

The Psychology of Human Religious Beliefs;
Evolutionary and Political Implications.

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Background.

Psychologists for many decades have theorized about the possible presence of two different types of human religious thinking. They describe one form of religious thinking that is literal, rigid and associated with conflict, and another that is more humanistic and accepting of differences between peoples.

The initial theories were based initially on observation of religious writings and practices. William James, Sigmund Freud early in the 20th Century and Eric Fromm later have theorized about the nature and meaning of human religious beliefs (James, 1994, Fromm, 1950). Fromm, for example described two types of beliefs, authoritarian and humanistic.

Fairly recently psychologist Bob Altemeyer of the University of Manitoba created a questionnaire that measures what he describes as religious fundamentalism (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). Research with this scale has found that this form of religious belief is endorsed by some persons in each of many major world religions, consistent with what we read in the media as extremist religion in many parts of the world. This orientation is associated with authoritarianism and prejudice (Hunsberger, 1996, Spilka, et al, 2003).

A psychologist at the University of Oregon, Gerard Saucier, has analyzed the English language, specifically words ending with the suffix "ism" (Saucier, 2000)

Analysis of these words has revealed four basic clusters. One of these seems to be the fundamentalist religious orientation as measured by Bob Altemeyer and others.

By another technique, also involving factor analysis of questionnaire data, Saucier with Skrzypinska also found two different human traits that they term "tradition-oriented religiousness" and "subjective spirituality" (Saucier & Skrzypinska, 2006). They find that these factors are highly independent empirically. The Tradition-oriented religiousness trait is similar to the fundamentalism trait, correlating positively with collectivism, hierarchialism, extropunitiveness and favoring norms. It correlates strongly with beliefs in the power of God, respect for religious leaders and adherence to religious rules. It respects military leaders. It disrespects evolutionary science and is prejudiced against Gays and Lesbians.

In contrast, the Subjective Spirituality trait embraces searches for truth, nonconformity, and indifference to military leaders, gays and lesbians.

Schuon has proposed a theory of two religion types that he defines as "esoteric" and "exoteric" (Schuon, 1953). The esoteric type is characterized by orientation to contemplation, knowledge, wisdom and the spirit rather than the letter of religious teachings. The exoteric type is characterized by literal dogmatism, claims to exclusive truth and an emphasis on morality, reminiscent of the fundamentalist type of religious belief seen by other researchers.

Method.

My approach to this topic was to briefly review the major world religions and glean from them a sample of basic beliefs with the intention of broadly sampling human religious thinking. Starting with a questionnaire of many such beliefs, I found through factor analysis of questionnaire data that this sample represented two basic factors or clusters of beliefs. One of them again appears clearly to be the fundamentalist religious orientation.

In my questionnaires this belief system is characterized by the notion that humans are basically designed to be in conflict with one another, and that there is only one true God who all people should worship. People who disagree with this belief are considered to be wrong. God is seen as punishing wrongdoers. Religion and politics are to be melded together. About 6% of many samples of Americans that I have tested appear to endorse this religious belief orientation.

The other belief type that was revealed in my factor analysis I have termed the "kindly religious beliefs" orientation. It holds that humans are innately cooperative

with each other and that God appears in many different forms for different peoples and forgives wrongdoers. It holds that one should follow the Golden Rule and do unto others, as you would have them do unto you. It is wrong to be violent against fellow humans. Religion and politics should be kept separated in society. About 89% of Americans hold this religious orientation.

Results.

I have studied the relationships between these two belief types and many other psychological traits and attitudes and have found that with a broader factor analysis of 16 traits the fundamentalist and kindly religious beliefs types tend to fall into two different clusters. The nature of these clusters is revealed in the correlations between these religious belief types and other traits, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Relationship between religious beliefs measures and other traits.

