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Abstract

As a social identity anchored in a system of guiding beliefs and symbols, religion ought to serve a uniquely powerful function in shaping psychological and social processes. Religious identification offers a distinctive “sacred” worldview and “eternal” group membership, unmatched by identification with other social groups. Thus, religiosity might be explained, at least partially, by the marked cognitive and emotional value that religious group membership provides. The uniqueness of a positive social group, grounded in a belief system that offers epistemological and ontological certainty, lends religious identity a twofold advantage for the promotion of well-being. However, that uniqueness may have equally negative impacts when religious identity itself is threatened through intergroup conflict. Such consequences are illustrated by an examination of identities ranging from religious fundamentalism to atheism. Consideration of religion’s dual function as a social identity and a belief system may facilitate greater understanding of the variability in its importance across individuals and groups.

Keywords

social identity, religion, belief system, intergroup relations, well-being

From race to religion, people belong to particular groups that inevitably shape their responses to a range of circumstances. In this regard, *social identity theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) has been most influential in providing insight into the relation between the self-concept and the social groups to which one belongs. Identification with groups often affords us benefits to well-being (e.g., by offering enhanced support and a sense of belonging; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). Furthermore, groups may be able to accomplish goals (e.g., social change through political action; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007) that would otherwise be unattainable at the individual level (Haslam et al., 2009). As a social identity anchored in a system of guiding beliefs, religious affiliation should serve a uniquely powerful function in shaping psychological and social processes. An examination of religiosity that considers the synergy of its dual function as a social identity and an unfalsifiable belief system may facilitate an understanding of why religion is important to so many people and might even elucidate why it is not important to others.

Although considerable research has focused on social identities based on race (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999), gender (Schmitt, Branscombe, & Postmes, 2003), and nationality (Bond, 2006), fewer studies have evaluated the psychosocial implications of a social identity stemming from religion. Yet it has been suggested that the content of identity is important, in that “social identities are meaningful self-definitions *precisely because* of their content” (Livingstone &

Haslam, 2008, p. 18). Given the importance of religiosity in many individuals’ self-conceptions (Freeman, 2003; Kinnvall, 2004; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007), coupled with a culture wherein individuals and groups are regularly targeted on the basis of religious belief and affiliation (Wellman & Tokuno, 2004), a review of the ways in which religious identity shapes psychosocial functioning seems timely. Grounded within a social identity framework, we propose that the unique characteristics of a group membership inextricably linked to a religious belief system (even compared with other ideological belief systems) may be essential to explain why religiosity is often embraced with such tenacity. We subsequently present empirical findings regarding the view that religious identification can be fundamental to the promotion of individual well-being while simultaneously serving as a basis for seemingly intractable intergroup conflicts. Finally, we suggest several avenues for research, with consideration of the role of religious leaders and symbols, variations of religious ideologies, multiple social group memberships, and the potential preeminence of religious identification over other social identities in the lives of many individuals.

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Social Identity Approach: A Brief Overview

The concept of identity has been the subject of considerable theorizing and research. From a social identity perspective, threats to one's self-esteem or well-being might be alleviated by increasing identification with a group that offers high levels of status and support (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). A social group is a collection of individuals who perceive themselves as members of the same social category. This *self-categorization* (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994) subsequently promotes perceptions of one's social environment as consisting of an *in-group* (in which the individual holds membership) and various *out-groups* (of which the individual is not a member). The knowledge and emotional value of membership in a group is integral to the individual's sense of self (Tajfel, 1981). Thus, social identification appears to have cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions, frequently interpreted through the importance of group membership to the self-concept (Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, Halevy, & Eidelson, 2008).

A social identity perspective posits that identification with one's group motivates individuals to distinguish their group from others to preserve positive self-esteem or to attain self-enhancement (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Building on this notion, it was suggested that positive identification is best achieved through finding the optimal balance between the motivations for individual uniqueness and for group belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brewer, 1991) or through reducing uncertainty by more closely aligning oneself with an entitative (i.e., pure or clearly defined) group (Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007). Some group memberships are especially central to the self-concept and might be particularly salient under distressing circumstances. In this regard, religious identity may be especially important when an individual's sense of safety and security has been undermined (Freeman, 2003; Muldoon, Trew, Todd, Rougier, & McLaughlin, 2007). Essentially, identification with one's religious group may provide a sense of unwavering stability and "solid ground" (Kinnvall, 2004), more so than would be gained from other social identities, perhaps stemming from highly organized support networks (Graham & Haidt, 2010; Lim & Putnam, 2009) or the shared reliance on faith in a "higher power" (Pargament, 2002).

