Group Dynamics, Religious Group Relations and Terror Management Theory

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Thanks to my family and Ben Le

In loving memory of Charcoal (1999-2015)
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Introduction

Conflict between religious groups has been a predominant theme throughout human history. Given this legacy, it is important to understand why religion has proved to be such a powerful force in inciting conflict, especially given that religious teachings often call for their followers to treat others with love and kindness. Considering the propensity of human beings to engage in violent action against people of different religious groups, it is vital to examine the ways in which prejudice develops between various religious groups, and ways to combat the activation of stereotypes and reduce religious prejudice in people. Additionally, it is important to understand how and why religious conflicts can so easily escalate over time.

Religious conflicts have continued into recent times as many of the conflicts in the world today involve some sort of religious component. Recently, the Pew Research Center (2014) released a report detailing hostility against religious groups across the world. Their report revealed that religious hostilities between groups have been on the rise during the last eight years. It showed that seventy-four percent of the world’s population lives in areas where there were high levels of religious restrictions, meaning that most people live in areas where government laws restrict religious behaviors. In recent years, the report revealed that more and more countries have had incidents with religious minorities (Pew Research Center, 2014). Indeed, “Incidents of abuse targeting religious minorities were reported in 47% of countries in 2012” (pg. 10). For example, Sri Lanka has recently seen Buddhists attack a mosque and forcefully change a church into a Buddhist temple. The disturbing practice of using violence to force people to follow certain religious practices “occurred in 39% of countries, up from 33% in 2011 and 18% in mid-2007” (pg. 11). These findings illustrate that conflict between religious groups is something which continues to be prevalent in the modern era.
Religion’s role in creating conflict between groups is not entirely surprising when we consider how deeply intertwined religion can be with our cultural beliefs. Religion is a powerful motivator in the lives of many people. Steger, Pickering, Adams, Burnett, Shin, Dik, and Stauner (2010) explain that religion is useful in that it forms a fundamental part of many people’s cultural worldview which helps them interpret the meaning of their existence. Thus religion serves as a fundamental part of our culture, which will be explored at length in this paper.

The role of religion in dictating conflicts between groups is especially important today given the rising religious diversity in the world. Modernity has increasingly brought religious diversity to places where it did not previously exist. For example, the Pew Research Center (2015) projects that the most non-Christian groups (including unaffiliated people, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists) will grow in Europe in the next 35 years, while the number of Christians in Europe will drop over the same time period. With people of different faiths increasingly coming into contact with each other, more conflict between religious groups is likely, and thus it is vital to investigate how to best defuse religious conflict. Will increasing religious diversity bring even more conflict in the future? Or will increasingly diverse populations make people more familiar with other religious groups and lead to less conflict?

Religious Conflicts in the World

Persecution of minority religious groups and conflict between religious groups are common across human history. One prime example of a past religious conflict which continues to shape modern times is the conflict between Muslims and Hindus in the Indian subcontinent. Kakar (2000) points out that recent violence between Muslim and Hindu communities revolves
around far more than just religion however. He argues that one major factor in the conflict is
communalism, or the idea that these religious groups also share “social, political, and especially
economic interests in common which conflict with the corresponding interests of another
community of believers” (pg. 878). This illustrates that being a Muslim or a Hindu in India
represents far more than simply one’s religious beliefs. Religious groupings are also tied to
socio-economic status and political interests. Thus, religion helps create different groups which
have wildly different interests.

Kakar (2000) points out a single incident in which a Muslim was murdered in India, and
notes that this incident eventually led to conflict that “lasted for ten weeks, claimed more than
three hundred lives and left thousands wounded” (pg. 877). How does the death of one person
escalate into such a sweeping conflict? Kakar (2000) argues that “Each riot and its aftermath
raise afresh the issue of an individual’s identification with his religious group and bring it to the
surface of his consciousness…For varying periods of time, individuals consciously experience
their identity through their religious group” (pg. 897). This suggests that violence and the threat
of violence towards the religious in-group makes religious identity more accessible in the minds
of these Indians. Sadly, such identification only seems to escalate the conflict.

Just as religion in India was related to differences in political beliefs, and economic
status, Northern Ireland also experienced disagreements between religious groups which were
characterized by nonreligious underlying issues. Although the conflict has roots in a number of
different issues, religion is one aspect which has become grafted onto it. While religion may not
have been an initial instigator for the conflict, Protestant and Catholic have generally become
synonymous with the two sides of the conflict. Cairns and Darby (1998) support the view that
while theology was not a primary cause of the conflict in Northern Ireland, it nonetheless became
ingrained in the conflict due to the way the two sides in the conflict label themselves. They point out that “for most people in Northern Ireland, it is not inconsistent to say that one is not religious (e.g., never attends church or is an atheist) but at the same time to describe oneself as a Catholic or a Protestant” (pg. 755). Thus, even if the people of Northern Ireland were not particularly religious, they still saw themselves as belonging to a certain group. This demonstrates that even when people are not particularly religious, religion can still serve a powerful role in separating people into different groups which are largely concerned with nonreligious issues, but still carry religious labels.

Indeed, McAlister (2000) writes that religion is a divisive point for people living in Northern Ireland. He argues that religion makes up a fundamental part of the identities of the people of Northern Ireland. Religion became identified with culture as a whole for both sides and thus it became completely intertwined with the conflict even though it was not initially a primary cause. McAlister (2000) argues that religion serves as “as a badge of membership within a particular subcultural group” (pg. 844), but also “has shaped the two cultures, creating different images of the world within the individuals experiencing those two cultures” (pg. 845). Thus, religion clearly defines the two separate groups, and it also has shaped the way that each group views the world.