(Samples: 109 churchgoers and community college students, 40 community college students.)

| Trait correlations (* = .05, ** = .01) | Fundamentalism | Kindly Religious Beliefs |
|--|-----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Warmongering endorsement | .53** | -.51** |
| Violence-proneness traits | .41** | -.67** |
| Terrorism endorsement | .28 | -.63** |
| Authoritarianism | .57** | -.18 |
| Military dictatorship government endorsement | .35** | -.37** |
| Special interest group democracy endorsement | .23* | -.27* |
| Value of Religion (in guiding one's personal life, daily activities, etc.) | .71** | -.04 |
| | | |
| Public democracy endorsement | -.09 | .38** |
| Human rights endorsement | -.39** | .60** |
| Sustainable policies endorsement | -.50** | .54** |
| Positive foreign policy endorsement | -.47** | .56** |
| Desire for improved | -.09 | .58** |

| | | |
|---------------------|--|--|
| government services | | |
|---------------------|--|--|

The fundamentalist religious orientation falls into a cluster of traits that include endorsement of warmongering against other nations and endorsement of authoritarianism, that is, a willingness to submit blindly to authoritarian leadership. It includes endorsement of political systems characterized by authoritarian and militaristic philosophies, such as military dictatorships and special interest group democracies, governments that serve citizens as members of special interest groups. This is the form of democracy practiced at present in the United States.

The kindly religious belief orientation falls into a cluster of traits characterized by endorsement of human rights, and endorsement of environmental and sustainable policies and programs. This cluster includes, endorsement of a positive, helpful international foreign policy and endorsement of democracy that serves citizens not as members of special interest groups but as members of the community overall, government that serves the common good.

We should keep in mind that these two religious beliefs factors are statistically independent of each other. This means that how high you are on one of the types does not predict how high you are on the other. You can be high on both, low on both, high on one and low on the other. While studies suggest that about 89 percent of Americans currently hold the kindly beliefs, under pressure or threat we can expect that they can revert to the fundamentalist belief orientation. Indeed, one sample of churchgoers from Kansas was high on both dimensions simultaneously. And during war, religion is promoted by nations as currently justifying hatred and killing of enemy groups, even groups that have previously been friends or allies.

Broader theoretical implications.

A conference at the University of Oregon some in the fall of 2008 focused on the evolution of war. Most of the presenters were anthropologists. One presenter of great interest to my thinking was a biologist, Randy Thornhill, from the University of New Mexico (Thornhill, 2009). He described a theory that he and other biologists designed after studying the frequency of various human behaviors and institutions around the world. They found that the closer communities are to the equator the higher the frequency of conservative governments, different religions, different languages and war.

In addition, the closer one gets to the equator the more disease pathogens there are. These biologists offer the theory that the conservative political worldview evolved

in the human species as a mechanism to promote protection of in-groups. Specifically, it protects the in-group from disease pathogens in neighboring groups against which the in-group does not yet have immunity.

Presumably, in-groups threatened by disease pathogens, probably poorly understood in ancient history, feared neighbors, and warred against them to keep them out of their home territory. They preserved their own language and culture as sacred and unique, their religion as unique and favoring them as God's chosen people, and crafted their religion to support a bellicose foreign policy, reinforced by blind obedience to authority.

This theory seemed to dovetail with my two human trait factors. My first factor, characterized by endorsement of warmongering, competition and favoring government that serves one's special interest group, seems to correspond with the biologists' conservative worldview theory. My first factor includes religious fundamentalism and warmongering endorsement, as well as violence-proneness and endorsement of authoritarianism. An authoritarian social structure is required in military activities; citizens must be willing to suspend personal judgment and obey leadership blindly to participate efficiently in war.

Thornhill's conservative mechanism of protecting the in-group from disease pathogens is perhaps most dramatically evident in the history of native American peoples, who were effectively diminished by European diseases more than my European military might per se. They lacked the military technology to adequately defend themselves against the incursion of Europeans and their diseases.

In-group protection and promotion human trait clusters.

I have broadened Thornhill's theory to make room for the liberal worldview. My second factor or cluster of traits seems to reflect the liberal political worldview. I believe the conservative worldview is a mechanism for protecting in-groups from threats from outside groups in general, including warmongering, and specifically from the diseases that those groups can bring into one's homeland territory. I refer to this as the in-group protection mechanism.

