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# Dimensions of religiousness and their connection to racial, ethnic, and atheist prejudices

Wade C Rowatt and Rosemary L Al-Kire

In this article, we review the most recent empirical research about the psychology of religion and intergroup prejudices based on race/ethnicity or religious identification. We highlight how social identity fusion, intergroup emotions, perceived value-conflict and threat, and system-justification contribute to degrees of prejudice. We also review connections between religiosity and attitudes toward-specific cultural groups (e.g. immigrants, atheists, and religious minority groups). Finally, we conclude with a few recommendations for ongoing research in this area, such as interdisciplinary and person-centered approaches.

## Address

Baylor University, United States

Corresponding author: Rowatt, Wade C ([Wade\\_Rowatt@Baylor.edu](mailto:Wade_Rowatt@Baylor.edu))**Current Opinion in Psychology** 2021, 40:86–91This review comes from a themed issue on **Religion**Edited by **Vassilis Saroglou** and **Adam B Cohen**<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.08.022>

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## Introduction

The year 2020 was marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, racially motivated protests, and new legal protections for LGBTQ+ individuals in U.S. workplaces. The next article reviews religious predictors of sexual prejudice. In this article, we consider psychological factors linking indicators of religiousness and prejudices based on race, ethnicity, or religious group identification. For more comprehensive reviews, we recommend previous meta-analyses [1,2] and chapters [3–6].

## Definitions and operationalizations of Prejudice and Religion

### Defining prejudice

Dovidio *et al.* conceptualize prejudice as a negative attitude ‘toward groups and their members that creates or maintains hierarchical status relations between groups’ [7], p. 7]. Fiske reminds us some prejudices are more common across cultures (e.g. sexism, ageism) [8<sup>\*</sup>] whereas prejudices based on race, ethnicity, or

religion are regionally specific (e.g. Hutu-Tutsi ethnic groups in Rwanda; Shi’a-Sunni Islamic groups in Iraq; Muslim Rohingya-Buddhist in Myanmar; for more examples see Ref. [9]). Many intergroup conflicts and prejudices are rooted in generations-long competitions for limited resources (real or imagined), dehumanization, or apparently conflicting worldviews that evoke a range of negative emotions such as fear, disgust, or distrust. Atheist/agnostic irreligious ‘nones’, for example, are a steadily growing heterogeneous group toward whom there is high moral distrust [10<sup>\*\*</sup>].

### Operationally defining and measuring the religion of the individual

Associations between religiousness and prejudice depend on how the constructs are measured. Single items tap religious group identification, specific beliefs (e.g. in or about God), or frequency of religious behaviors (e.g. worship attendance, prayer/meditation). Multi-item scales assess non-creedal religious commitment [11], religious orientations (e.g. intrinsic [I], extrinsic [E], quest [Q]), religious fundamentalism, and being spiritual-but-not-religious [12]. Recent research has moved away from conceptualizing religiosity in terms of I/E/Q orientations (but see Ref. [3]), and has examined flexibility of beliefs. Holding religious beliefs inflexibly, measured with scales assessing religious fundamentalism or post-critical beliefs, is related to a variety of prejudices [5,13,14].

### Measurement and methodological issues for studies of religion and prejudice

Like religiousness, prejudices are often measured with easy-to-fake explicit, self-report scales. Could participants fake being more pious or less prejudiced? Sure. Does this mean associations between religiosity and prejudice are inaccurate? Possibly. Implicit, reaction-time measures might be useful here. Recently, Carpenter *et al.* [15] developed an online-survey IAT; but this new measure has yet to be used in studies of religious prejudice. However, the IAT is not a perfect measure, and implicit measures of prejudice are not necessarily more valid than explicit measures [16].

Most studies of religious prejudice are still correlational in design. To increase experimental rigor, some researchers use concept priming (making religion or mortality salient). For example, mortality salience increased prejudice toward Hausa’s (an out-group) by the Igbos in Nigeria [17] compared to those in a neutral group. Priming religion above and below awareness increased

benevolent but not hostile sexism among Americans and Belgians [18\*\*]. Priming religious context also appears to soften perceptions of ex-offenders [19]. A ‘many labs’ collaboration about religion and prejudices could be fruitful [20] as would an updated meta-analysis [1].

### A few known predictors

It remains an open question whether there is anything unique about religion’s role in prejudice beyond known causes or correlates of intergroup prejudice — such as competition for limited resources, salient social-group identities, dehumanization, ideological conservatism, or system-justification [see Refs. [5,6,21]. But understanding these and other predictors of prejudices provide insights into associations between religious dimensions and prejudices.