Overall, religious conflicts have long been significant drivers of history, and they have continued to influence world affairs in the modern era. While conflicts are not always completely, or even primarily, religious in nature, religion still plays an important role in escalating conflicts, because it neatly segments people into different groups which share cultural values and similar interests. This process serves to create clear in-groups and outgroups. For instance, investigating religious conflict in both India and Northern Ireland illustrates that
religious beliefs were not central to the conflict, but that religious groupings seemed to neatly divide people into two camps. Thus, it is important to explore how religious groups interact with each other, and why stereotypes and prejudice so often characterize these experiences. Overall, research on conflict between religious groups seems to indicate that interactions between religious in-groups and outgroups seem to be largely driven by group dynamics which can result in positive interactions between groups at times, but generally lead religious people to reject and stereotype religious outgroups due to their desire to defend their own cultural worldview.

**Ingroup/outgroup Theory**

Before investigating the specific impact of religion on group relations, it is important to consider the basic group dynamics which help to shape many of the ways in which religious groups interact. In-group favoritism and outgroup derogation are frequently evident in interactions between groups. Brewer (1999) notes that human beings need to cooperate with one another to survive, and thus support for groups we belong to, or in-group favoritism, is a strong motivator in our lives. Brewer (1999) suggests that altruism, and cooperation are more likely to occur between in-group members, because they are generally expected to return this help, while outgroup members are less trusted to reciprocate helping behaviors. Thus, this favoritism towards the groups which we belong to has the important side effect of creating “a fertile ground for antagonism and distrust of those outside the ingroup boundaries” (Brewer, 1999, pg. 442). The human tendency to be biased toward in-groups also helps to create the prejudice, “which can be broadly defined as negative attitudes toward an outgroup” (Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010, pg. 575). These negative attitudes towards outgroups then help contribute to the development of conflict between the groups.
The tendency of group members to favor their in-groups, while simultaneously denigrating outgroup members is a common trend across groups. For instance, Schiller, Baumgartner and Knoch (2014) demonstrated this effect when they asked participants to punish people for their actions in a Prisoner’s Dilemma Game. Participants punished in-group members less than they punished people unaffiliated with the in-group or an outgroup, and they punished outgroup members more than they punished these unaffiliated people. Such results demonstrated that in-group favoritism and outgroup prejudice both drove the fact that punishment was more severe for outgroup members than it was for in-group members.

Of course, there are ways to combat our tendency to favor the in-group over outgroups to an extent. For example, there is evidence that repeated contact with an outgroup led to higher opinions of the outgroup (Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007). Thus, increased familiarity with an outgroup led to less of a disparity in the treatment of the in-group and the outgroup. Montoya and Pittinsky (2011) additionally demonstrated conditions which facilitated more positive and more negative group relations. Their study showed that “outgroup liking was highest when group identification was high and relations between groups were cooperative, but outgroup liking was lowest when group identification was high and relations were competitive” (pg. 784). Group identification is a measure of how much participants related to their in-group. Thus, these results indicate that when individuals experience a strong association with their in-group, and their in-group cooperates with the outgroup, people tend to like the outgroup, while competitive interactions between the in-group and the outgroup along with a strong identification with the in-group led to the worst relations between groups. Montoya and Pittinsky (2011) additionally found that these relationships were mediated through trust of the outgroup in question. When people are cooperating with outgroups rather than competing with them, they trust the outgroup
more, and thus prejudice towards the outgroup fades to an extent. However, while competition may make group conflict more likely, competition is not necessarily needed in order to show signs of in-group favoritism and outgroup derogation. Overall, group members tend to favor the in-group, while discriminating against outgroups, but these effects can be counteracted to a degree through increased contact with outgroup members, increased knowledge about them, and having a cooperative relationship with the outgroup.

Social Identity Theory

Tajfel and Turner (1986) explored the ways in which groups interacted with one another in an effort to develop a model to explain favoritism for the in-group and disdain towards outgroups. While earlier theories of group relations focused on competition and conflict between groups as creating prejudice and poor group relations (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), Tajfel and Turner recognized that favoritism and prejudice could be created between completely arbitrary minimal groups which were not competing with one another. In fact, they noticed that “intergroup discrimination existed in conditions of minimal in-group affiliation, anonymity of group membership, absence of conflicts of interest, and absence of previous hostility between the groups” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, pg. 9). This indicates that merely assigning people to different groups was enough to create discrimination between the parties. Indeed, participants assigned to minimal groups sometimes know that the groupings are completely meaningless, and yet they still discriminate against outgroups. These facts invalidated the argument that discrimination was due to previous conflict between groups, or competition between the groups.
Rather, Tajfel and Turner (1986) argue that “mere awareness of the presence of an out-group is sufficient to provoke intergroup competitive or discriminatory responses on the part of the in-group” (pg. 13). This means that group formation itself has the power to create prejudice between groups. Groups lend people their social identity, or “those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging” (pg. 16). People desire positive social identities, and thus they seek to understand their social groupings as positive things. Yet in order to boost their self-image, they are also forced to look down on other groups. The social identities which people develop are “based to a large extent on favorable comparisons that can be made between the in-group and some relevant out-groups” (pg. 16). Thus, because people understand the groups they belong to as dictating their social identity, they tend to elevate their in-groups, while simultaneously denigrating outgroups. This creates a more positive social identity, and may lead to self-esteem increases for the individual as their self-image based upon their group affiliation grows more positive.

*Self-Esteem and Group Dynamics*

Relations between groups are often determined by self-esteem concerns. As illustrated by Tajfel and Turner (1986), the self-esteem of individuals is often understood to be at least partially reliant on their group membership. Just as Tajfel and Turner (1986) investigated minimal groups, Lemyre and Smith (1985) demonstrated that people discriminated against outgroups in these minimal groups in an effort to raise their own self-esteem. Such findings suggest the pivotal role which our own self-esteem plays in group dynamics, as it shows self-esteem as a motivating factor behind discrimination. In the Lemyre and Smith (1985) study people who discriminated against other arbitrary groups had ended up having higher self-esteem
at the end of the study than those who had not been given the opportunity to do so. These results indicate that discriminating against outgroups can help raise self-esteem through glorifying the in-group in relation to the denigrated outgroup even when group membership is completely arbitrary rather than a meaningful representation of someone’s values.

