conflict as a cultural product of niche constructionism. To some extent, similar basic individual (e.g., authoritarianism, need for cognitive closure) and contextual (e.g., frustration, minority status, perceived discrimination) factors seem to, at least in part, explain religious prejudice across religions and cultures. However, there are several initial indicators that religions/cultures may differ in the way religious radicalism is expressed.

All major religions seem to be characterized by the co-presence of four basic dimensions, that is, (a) *believing* in specific non-demonstrable ideas, (b) *bonding* with a transcendence, (c) *behaving* with correctness, and (d) *belonging* to an eternal prestigious group (Saroglou, 2011). However, there are differences between religions/cultures in the intensity of investment in each of these four dimensions within a given society. In addition, each of the four dimensions may be expressed in closed-minded (fundamentalist) or open-minded ways. This translates, respectively, into (a) *literalism/orthodoxy* and *dogmatism* versus symbolism in endorsing religious ideas, (b) *negative emotionality* versus positive emotionality when participating in religious rituals and activities, (c) *moral deontological rigorism* and *collectivistic morality* versus moral flexibility and emphasis on interpersonal morality, and (d) *strong ingroup/outgroup separation* versus permeable religious ingroup identification. In other words, religious rigidity may be primarily *dogmatic, ritualistic, moralistic,* or *identitarian* (see Table 1). Although the four forms of religious radicalism are overall interrelated within individuals and cultures, in any given religion, denomination within a religion, cultural group, or historical period, one or two of these may be more strongly emphasized.

For instance, well-documented differences between Protestants and Jews on their normative emphasis on, respectively, intrinsic religiosity and faith versus participation in rituals and group belonging (Cohen, Gorvine, & Gorvine, 2013) may result in respective radicalisms that are primarily characterized by dogmatism and literalism versus ritualism and outgroup derogation. Not surprisingly, American Protestant fundamentalism was originally based on, and is till today

nourished by, biblical literalism. The emphasis is on *believing*: creationism, evangelicalism and world missionarism constitute its central features. On the contrary, Jewish radicalism, as well as Christian Orthodox—Greek and Slavic—fundamentalism, are primarily characterized by over-emphasis on the *bonding* and the *belonging* dimensions, that is by strictness in performing and respecting (in Freudian terms, "neurotically") religious rituals and norms and by excessive identification with the ingroup. The latter results in outgroup derogation not only of other ethnic groups but also of the religious liberals within the same ethnic community, that is, secular Jews in Israel (Bermanis, Canetti-Nisim, & Pedahzur, 2004) and people open to religious ecumenism in countries of Christian Orthodox tradition (Kalaitzidis, 2014; Saroglou, 2013).

Islamic contemporary fundamentalism, as well as Catholic traditionalism, both of which were often called "integrisms" some decades ago, are concerned primarily with the *behaving*, rigorously moralistically, dimension. Radical Catholicism is strongly oriented today toward morally fighting societal tolerance of issues such as abortion, gay rights, euthanasia, and stem cell research and cloning (see, for example, www.catholicscomehome.org), with this fight being motivated by collectivistic deontological morality rather than interpersonal concerns (Deak & Saroglou, in press). Islamic fundamentalism is primarily fueled by disgust against immorality, detected extensively in all domains of life, and being perceived as characterizing other religionists, secularists, and atheists, or even coreligionists from other Muslim traditions. The instauration of the Islamic Sharia moral code, even at the detriment of prosocial values and the respect of others' lives, is today of primary importance among militant Islamists (Kramer, 2013).

Different religions and their respective various fundamentalisms may constitute cultural products of the "niche constructionism" Kashima (2016) evokes in defending the person-environment interaction. Although religions importantly immigrate and expand, each is heavily rooted in specific geographic areas of the world, and the same seems to be true for various fundamentalisms and religious intergroup conflicts (Denis & Frachon, 2007; Tétart, 2015; see also Table 1). The mean level of religiosity across countries in the world is associated with non-negligible variability on many psychological, social, and ecological features, which can be conceived as either causal factors or consequences of religious differences, or better, as realities that co-developed with religion within the person-culture-nature interactions. This variability may concern a broad array of features, from parasite-stress and health threats (Fincher & Thornhill, 2012) to self-esteem and psychological adjustment (Gebauer, Sedikides, & Neberich, 2012), and even economic preferences (Malka, 2014) and democracy (Meyer, Tope, & Price, 2008).

Finally, there is evidence that religions constitute distinct civilizational zones across the world, with differences evident even after controlling for country-level variations in relevant socio-economic parameters (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). This possibly applies to respective religious radicalisms. For instance, across the world, Muslims are the most conservative group with regard to the cultural matters of abortion and homosexuality; between Christian groups, Orthodox Christians are quite conservative with respect to homosexuality, and Catholics are more conservative on abortion; Protestants seem more liberal, but they are still more conservative than non-believers (Malka, 2014). Similarly, religions differ in the emotions they value: across nations, Christians report higher frequencies of experiencing love, whereas Muslims report shame and fear with greater frequency (Kim-Prieto & Diener, 2009).

One can understand such cross-religious differences, which are partly independent from socio-economic differences, as resulting from, among other things, the long history, specific theological traditions, and ecology of each religion. However, the other causal direction that goes from human cultural animals to the shaping of their (natural) environment is also real. It is sad, but important, to remember here that Christian radicalism has encouraged non-ecological ways of exploiting natural resources and exerts influence, through fundamentalist views against medicine and science, on the population's health and life; that Jewish radicalism has contributed to the lack of security in the Middle East and has shaped changes in the natural landscape in Israel and

Palestine; and, finally, that Islamic radicalism is currently responsible for the destruction of cultural heritage, mass population displacement, and changes in the geopolitics of oil and related economies.

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