Belief Systems as Identity: Why Religion?

Religion exists as a set of diverse yet commonly held belief systems from which individuals may gain benefits (e.g., health and well-being; Haslam et al., 2009). Those who are highly identified with their religious group not only share common beliefs but also, by definition, perceive their group

membership as central to their self-concept, thereby gaining a sense of personal or collective self-esteem from that membership (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) and a strong bond with other group members (Cameron, 2004). However, the unique characteristics of religion, including compelling affective experiences and a moral authority that cannot be empirically disputed (Wellman & Tokuno, 2004), may lend this particular social identity a personal significance exceeding that of membership in other groups (Kinnvall, 2004; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007).

The belief system inherent in any religion may be central to explaining why many individuals strongly associate themselves with their religious group. Ordinarily, people have beliefs about the self and the world around them that emanate from a variety of psychological or social foundations. For example, gender belief systems encompass attitudes toward sex roles, representations of men and women, and gender stereotypes (Deaux, 1985). Personality traits might also function as belief systems to promote an understanding of oneself and one's emotions (Robinson & Kirkeby, 2005). More broadly, considerable research efforts have been devoted to examining the role of belief systems reflecting political ideology (i.e., conservatism and liberalism) in shaping (and being shaped by) psychological and social processes (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). And, of course, religiosity offers a system of guiding beliefs through which to interpret one's experiences and give them meaning (Park, 2007). These belief systems often function as social identities through the increasing importance of the relevant group membership to the self-concept (e.g., gender identity, political identity). However, religion differs substantially from these constructs in that it may also invoke epistemological beliefs regarding what can (or cannot) be known as well as ontological beliefs regarding what can (or cannot) exist (Nelson, 2006) that are shared among group members. Moreover, historical and cultural continuity grounds these core beliefs founded in rites, symbols, and physical spaces created over millennia but adapted to fit with shifting social norms and ways of living in a given era (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, in press).

One of the tenets that may empower religious identity is the steadfast belief that one's own religion is *the truth* (Kinnvall, 2004; Stark, 2001; Wellman & Tokuno, 2004). Previous research demonstrated that "beliefs yield to evidence" (G. L. Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000, p. 1151) in situations where an alternate identity has been affirmed. However, given that religious belief systems (e.g., existence of God) can be neither proven nor disproven, the faith inherent in religious identification is able to thrive regardless. Although a unitary perception of the truth has been conceptualized as fundamentalist in nature by some (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004; Herriot, 2007), it may be far more widespread as an individual's loyalty to a particular set of religious beliefs rests on the premise that his or her religion is the correct one to follow. This positive intergroup comparison is likely

to foster perceived superiority (i.e., in-group “glorification”; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006) relative to other religious groups and thus reinforce the centrality of that group membership to the self-concept (Haslam et al., 2009). Although such feelings of superiority are likely to have deleterious effects on religious intergroup relations, paradoxically, the ability to fully embrace the identity is apt to provide comfort in times of uncertainty and robust coping resources in the midst of distress.

Despite the philosophical divergence between religious and other worldviews, some similarities should be noted. For example, religiosity (especially Christianity) and political conservatism often overlap (Jost et al., 2008), perhaps as a result of desires to minimize uncertainty and threat that may be fulfilled by both types of ideologies (Bonnano & Jost, 2006). It has also been suggested that support for religious and sociopolitical systems might be linked by individuals’ perceived lack of control and that (notwithstanding obvious differences) beliefs in these systems might even substitute for one another based on the supposed external control that each conveys (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008). The question remains, if religious and political (or other) belief systems coincide to a great extent, then why have both? Why religion? It could be that religious identification offers something that identification with a political (or other) group lacks, even if that other group membership also serves to shape one’s worldview in some fashion. In answer to the question of what makes religion distinctive, Pargament (1997) has offered two perspectives: First, religion is about the substantive notion of “the sacred,” and, second, religion serves a unique function in explicating the “ultimate issues in life” (p. 25). Thus, the shared belief in the existence of God (or gods) and an afterlife as well as less explicitly religious concepts, such as control and life purpose, ought to culminate in a powerful worldview (Park, 2007). That worldview not only directs individual and group processes but also might reduce existential anxiety (Kinnvall, 2004) by fostering the prospect of an *eternal* group membership.