In two separate studies, Van Leeuwen and Tauber (2011, 2012) demonstrated that groups were willing to help outgroups, but only in an effort to bolster the image of their own group. Van Leeuwen and Tauber (2011) showed that low-status groups would help other groups in an effort to promote their group. Similarly, Van Leeuwen and Tauber (2012) again showed that people would engage in outgroup helping in order to bolster the image of their in-group. Thus, we can see that groups will decide to help outgroups when such help can enhance the image of their in-group. Enhancing the image of their in-group would serve to make its members have more positive social identities. This indicates that although self-esteem is usually tied to glorifying the in-group and derogating the outgroup, there are times where self-esteem concerns can drive people to help outgroup members.

On the other hand, research has shown that people low in collective self-esteem tended to discriminate more against outgroups, while people high collective self-esteem tended to give more to their in-group (De Cremer & Oosterwegel, 1999). Collective self-esteem is “self-esteem derived from the person’s social identity” (pg. 327). This is thus the key trait to look at in terms of support for the in-group and prejudice towards outgroups. De Cremer and Oosterwegel (1999) argue that people who are high in this trait will be “more confident about their esteemed social identity, making them search for more opportunities to enhance the collective self” (pg. 334), while people low this trait may “not feel very confident about their social identity and, in order to avoid failure, they will consider outgroup derogation as a more useful strategy to protect their
social identity” (pg. 334). This shows how a portion of our self-esteem revolves around our social identity, and our self-esteem ties closely to group interactions.

Overall, all of this research indicates that one of the major factors which drives people to favor their in-group over other groups is self-esteem (specifically collective self-esteem). Discriminating against outgroups can serve to boost the self-esteem of individuals, as it makes their in-group and the self appear even better in contrast. Alternatively, groups will seek to help outgroups at times, but this seems to occur when the group has lesser social status, and it still seem to be driven by selfish self-esteem motivations as it occurs when they feel that helping will serve to promote the image of their group, and thus boost their self-esteem.

**Religion and Group Dynamics**

*Religious In-groups and Outgroups*

Interactions between religious groups demonstrate many common in-group/outgroup phenomenon. Johnson, Rowatt, and LaBouff (2012) demonstrated that higher levels of religiosity and spirituality in their subjects predicted more positive views of “value-consistent in-groups (Christians, heterosexuals)” (pg. 154), while also predicting more negative views of “value-violating out-groups (atheists, Muslims, and gay men)” (pg. 154). This research shows that people who felt greater ties to the in-group (as measured through religiosity and spirituality) had more positive impressions of their in-groups and more negative impressions of outgroups. Indeed, Johnson et al. (2012) went on to show that priming the participants with a religious prime made them more negative towards groups with different values, while simultaneously increasing their liking to groups which had similar values. Such results indicate that religion is
just as susceptible to the power of group dynamics as other potential groups. Finally, Johnson et al. (2012) stressed that religious groups show strong signs of in-group favoritism.

Additionally, priming people to think about their religious group affiliation makes them view religious outgroups and their religious in-group differently. LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, and Finkle (2012) did a study where they interviewed people about their level of religiosity and their attitudes towards non-Christians. They interviewed part of their sample next to Christian religious structures, while they interviewed the other part of their sample in areas devoid of religious structures. Their results showed that those interviewed next to religious structures had more negative outlooks on non-Christians and tended to score more highly in terms of religiosity. Thus, priming people with religious symbols can increase the reported religiosity of participants, and also increase their negativity towards outgroups (possibly through reminding them of their Christian group identity).

While making religion salient in the minds of people accentuates prejudice between groups, exposure to and knowledge about religious outgroups can lead people to have positive views of these outgroups (Zafar and Ross, 2015). Zafar and Ross (2015) asked Canadian college students to rate religious groups on a favorability measure. They found that the groups which the students knew more about and the groups which they had more contact with were generally viewed more favorably than the other groups. This indicates that some degree of prejudice between religious groups is due to a lack of familiarity with outgroup members. Just as Turner et al. (2007) showed that contact with the outgroup led to decreased prejudice towards the outgroup, Zafar and Ross (2015) showed similar findings specifically about religious groups. Additionally, confirming the idea that group competition serves to help create prejudice, Jackson and Hunsberger (1999) speculated that competition between religious groups led to increased
prejudice between the groups. While the mere existence of groups may be enough to create prejudice and stereotyping, increased competition between religious groups may amplify the amount of animosity between the two factions.

While religious groups are similar to other groups in many ways, it is important to note that religion may be a more important group label than other potential labels. Hewstone, Islam, and Judd (1993) examined Muslims and Hindus in Bangladesh in terms of their views towards other Muslims and Hindus who were either Indian or Bangladeshi. They found that “The most prominent effect in our data was religious category dominance” (pg. 788). While nationality (Indians versus Bangladeshis) also influenced the way people viewed each other, religion seemed to play the biggest role in dictating the opinions of the subjects. Additionally, Hewstone et al. (1993) showed that “Self-esteem was, however, relatively enhanced by higher evaluations of the religious in-group and lower evaluations of the religious out-group” (pg. 789). This finding indicates that religious groups can also bolster their self-esteem through comparing their group favorably with others.

Religious Prosocial Behavior

It seems strange to think of religion as causing so much conflict considering religions so often focus on being kind to others and helping other people. Preston et al. (2010) notes that prosociality is often endorsed by religions as “the lesson treat others as we would like to be treated (i.e., the ‘Golden Rule’) seems to be a prominent narrative throughout nearly all major world religions” (pg. 574). Religion is often thought to be related to prosocial behaviors, but it can be hard to tell if these effects are real or if they are caused by biases in reporting prosocial
behavior. Several studies which tie religion to prosociality rely upon self-report measures which presents a wide array of problems as people strive to portray themselves in a good light, and religious people often engage in prosocial behaviors directed at in-group members rather than extending such kindness to outgroup members (Galen, 2012). The question of whether religion is truly associated with prosocial behaviors or not is important to investigate because it can help illuminate the conditions under which religious people will act kindly towards outgroup members, and the contrasting conditions under which they will reject these outgroups. In support of the religious prosociality hypothesis, Li and Chow (2015) showed that spirituality was positively correlated with self-reported helping behaviors. Due to the fact that helping behaviors are self-reported, this study suffers from the drawbacks which Galen (2012) suggested. Self-reported helping behaviors may not reflect actual prosocial behavior, and may simply reflect an inflated view of the self. However, it is still important to note that more spiritual people perceive themselves as being more helpful. Additionally, although religious conflicts seem all too common throughout the world, there is evidence that people lower in religiosity tend to be more prejudiced than those high in religiosity (Village, 2011). Indeed, Village (2011) argues that the “decline in religiosity between early and midadolescence was associated with an increase in prejudice” (pg. 269). This work suggests that there may be a potential link between religion and prosociality.