### Identity fusion

People strongly fused with a group are more likely to perform extreme, even sacrificial behaviors for the group [22]. Infusing intergroup conflicts with religion seems to be like spraying gasoline on a fire [9]. Religious identity fusion increased endorsement of retaliatory activity after ‘intifada’ began [23]. In some cases, religious identity fusion could lead to behaviors motivated by parochial altruism (i.e. benefiting in-group and harming out-group [24]).

### Ideology and prejudice

Perceived political ideology of target groups predicts prejudices among Americans [25] and conservative ideology predicts dehumanization of immigrants [26]. More broadly, religion appears to function like other system-justifying ideologies [27,28]. However, associations are often small between religiosity, general system justification, and status-quo justifying constructs like belief-in-a-just-world or opposition to equality [27]. Consistent with the dual process model of prejudice, religious identity was positively associated with political conservatism via right wing authoritarianism, whereas spirituality was negatively associated with political conservatism via low social dominance orientation [29].

### Value-conflict/dissimilarity

Just as similarity often increases liking, dissimilarity can breed disliking and contempt. However, people high *and low* on religious fundamentalism express prejudice toward others they perceive hold dissimilar values [30\*\*]. One challenge for groups with differing cultural norms, worldviews, or religions is to figure out how to build mutual respect for people who have dissimilar worldviews. Streib calls this *xenosophia*, or wisdom that can be gained from being open to ‘strangers’ in our midst — such as refugees fleeing persecution [31]. For more about worldview conflict and prejudices see Refs. [32,33].

### Perceived threat

Perceived threat and anxiety play an important role in some religious prejudices. For example, social-identity threat from religion predicted lower belonging, increased identity concealment, and intergroup bias [34]. Expressing religious-based prejudice may serve a palliative function by helping alleviate experiences of religious threat [35]. Beyond prejudiced attitudes, perceptions of religious threat may also lead to support for religiously justified violence [36–38]. Perceptions of symbolic threat predicted intergroup hostility; whereas higher religious identification was associated with increased threat [39]. At a national level, stronger associations between religion and prejudice were found among countries low in cultural threat dimensions (i.e. low power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and collectivism); whereas this relationship was weaker or even absent among countries higher in threat [40\*].

### Specific targets of prejudice

Religious schemas based on openness are linked with being more accepting [31]. However, in general, religious dimensions predict negative attitudes toward dissimilar others through identity fusion, ideological conservatism, and negative emotions — especially when dissimilarity is based on citizenship/immigration status, belief in God (i.e. theist-atheist), or religious worldview (i.e. Christian, Muslim).

### Immigrants

Immigrants, who may hold different religious beliefs than their host nation, are often targets of prejudice. Consistent with a religious intergroup bias [41], Christians and Muslims in Malaysia report negative attitudes toward asylum seekers affiliated with other religions [42]. A meta-analysis of 37 also studies shows religious affiliation, but not self-reported degree of religiosity, predicted self-reported negative attitudes toward migrants [43\*\*]. In U.S. samples, religiosity-immigrant prejudice associations were negligible when conservative political ideology was statistically controlled [44]; but there is an indirect effect of religiosity on immigrant prejudice through conservative ideology. Dehumanization, perceived threat posed by immigrants [26], and value dissimilarity further predicts anti-immigrant sentiment [45]. Religious complexity and social identity complexity are also important constructs to consider when attempting to predict intergroup bias [46\*].

### Atheists

Distrust is a well-documented, underlying mechanism of prejudice toward atheists [10\*\*]. Atheists are perceived as less trustworthy, warm, or competent than theists [47], as well as perceived to adopt a ‘fast life history’ mating strategy, which is value incongruent with many religious traditions [48\*]. Across cultures, religious fundamentalism is associated with antipathy toward atheists. In Poland,

religiously orthodox participants who expressed prejudice toward atheists (in a lab context) experienced reduced heart rate [35], an indicator of physiological soothing.

This group-based antipathy toward atheists can be ameliorated. Perceiving atheists as concerned for caring/compassion predicts less anti-atheist prejudice [49]. Building on classic intergroup contact research, imagining an interaction with an atheist reduced distrust and increased cooperative intent among religious fundamentalists in the United States [50].

