Toward Understanding Violence in Islam

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Abstract

In the context of reduced violence world-wide, as documented by Pinker (2011), Islam is an exception; i.e., it is more violent than other cultures. Can contemporary cultural psychology explain aspects of this difference? It is hypothesized that violence is more frequent in cultures that are vertical collectivist than in cultures that are horizontal individualist. The paper reviews data that are generally consistent with this hypothesis. Furthermore, most Muslims are not violent, but perhaps 1 percent do engage in jihad. What personality aspects might explain this difference? It is argued that self-deception is very common among humans and the jihadists are especially susceptible to self-deception. Religion provides important benefits but it is also often related to violence. One way to reduce aspects of Islamic violence is for the West to ridicule Islam less. The paper also provides Islam with a more realistic model of its religion.

Key words: Violence, Culture, Collectivism, Individualism, Religion, Islam.

Entendiendo la violencia en el Islam

Resumen

En el contexto de reducción mundial de la violencia, tal como lo documenta Pinker (2011), el Islam es una excepción p.e., es más violento que otras culturas. ¿Es posible que la psicología cultural actual explique los aspectos de dicha diferencia? Se hipotetiza que la violencia es más frecuente en culturas que son colectivistas verticales que en culturas que son individualistas horizontales. Este trabajo revisa datos que son generalmente consistentes con la ya mencionada hipótesis. Además, la mayoría de los islámicos no son violentos, aunque tal vez el 1 por ciento de ellos sean partícipes del jihad. ¿Qué aspectos de la personalidad podrían explicar esta diferencia? Se argumenta que el auto-engaño es bastante común entre los seres humanos, y que los jihadas son especialmente susceptibles al auto-engaño. La religión provee beneficios importantes pero también es comúnmente asociada con la violencia. Una manera de reducir aspectos de la violencia islámica es que el oeste haga menos ridiculizaciones del Islam. Este trabajo también describe al Islam con un modelo más realista de su religión.

Key words: Violencia, Cultura, Colectivismo, Individualismo, Religión, Islam.

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While there is violence in most parts of the world, some parts are more violent than others. People often believe that Islam is violent because of what they read in their newspapers, often forgetting that religions on both sides may have instigated the violence. They see violence in Palestine (Jews v Muslims), the Balkans (Orthodox Serbians v Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbians v Bosnian and Albania Muslims), Kashmir (Muslims v Hindus), Sudan (Muslims v Christians and animists), Nigeria (Muslims v Christians), Iran, Iraq and Pakistan (Shiah v Sunni), Indonesia (Muslims v Christians), Chechnya and the Philippines (Muslim insurrection). Recent events are remembered better. Thus the terrorism in America, Indonesia, Britain, and Spain, and the March 22, 2012, event in Toulouse, France, where Mohamed Marah, who had killed seven people, jumped out of a window stating that he did not fear death because he was “going to paradise” are remembered well.

There is also some evidence that Muslims are more ready to fight than are other groups. A study by Liu et al. (2012) had data from 5800 students from 30 cultures. One item used by Liu et al. was “willingness to fight for one’s own country.” The countries that were “high” on this measure included Malaysia, Tunisia and Indonesia (the three predominantly Muslim countries in the sample of 30). Low were Switzerland and Italy (p.267). Of course, this finding can also be interpreted in non-religious ways: in these countries people are more “patriotic.”

Religious intolerance has become an increasingly serious problem in Indonesia, one of Islam’s less fundamentalist countries. The Economist (June 9-15, 2012) has reported Muslim mob attacks of Christian churches, and even Muslim sects, such as the Ahmediyah, which the Islamic hardliners consider heretical.

Can our current understanding of cultural psychological differences provide some clues about the difference between countries that are high or low in interreligious violence?

Most of the instances of violence mentioned above are related to religion. There are two kinds of religions: external and internal (Triandis, 2009b). The external assume the existence of supernatural beings. The internal focus on what happens inside persons. The outstanding examples of internal religions are original Buddhism, where the internal struggle is to reach nirvana, and the versions of Islam that focus on the little jihad, which concerns cleaning oneself from sins and controlling oneself. In this paper when Islam is mentioned it refers to the external religion. All external religions are related to violence (Pinker, 2011), but this paper focuses only on Islam, in order to limit its length.

In this essay, after some preliminary comments, I will review some major ways in which cultures are different from each other, and then compare Islamic cultures to these patterns of differences. I will finally suggest ways to de-escalate the violence in Islamic cultures.

**Some Preliminary Considerations**

Many conflicts appear related to fundamentalist religion, especially certain aspects of Islam. Yet most Muslims oppose violence (Gabriel, 2006), and their very way of greeting each other, “Peace be with you,” suggests that they value peace.
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