Although interactions between religious groups seem to so often devolve into conflict, it is important to note that these interactions do not always result in conflict. Schumann, McGregor, Nash, and Ross (2014) demonstrated that reminding people of their religious beliefs made them more helpful towards outsiders because their generous religious beliefs were made accessible. Thus, being primed to think about your benevolent religious beliefs may defuse threat
situations. However, in the absence of such a prime, underlying religious loyalties may escalate conflicts.

Interactions between ingroups and outgroups can also be affected by the religious group’s perception of God. For instance, Johnson, Li, Cohen, and Okun (2013) revealed that people primed with an authoritarian God were less likely to help religious outgroups, while those primed with a benevolent image of God were more likely to help religious outgroups. Johnson et al. (2013) argued that there are many possible ways to view God. They demonstrated that priming an image of God that is harsh and authoritarian led people to act less prosocially and more aggressively. Conversely, priming an image of God as benevolent led to increased prosocial behaviors directed at religious outgroups and less aggressive behaviors. Additionally, Blogowska and Saroglou (2013) showed that religious fundamentalists primed with violent Biblical texts became less prosocial, while more compassionate Biblical texts made them more prosocial. Such findings illustrate that elements of religion can be tied to prosocial effects. However, other religious elements can produce exactly the opposite effects.

On the other hand, Decety et al. (2015) recently showed that religious children actually engaged in less sharing behaviors than children raised in non-religious households even though religious children are more likely to be viewed as altruistic by their parents. People often judge religious people to be more altruistic due to their perceptions of religious people, or the way that religious people attempt to portray themselves, but there is certainly evidence that being religious does not necessarily lead to more altruistic people. All in all, religion can prove to be a prosocial force in certain situations, but in other situations it can create conflicts.
Religious Dimensions Impact on Prosociality

One aspect of religion which may have an effect on whether people act prosocially towards outgroups is the way religion manifests itself in their lives. Just as Li and Chow (2015) showed spirituality was related to self-reported prosocial behavior, the dimensions of religiosity have been investigated to see if they connect to people’s levels of prosociality and prejudice. Allport and Ross (1967) found extrinsic religiosity to be more associated with prejudice while intrinsic religiosity was less associated with it. This idea is somewhat coherent when we consider that Allport and Ross (1967) defined extrinsically religious people as people who use religion to “provide security and solace, sociability and distraction, status and self-justification” (pg. 434). The fact that extrinsically religious people use religion as a means to lend security, sociability, and status suggests that they rely on religion as a group which protects them and lends them status. This kind religiosity being associated with prejudice is not surprising when we consider that in-group favoritism often goes hand-in-hand with prejudice. On the other hand, Allport and Ross (1967) describe an intrinsically religious person as “[living] his religion” (pg. 434). This places less emphasis on the group aspect of religion, and so it may be related to less prejudice than extrinsic religiosity.

However, Batson (1976) changed Allport and Ross’s (1967) model of religiosity by adding a third dimension of religion. Batson (1976) added the dimension of religion as a quest. Religion as quest is depicted mainly as a journey in search of truth in religion, and it has been associated with less certainty in beliefs system (Steger et al., 2010). Batson, Oleson, Weeks, Healy, Reeves, Jennings, and Brown (1989) went on to show that religious people apparently had different motivations for helping others. While the study showed that religious people were more likely to help in general, they also measured egoistical motivation for helping compared to
altruistic motivation to help. They showed that intrinsic religiosity and extrinsic religiosity generally led to egotistical helping behaviors. People high in intrinsic religiousness and people high in extrinsic religiousness only wanted to maintain their image as religious and helpful, rather than actually wanting to help. On the other hand, people high in the religion as quest dimension were not found to be high in egoistic motivation, and thus their behavior may have been altruistic in nature. Their helping behavior seemed to revolve around more than simply maintaining appearances.

Just as intrinsically religious people wanted to appear helpful in Batson et al. (1989), Batson, Flink, Schoenrade, Fultz, and Pych (1986) did a study examining the effect of religiosity on prejudice in people. The study involved choosing to see a movie while sitting next to either a black or a white compatriot. When the movies were the same, intrinsically religious people often chose to sit next to the black individual, presumably in an effort to display themselves as not being prejudiced. However, when different movies were being watched by the black and white people and thus there was a plausible non-racial reason to choose one over the other, intrinsically religious people generally chose to sit with the white person. People high in religion as quest sat with the black confederate more than other groups when different movies were being shown. Thus, the study revealed that intrinsically religious people hid overt prejudice, but did not hide their prejudice in the covert condition. On the other hand, the religion as quest dynamic was related to reduced prejudice in the covert condition. Overall, it appears that there may be a link between the dimension of religion as quest, reduced prejudice, and altruistically driven helping behaviors. On the other hand, people high in intrinsic or extrinsic religiosity appear to help out outgroup members more out of a desire to maintain their image and self-esteem.
Prosociality and God

Another aspect of religion which can have a profound impact on prosocial behaviors is priming the idea of God. Implicitly priming participants with the idea of God made them share more in an economic simulation (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). They presented this priming as making people feel like another being was watching over their actions, and thus they tended to act more prosocially or morally. The study found that “God concepts, activated implicitly, increased prosocial behavior even when the behavior was anonymous and directed toward strangers” (pg. 807). Although people were meant to give however much they chose without any social influence changing their giving patterns, activating the idea of God may have made them feel like they could be judged for their behavior. As Norenzayan and Shariff (2008) noted “When thoughts of morally concerned deities are cognitively salient, an objectively anonymous situation becomes nonanonymous and, therefore, reputationally relevant, or alteratively, such thoughts activate prosocial tendencies because of a prior mental association” (pg. 62). Indeed, Norenzayan and Shariff (2008) argue that “religious situation is more important than the religious disposition in predicting prosocial behavior” (pg. 62). Of course, these studies focused on situations where people were giving money to an anonymous other party. Therefore, they do not show that implicitly activating God in people’s minds will make people act more prosocially towards outgroup members.