### Muslims

Theists are targets of prejudices too. Microaggression against religious persons predicted overt religious discrimination [51] – however, members of religious minorities are more likely than a religious majority or overt atheist to be disliked.

Prejudice toward Muslims is also well-documented in cultures where Muslims are a minority. Feelings of uneasiness with Muslim immigration could be due in part to an inaccurate stereotype that all Muslims hold extreme fundamentalist religious views [52]. For example, Muslim mass shooters are perceived more motivated by religion than White or Christian mass shooters [53<sup>\*</sup>]. Exposure to news coverage of religious extremism increased negative attitudes toward religious groups shown to be extreme [54]. In New Zealand, perceived threat and negativity were stronger toward Muslims compared to other religious groups [55]. In Lebanon, communal religious practice promoted intolerance toward members of other faiths, but personal prayer increased tolerance [56]. Similarly, levels of prejudice (among Christians) toward Muslims increased during a communal religious holiday meal [57]. Knowledge of and contact with Muslims predicted less prejudice toward Muslims [58], and we suspect this would generalize to other religions.

### Religious nationalism

As mentioned, identity fusion increases in-group prosociality and out-group hostility [22,23]. Religious nationalism is an understudied form of identity fusion. Religious nationalists believe their nation should be one religion (and not other religions). When religious and nationalist identities merge, ethnocentrism increases. In India, Hindu nationalism is on the rise, characterized by Hindutva ideology and antagonism toward Muslims. In the United States, Christian nationalism predicted more conservative social political attitudes such as endorsement of traditional gender norms [59], opposition to stricter gun laws [60], endorsement of negative racial stereotypes [61], and intergroup bias [62]. We suspect religious nationalism is on the rise in other countries, as well.

### Future directions

A few future directions for religion-prejudice research include pathogen prevalence, psychological identities, and broader social-community systems. For example, could-specific religiously rooted prejudices be rooted in disgust? How do multiple groups with which we identify (e.g. nation, political party) affect religion-prejudice relationships? Can places of worship (e.g. church, mosque, temple, or synagogue) affect socialization of egalitarian or prejudicial views of one's neighbor? Places of worship where strict church-state separation is valued/practiced could be more open to social justice issues and missions? Below, we briefly consider each of these future directions.

### Pathogen prevalence and prejudices

The relationship between religious conservatism and ethnocentrism could be a product of the behavioral immune-system [63]. For example, indicators of behavioral immune-system activation (i.e. disgust) are moderately, positively associated with both religious conservatism and ethnocentrism (meta-analytic effect sizes  $r_s = .42$  and  $.34$  [64]). Several studies reveal disgust-sexual prejudice connections are stronger among religious conservatives; but the effect on attitudes toward racial/ethnic or religious minorities is understudied (but see Ref. [65]). Intergroup disgust sensitivity could explain some religious prejudices toward people perceived to carry an infectious disease. For example, regional pathogen prevalence predicted increased authoritarianism and racial prejudice [66].

### Intersecting, nested identities

Typically, researchers study social identity by focusing on dual in-group/out-group dynamics. However, multiple aspects of identity intersect or are nested within the self – such as gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality or identification with a religion, political party, sports team and more. How does the intersection of multiple facets of identity influence prejudices? Are people who simultaneously identify with multiple disadvantaged groups at increased risk for religious or political prejudices? Could interventions aimed at broadening perspectives to see a singular shared superordinate identity (i.e. we are all human) reduce prejudices rooted in non-shared identities?

### Creative methods, multiple levels, and interdisciplinary vision needed

Variable-centered, correlational approaches dominate the literature. More ecologically valid methods and measures of religiousness and prejudices, in diverse samples, could help document and explain ways religion motivates racial and ethnic conflict or cooperation. The field could benefit from more person-centered approaches to religion [67] and prejudice [68] as well as experimental approaches [69]. Although the social neuroscience of prejudice is well-developed [70], inclusion of religion variables is



uncommon. One exception [71] details how group prejudice and religious belief can be influenced by transcranial magnetic stimulation of the posterior medial frontal cortex.

In closing, moving forward, psychology of religion and prejudice will benefit from multi-method approaches and multiple levels of analysis (biopsychosocial). The psychology of religion and prejudice can also be informed by other subdisciplines (cultural and political psychology), related disciplines (sociology of religion), and broader perspectives about societal-level predictors of systemic racial and ethnic prejudices.

### Conflict of interest statement

Both authors contributed equally to the conceptualization and writing of this article.

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