In contrast, I believe that the liberal worldview evolved in the species because it serves another in-group function by promoting gradual peaceful interaction with neighboring groups to benefit from opportunities in general and specifically the opportunities of trade. This includes trade of both goods and services, including trade in technologies and trade in genetic materials via intermarriage, which eventually will impart immunity to the in-group against the disease pathogens of

neighboring groups. My second psychological trait factor describes humans as cooperative, kind, comfortable with differences in ideas and traditions, helpful and peaceful in foreign policy and preferring government that serves citizens as the community overall. It serves what I refer to as the in-group promotion function.

And so, both the liberal and conservative worldviews have had complementary survival value for human groups specifically and for the species in general. I believe that every small group of humans will have some individuals who are more suited for the protection function and some more suited for the promotion function. When interviewing friends, for example, they report that even within their childhood families among their parents and siblings there are almost always conservative worldviews preferred by some and liberal political worldviews by others. I believe that groups that had representatives of both these worldviews were better adapted to threats and opportunities than groups who lacked one or the other, or both, of these dispositions. Thus, the human species has evolved because both of these worldviews have had survival value for human groups.

Conclusions.

I believe our challenge as a species now is clarifying and understanding these issues via further research. If confirmed, we must disseminate the findings to the general public and to governments. We must do this quickly to address the threats we face collectively. Collectively we face threats of overpopulation, greenhouse gas atmospheric pollution, increasing scarcity of fresh water, depleting fisheries and non-renewable resources... the list is long and daunting.

There are related corollary findings of my research that have resulted in practical tools that journalists can use. One is a 50-item scale for rating the warmongering-proneness of political leaders from a distance. I have reliable scores on many historical and recent and current political figures that show that G.W. Bush was rather high on warmongering-proneness, falling between Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan in that trait and below Hitler, Stalin and Saddam Hussein.

Every year the Parade Magazine newspaper insert presents a rating of the world's worst dictators. The 50-item warmongering-proneness scale could be used by journalists to add scientific precision to such leader ratings.

I have another scale of 50 items that measures the constructive leadership attitudes of political leaders. The details of how these instruments can be used by journalists are available in publications on my website, Politicalpsychologyresearch.com. I would be happy to collaborate with

journalists, political scientists, historians and other in conducting ratings and further research to perfect such instruments for practical use.

The final product, from my research is a model for what I believe will be the next form of democracy, which I term "public democracy", government that the majority of citizens seem to prefer, government that serves them as members of the community overall rather than as members of competing special interest groups. Specifically, it is a model for a new form of political party through which I think this new form of democracy is likely to evolve. The model for this new form of political party is also available in publications on my website.

This party would be funded exclusively by party member dues, no special interest group money. Its platform will be periodically updated and defined by sophisticated polls of the general public and of party members. My research shows that the majority of the public is very "pro-social", believing in human rights, a positive and helpful foreign policy and seeing humans as basically cooperative. They want a balanced national budget, affordable housing and higher education, affordable health care, etc. They can be trusted to define a reasonable national government agenda.

I very much appreciate this opportunity to participate in this conference with journalists. I believe that a vigorous interdisciplinary effort will be needed if we are to succeed in living cooperatively and sustainably on this planet. We need to put all of our disciplines together.

Fighting wars and burning vast amounts of fossil fuels in the process may eliminate a few terrorists, but in the process we add seriously to greenhouse gas emissions.

Reducing disease by international immunizations, as via the Rotary Polio Plus program reduces infant deaths and crippling, but if we do not also control birth rates, we inadvertently contribute to overpopulation.

We need to put all of our disciplines together. We need to put all of our heads together. We need to put all of our hearts together. We need to control our selfish, competitive and hostile tendencies as a species and promote our kind, cooperative and creative tendencies to design sustainable communities and a sustainable world.

I look forward to collaborating with you in research and communication.

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