Building off of Norenzayan and Shariff’s ideas, Preston et al. (2010) argue that religious prosociality is dictated by “religion as a social ingroup, and the belief in God as a supernatural moral agent” (pg. 581). They attribute viewing “religion as a social ingroup” to negative social interactions between groups members, while pointing to “God as a supernatural moral agent” as a potential source of prosocial behavior. They argue that people’s tendency to see religion as an
in-group leads them to value “ingroup protection and co-operation” (pg. 581). While such concerns may lead to prosocial actions within the in-group, they actually create negative attitudes and experiences with outgroups as the in-group favoritism creates outgroup derogation. On the other hand, seeing God as a supernatural force concerned with morality drives people to strive for “virtue, defined as obedience to God, and following the moral rules of God” (pg. 581).

Preston and Ritter (2013) supported the above theory when they found that priming people with their religious group affiliation led to more in-group helping, while priming people by asking about their level of belief in God led to more outgroup helping. Making people cognizant of their religious group may lead them to try and protect their in-group, and lash out against outgroups. On the other hand, priming God may lead people to help outgroups more, as they see God as a supernatural force which watches and judges their actions. Being primed with awareness of this supernatural being watching over you makes people attempt to treat outgroups more fairly. Overall, religious groups seem to engage in standard group behavior. However, they do embrace outgroups when they are primed with the right beliefs, or when the idea of God is made salient to them. Yet without such primes religious people tend to fall back upon in-group favoritism, and outgroup denigration. While priming people with various aspects of religion can demonstrate interesting effects, it is also important to consider how people might react to religious outgroups when they perceive a threat.

**Terror Management Theory**

Terror Management Theory presents a system which can help explain why religion plays such an important role in people’s lives, and why religion can effectively escalate conflicts.
Before diving into the relationship between religion and Terror Management Theory, it is important to first simply understand Terror Management Theory in isolation. Terror Management Theory begins with arguments about our ancient evolutionary history. It argues that human beings are different from other animals due to our advanced minds which eventually led to us being self-aware. However, this self-awareness which developed came at a price. Self-awareness brought awareness of human fragility, and especially the knowledge that we shall all die one day (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Koole, 2004). Terror Management Theory posits that this realization of our impending death threatens to paralyze us with terror. In order to combat fear of our inevitable end, Terror Management Theory posits that human beings developed culture. Culture gave us the idea that even if we died, our lives were still part of some meaningful system and thus there were not lived in vain. Culture gives our lives purpose, and dictates our self-esteem which relies on our role in society and our ability to uphold the cultural values which are ingrained within us.

Dechesne, Pyszczynski, Arndt, Ransom, Sheldon, van Knippenberg, and Janssen (2003) argues that humans have a cultural anxiety buffer which is designed to protect us from feelings of existential terror. Dechesne et al. (2003) argues that this buffer consists of the cultural values which we hold dear and which give our life meaning, and our self-esteem which is based upon our life upholding these values. Without cultural values we would feel paralyzed by terror about death as our lives would not be part of anything meaningful framework. Lower self-esteem would represent that we were not living up to our own cultural values, and as such our life was not contributing to the meaningful cultural world which we believe in. Thus, self-esteem maintenance plays a vital role in Terror Management Theory. When people are confronted with their own mortality, they seek to raise their self-esteem in order to reduce fear of death.
(Greenberg et al., 2004). Of course, clinging to cultural values when mortality is salient also makes people feel closer to their in-group. Herrera and Sani (2013) argued that mortality salience “enhance[d] perceptions of group continuity though time” (pg. 326). In turn, this perception made people feel that “the group is a single, cohesive entity” (pg. 326), which made people feel more close to the in-group following mortality salience. Overall, mortality salience makes people more closely associate with their in-group and its cultural values, as they seek to raise their self-esteem.

One prominent part of culture is religion. In a way, religion directly addresses the problem of terror raised by Terror Management Theory, as it seeks to allay our concerns over our impending deaths. Whether these concerns are over our lack of resources, or our fear of death, religion offers answers. In the past, people believed that natural disasters were from the Gods and thus praying to these Gods could shelter them from such misfortune (Greenberg et al., 2004, 143). Religion provides people with a wealth of cultural values which help people create meaningful lives. Religion’s goal is to make one feel that they are part of a meaningful system, a community of believers which understands the world. However, on top of this religion offers the ultimate answer to the concerns of terror management. Religion suggests that our deaths may not be the end of the self; and that we may enter an afterlife upon death.

Studies testing Terror Management Theory generally involve making mortality salient to the experimental group, while the control group does not have mortality made salient to them. Mortality can be made salient subliminally or through asking participants to write about what they imagine will happen when they die. Participants are generally given some time to suppress conscious death-related thoughts. After making mortality salient, participants are then asked to judge a person or an idea that conflicts with their cultural worldview, or is supportive of their
worldview. Such studies are designed to show that our awareness of death makes us more entrenched in our own cultural worldview and more staunchly opposing other worldviews. Studies generally do not test cultural belief strength directly following mortality salience as death needs to be suppressed to an extent before effects are generally shown. One good example of a study investigating Terror Management Theory is an experiment performed by Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, and Lyon (1989). The study had judges sentence people guilty of prostitution to sentences. Mortality was made salient for some of the judges, while it was not made salient for the control group. The judges who had mortality made salient to them tended to punish the prostitutes more harshly than the judges in the control group. However, this effect only manifested in judges who had negative attitudes towards prostitution already (Rosenball et al., 1989). Thus, those who felt that prostitution was in violation of their cultural worldview tended to punish prostitutes more severely when they had been primed to think about death.

It is undoubtedly interesting to see that making mortality salient can make people’s behavior dramatically change. However, it is important to understand that Terror Management Theory implies that we made our culture in an effort to make our lives feel worthwhile. It demonstrates that we will strive to raise our self-esteem to achieve this goal, and this may lead us to dislike outgroups and like in-groups more. Additionally, it is important to note that it is not uncommon for us to encounter mortality primes in everyday life. For example, Kastenmüller, Greitemeyer, Ai, Winter, and Fischer (2011) showed that terrorism could serve as a mortality salience prime. Additionally, 45% of Americans said they spent at least some time thinking about their death (CBS News Poll, 2014). Thus our thoughts of mortality can be activated fairly easily, especially given how easy it is to read about violence given the global nature of the news.
Religion and Symbolic Immortality

Religion is often tied to people’s cultural worldview as religion helps to define people’s values and beliefs. McCullough, Swartwout, Shaver, Carter, and Sosis (2015) revealed that American participants trusted people more when they wore ashes for Ash Wednesday, or a cross around their neck. Considering the participants in the study were American students, this study shows that Americans tend to trust Christians (or simply people who are obviously religious). This effect is still present when we examine non-Christian Americans. This suggests that Christianity is so tied to American cultural values that even those who do not subscribe to Christianity still feel that Christians are more trustworthy.

Religion ties into Terror Management Theory in a number of different and distinct ways. Firstly, religious beliefs shape the cultural worldview of religious people. Even people who are not particularly religious could have certain religious values ingrained within their cultural worldview. The fact that religious beliefs makeup part of the cultural worldview means that people will tend to cling to their own religious beliefs, while rejecting the religious beliefs of other religious groups. Thus religious people may reject other cultural beliefs (such as other religious beliefs) when death is at all salient. For example, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Rosenblatt, Veeder, Kirkland, and Lyon (1990) showed that when Christians were primed with mortality they more positively viewed Christians, while they had more negative views towards Jews. These religious ideas become ingrained at a young age, with implicit and explicit religious preferences manifesting at ages 6-8 (Heiphetz, Spelke, & Banaji, 2013). People apparently learn to hide explicit religious preferences over time, as their parents only showed implicit religious preferences.
Additionally, stereotypes about other groups (including religious outgroups) are also themselves cultural views. Devine (1989) demonstrated that people were equally knowledgeable about stereotypes about other groups no matter their level of prejudice. This indicates that stereotypes are well-known cultural views that people often stifle. Greenberg and Kosloff (2008) showed that stereotypes could potentially be part of our cultural worldview through their study showing that members of groups which were targets of prejudice disidentified with said group and “confirm[ed] negative stereotypes of their group” when mortality was made salient to them (pg. 1891). The idea that making mortality salient could cause people to disidentify from their own in-group and that it makes them more likely to believe negative stereotypes about their own group indicates that stereotypes themselves may be cultural beliefs which are part of our cultural worldview. Since mortality salience strengthens our beliefs in our cultural worldview, it seems that negative stereotypes about certain groups may themselves be part of our cultural worldview. Greenberg and Kosloff (2008) agree that “stereotypes are widely engrained components of cultural worldviews” (pg. 1891). Additionally, Schimel, Simon, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Waxmonsky, and Arndt (1999) revealed that making mortality salient increased people’s liking for stereotype consistent people, while decreasing their liking for people who broke the mold of the stereotypes about their groups. This study too indicates that stereotypes may be part of our cultural worldview. Following mortality salience, people tend to like people who support their cultural worldview while disliking those who go against it. Thus, liking stereotype consistent individuals is indicative of the stereotypes themselves being part of the cultural worldview of the participants.
TMT and Religious Conflict

The fact that our own religious beliefs are strengthened and we tend to rely more heavily on religious stereotyping of other groups when we experience mortality threat is very important for studying religious conflict. These ideas suggest that even if conflicts do not begin on the basis of religion, they could quickly evolve into religious conflicts if different religious groups felt threats to their own lives. Once a conflict which could form a potential threat to you begins, religious differences will be more likely to lead to prejudice and stereotyping. For instance, in the example of religious conflict between Muslims and Hindus earlier in the paper, Kakar (2000) said that “Each riot and its aftermath raise afresh the issue of an individual’s identification with his religious group and bring it to the surface of his consciousness” (pg. 897). Terror Management Theory explains this by noting that the death of a fellow Hindu or a fellow Muslim could make mortality salient, and thus make people identify more closely with their cultural worldview which is characterized by either Hinduism or Islam.

Research has also shown that priming religious beliefs in response to mortality salience can make people less vengeful towards others (Schumann et al., 2014). Somewhat similarly, Jonas and Fischer (2006) noted that people high in intrinsic religious belief did not react with worldview defense following mortality salience as long as they affirmed their religious beliefs following mortality salience. This affirmation of religious belief made thoughts about death less accessible in the study. This finding could be explained in a couple of different ways. Firstly, Abdel-Khalek and Singh (2014) found that religiosity was positively correlated with self-esteem. Thus, people high in intrinsic belief may have higher self-esteem and so they do not feel as strong a need to increase their self-esteem and protect their cultural worldview following mortality salience primes. However, Jonas and Fischer (2006) suggest that higher intrinsic
religious belief may be related to beliefs in the afterlife. Therefore, people who think about their religious beliefs following mortality salience think about the fact that their death is not the end as they believe in an afterlife.

**Religion and Literal Immortality**

“I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve immortality through not dying”.—Woody Allen, *The Illustrated Woody Allen Reader*

While religion is undoubtedly tied to our cultural beliefs and thus Terror Management’s idea of symbolic immortality, religion is also often connected to the idea of literal immortality. Many religions have afterlife beliefs which become quite popular. For instance, a CBS News Poll (2014) noted that 77% of Americans believe in heaven. Of those who believe in heaven, 82% reported that they think they will go to heaven upon death (CBS News Poll, 2014). This widespread belief in a form of life after death is another way in which we can combat our fear of the end of self. While belief in symbolic immortality may protect people from existential terror, belief in literal immortality is also effective in reducing this distress because afterlife beliefs center on the idea that death is not the end of the self.

Dechesne et al. (2003) showed that priming people to believe in literal immortality reduced their need to gain self-esteem after mortality was made salient to them. This indicates that when people think that there is life after death, they do not feel compelled to leap to defend their self-esteem and cultural worldview. Belief in literal immortality reduces the need to feel that we are part of a meaningful world system, as our death is not our end. Literal immortality beliefs mean that we do not have to live on through our culture, or through our children, but that
we can simply live on as ourselves. Kastenmüller et al. (2011) used terrorism as a mortality salience prime, and investigated the impact of literal immortality priming on prejudice. They used the terrorism prime to make mortality salient which led to prejudice against Muslims and groups of immigrants. Yet subjects who were also primed with beliefs in immortality showed less prejudice than those people who were primed with terrorism without any priming of immortality. The promise of the afterlife seems to be one potential avenue which religion offers which may reduce prejudice. While not focusing on interactions between religious groups, Piwowarski, Christopher, and Walter (2011) also showed that people who were promised an afterlife were less prejudiced against homosexuals following a mortality salience prime. Thus, beliefs in literal immortality may reduce the need of people to defend their religious values following threats to the self.

Importantly, all of the above findings show that priming beliefs in literal immortality can prove to be effective in reducing anxiety about death following mortality salience. This indicates an important alternate pathway which is closely tied to religion, as afterlife beliefs generally relate to religion. These findings suggest that prompting beliefs in literal immortality can combat the need to protect symbolic immortality and the cultural worldview following mortality salience. This implies that people who strongly believe in literal immortality may be less prone to stereotyping other religious groups. However, it is important to note that people showed reduced worldview defense when they were primed to believe in an afterlife. People may believe in the afterlife, but if this belief is not accessible to them following mortality primes, it may not be very effective. It seems that prompting literal immortality removes the need to protect symbolic immortality and self-esteem to an extent.
Overall, Terror Management Theory presents a framework of ideas which helps explain why religion could potentially lead to intergroup conflict. People react to threat by endorsing their cultural worldview to a greater extent and clinging to their in-groups. One way to combat this effect is through endorsing beliefs in literal immortality as opposed to striving to protect one’s symbolic immortality. Importantly, Jonas and Fritsche (2013) point out that Terror Management Theory can explain cyclical cycles of violence and escalation of conflicts between groups. Jonas and Fristche (2013) present a model which suggests that existential threat may lead to defense of the cultural worldview and intolerance of others which could potentially lead to additional violence and thus more existential threat. Perhaps this cycle can be broken through priming benevolent religious beliefs, the idea of God (while avoiding any connotations of a vengeful God), and beliefs in immortality. Religion is a group which is particularly connected to cultural worldview, and our views of what happens after death, and as such religion is a powerful tool in trying to break the cycle of threat, violence and more threat which Jonas and Fristche (2013) present.

**Implications for Ongoing Religious Conflicts**

Overall, I would suggest that the findings detailed in this paper illustrate that religious groups become embroiled in conflict due to group dynamics which create prejudice, but that religion can also serve to reduce conflict when certain aspects of religion are primed. These findings suggest that religion can help maintain violent conflicts, but also that religion could prove to be a powerful tool in breaking these cycles of violence. However, in order for religion to prove useful in bringing conflicts to a halt, people would have to be primed with appropriate stimuli at precise times. Additionally, such primes might not prove to as effective in groups with
extreme religious beliefs, and even when such primes are effective, it remains to be seen if the
effect sizes of these primes would lead to substantial reductions in religious violence.

Given the body of research presented in this paper, it seems that reducing religious
contact could be accomplished through religious institutions priming certain beliefs. For
example, religious leaders could focus more on God’s role as a supernatural agent, and how God
watches over our behavior to ensure that we acting morally. Consistent priming of this belief
could lead people to treat members of religious outgroups more fairly, which should hopefully
lead to reduced prejudice and more cooperation between religious groups. Alternatively,
religious groups could seek to emphasize that religion is characterized by a journey for truth,
rather than religion representing truth itself. Such beliefs would hopefully encourage people to
develop more in terms of the religion as quest dimension, which appears to be related to reduced
prejudice. However, such ideas may have difficulty being incorporated in various religious
groups, because religious groups may be unwilling or unable to alter the beliefs which they focus
on. On top of this, many people have lived their lives being ingrained with certain religious
attitudes, and such a stark change in religious content might not be easily accepted be long-term
practitioners of a religion.

Additionally, there are certain primes that would prove especially effective if they were
used in the wake of mortality salience primes. For instance, priming a belief in literal
immortality, and quoting religious beliefs which emphasize tolerance could reduce cultural
worldview defense following mortality salience. If religious leaders were to text message
members of their faith following shootings and terrorist attacks and focus on such ideas,
prejudice against religious outgroup members might not raise so dramatically following
mortality salience. Such activities would attempt to combat cultural worldview defense in the
moments following powerful mortality salience primes. Another potentially prosocial way for religious groups to respond to mortality salience primes is to find a way to base self-esteem on the way that religious groups treat religious outgroups following mortality primes. This could be created through religious leaders calling on their followers to be exemplary members of the faith through helping outgroup members in need. Overall, while there are some potential ways in which people could be primed with religious ideas in an effort to reduce violence between groups, effectively priming people consistently seems like a tremendously difficult task.

Would such priming activities even prove effective in reducing violence between religious groups? I think this question largely depends on who we see as the main perpetuators of religious violence. It seems likely that many of these primes would have relatively small effects on religious extremists. For example, priming people who are willing to risk their lives for in support of their religious group with a belief in literal immortality seems like it potentially increase violent behavior, as feeling certain that death is not the end of the self could lead these people to give up their lives in support of their religion as they feel that they are guaranteed entrance into paradise upon death. Even if such primes do have some effect on religious extremists, the size of these effects may not be enough for them to turn away from violent actions, and it is also unlikely that they would be willing to change their beliefs in any event.

On the other hand, violence occurring between people who are less extreme and are more driven to violence by group dynamics, rather than extreme religious beliefs, may be more plausibly reduced. Future research investigating Terror Management Theory would do well to continue using real world examples of violence, and testing whether a variety of different tasks can serve to reduce the cultural worldview defense of different groups of people in real-life situations. Additionally, it is important to investigate if reductions in cultural worldview defense
following mortality primes lead to decreased prejudice and violence against religious outgroups only in the short-term, or if such reductions can lead to long-term reductions in prejudice and violence.

Another thing to be aware of is the prejudice of religious people directed at atheists. While other religious groups may present a threat to people’s religious beliefs, Cook et al. (2015) suggest that people think of atheists as the greatest threats to their values. Atheists were found to be more threatening to Christians than either Muslims or gay men proved to be. Additionally, when people were primed to think that their values were being threatened, they had more negative perceptions of atheists, while their views on other groups were not changed. This indicates that it is also important to study how religious and nonreligious people interact, on top of investigating interactions between religious groups.

This compilation of research sought to understand why religion is so often associated with conflict. The research appears to indicate that this is largely because religions serve as group labels which divide people into in-groups and outgroups. Solving this issue relies upon getting people to focus on certain religious primes in an effort to reduce group conflict, upon finding another way to satisfy self-esteem needs which does not involve putting down rival groups, or upon harnessing self-esteem needs to get people to help one another. However, enacting such strategies would require a great deal of effort. Thus, it is important to keep studying the role of religion in conjunction with Terror Management Theory in an effort to see if there are effective ways which are proven to reduce prejudice and violence between religious groups.
Conclusion

All in all, members of religious groups appear to be driven largely by groups dynamics, and thus by self-esteem concerns. Self-esteem drives people to engage in in-group favoritism, and outgroup derogation. It also provokes harsh views about outgroups in response to mortality threat. On top of these negative interactions, self-esteem also drives intrinsically and extrinsically religious people to help others, but only in an effort to maintain their self-esteem. However, due to the fact that religions often entail benevolent beliefs, and due to the fact that religions often incorporate the concept of God as a moral figure watching over our actions, certain priming techniques can be used to get religious people to act prosocially. For example, priming a belief in literal immortality can lead people to bypass their need for self-esteem following threat, and thus afterlife beliefs could prove useful in leading to less prejudice and stereotyping between different religious groups. Additionally, priming the idea of God can make people act more prosocially, as they feel that a supernatural being is judging their actions. On top of this idea, there is some evidence that priming people with benevolent images of God, or benevolent religious beliefs can also lead people to treat religious outgroups more kindly, whereas more authoritarian views of God can serve to heighten religious tensions.

Sadly, religion can prove to be a powerful means to escalate existing conflicts. Religion can become easily intertwined with one’s entire cultural identity. For instance, even though religion was not the most important aspect of the conflict in Northern Ireland, people identified their cultural beliefs with their religion in general. Thus religion can become a powerful tool in impacting a conflict even when it is not the initial cause of the conflict. People in Ireland identify their religion with their culture as a whole. Thus, even though religion was not the primary cause of conflict in Ireland, it became identified with the conflict as a whole. It is important to
recognize that religion can come to symbolize entire cultural distinctions even when the initial differences between the two groups were not even primarily religious. In Northern Ireland, religion became a way to identify the two different groups even if the differences between the groups were far more than just religious differences. Thus, when people emphasize threat to religious groups, they can quickly make them more and more prejudiced against other religious groups. This is a terrifying phenomenon, because leaders can use these principles to turn any sort of conflict into a religious conflict as long as religious differences exist. They can do this through introducing the threat of the conflict to their people and noting the religious differences between their group and the opposing group. If leaders present a threat, Terror Management Theory predicts that this will make people’s view more extreme as they struggle to defend their cultural worldview and put down other cultural worldviews. For instance, the threat of terrorism which was brought about by the events of September 11, 2001 has led to increased prejudice against Muslims in the United States (Ingraham, 2015). This could be due at least partially to the fact that terrorism makes mortality salient, and thus many American Christians stereotype and become more prejudiced against Muslims.

Religion can often be used to create and escalate conflicts between groups. However, there are a number of possible avenues for reducing conflict between religious groups. Firstly, trying to align similar religious values, and getting religious groups to work cooperatively in certain areas could reduce prejudice. However, this possibility is hard to orchestrate in some places, because religious groups have fundamentally different values, and as such there are less things that they share to work together on. Also, making people cognizant of their religious beliefs may change how they understand their self-esteem. Raising people’s self-esteem following mortality salience in our everyday lives could help ease some prejudice between
religious groups. However, this may not totally alleviate the problem, as people with high self-esteem still glorify their in-group to such an extent that this may hurt outgroups which serve as comparison groups. Additionally, priming belief in God could lead to both afterlife beliefs and the idea that God is watching our actions which would diminish cultural worldview defense, and create desire to be prosocial to adhere to God’s will respectively.

Overall, one of the driving forces in religious conflicts is each individual’s desire to preserve their own self-esteem. They seek to preserve this self-esteem through helping people at times in an effort to preserve their own pious self-image. However, self-esteem concerns often drive religious individuals to stereotype members of religious outgroups. These stereotypes are activated as people seek to protect their own cultural worldview, while simultaneously putting down other cultural worldviews in their mind. Terror Management Theory can be used to explain why religion often becomes an instrumental part of violent conflicts, as it shows that religion can be a powerful tool in escalating such conflicts. Self-esteem drives religious conflicts largely through employing group dynamics that pit groups against one another. Sometimes these self-esteem needs lead religious people to act kindly towards others, as they try to maintain their self-image, but all too often our quest to live a meaningful life leads to a rejection of outgroups which inevitably leads to quickly escalating conflicts.
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