Although advocates of some religious ideologies may perceive acts of suicide or martyrdom to inherently bestow eternal spiritual rewards (which, of course, cannot be empirically challenged), the termination of one’s life obviously conflicts with more immediate (earthly) benefits for psychological or physical outcomes. Paradoxically, psychological benefits preceding such an act may be great in highly identified religious individuals (e.g., providing life purpose; Mahoney et al., 2005; Park, 2007). Thus, a social identity empowered by a community of members holding such strong convictions will likely bring about benefits to personal well-being, equaling or exceeding those associated with other group memberships. Moreover, such an advantage need not be restricted to social identities of fundamentalist proportion but should also be evident as a consequence of the daily attitudes and actions of highly identified religious individuals

who are guided by their systems of beliefs and bolstered by their own perceptions of the truth.

The Social Identity of Religion: Empirical Findings

Religious Identity and Individual Well-Being. A strong social identity, stemming from any number of group memberships, has been associated with positive psychological health (Branscombe et al., 1999; Haslam et al., 2009; Mossakowski, 2003). As alluded to earlier, a social identity approach posits that individuals are motivated to differentiate the in-group from the out-group using dimensions through which the in-group acquires a positive distinctiveness (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Establishing a positive social identity subsequently fosters a sense of individual well-being, including reduced depressive symptomatology (Mossakowski, 2003) and enhanced self-esteem (Branscombe et al., 1999). Even when an individual’s identity is threatened (e.g., through stigma, discrimination, or political violence), which ought to result in numerous negative psychological and physiological stress responses (Major & O’Brien, 2005; Matheson & Cole, 2004), highly identified individuals often experience the least distress (Branscombe et al., 1999; Haslam, O’Brien, Jetten, Vormedal, & Penna, 2005; Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001; Muldoon, Schmid, & Downes, 2009).

Several researchers have investigated the relation between religious identification and health *behaviors*, noting associations with reduced smoking (Soweid, Khawaja, & Salem, 2004) and increased intentions to follow mammography recommendations (Bowen, Singal, Eng, Crystal, & Burke, 2003). Such findings are consistent with research regarding the religion–health link in general (see Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001) and may be indicative of highly religious individuals’ tendency to avoid risk behaviors (Sinha, Cnaan, & Gilles, 2007), comply with authority (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004; Graham & Haidt, 2009), or conform to social norms (Saroglou, Delpierre, & Demelle, 2004). Likewise, the few studies that have empirically examined relations between religious identity and *psychological* health suggested that high levels of identification are related to lower levels of psychological distress. For example, religious high identifiers demonstrated reduced depressive symptomatology (Koteskey, Little, & Matthews, 1991; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2009c) and enhanced self-esteem (Talebi, Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2009). Higher levels of subjective well-being (i.e., lower negative affect, higher positive affect and life satisfaction) have similarly been reported among highly identified religious individuals in representative national samples in the United States (Greenfield & Marks, 2007; Lim & Putnam, 2009). Such findings appear to be consistent across religious groups, including Christian (Koteskey et al., 1991; Ysseldyk et al., 2009c), Muslim

(Ysseldyk et al., 2009c), and Jewish individuals (Vilchinsky & Kravetz, 2005).

Several mechanisms might account for the association between religious identification and positive psychological health. Certainly, religious people often receive considerable social support from members of their religious community, and this support may foster more positive outcomes (Lim & Putnam, 2009; Park, 2007). Supportive communities of fellow believers might also fulfill a highly identified individual's need for belongingness (Maslow, 1943), which Baumeister and Leary (1995) have called a "fundamental human motivation." Yet given that membership in a variety of social groups may offer similar benefits to the individual (e.g., social support, belongingness), what makes religious identification different? A large-scale American study revealed that the influences of religious versus secular social networks on life satisfaction were distinct only when the former were accompanied by a strong sense of religious import; likewise, the importance of religion to one's self-concept enhanced life satisfaction only when reinforced by their religious community (Lim & Putnam, 2009). Thus, in contrast to the suggestion that the benefits of religious and secular social networks might be indistinguishable (e.g., Diener & Seligman, 2002; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007), this research demonstrates that "praying together is better than bowling together, and better than praying alone" (Lim & Putnam, 2009).

Another possibility rests in the finding that religious coping behaviors (e.g., increased prayer), as well as the tendency for religious high-identifiers to use a variety of nonreligious coping strategies effectively (e.g., reduced avoidance), accounted for positive psychological health, following both recollections of trauma (Ysseldyk et al., 2009c) and threats to religious identity itself (Ysseldyk et al., 2009a). Thus, additional coping resources, including "spiritual support-seeking" (Pargament, 2002), perhaps reflecting inclinations to resist passive tactics in an effort to resolve stressful experiences, may account for the positive outcomes enjoyed by highly identified religious individuals. Others suggest that religiousness, in general, offers a global meaning system (Park, 2007), the benefits of which are apt to be marked among individuals whose religious group membership and the beliefs therein are central to their self-concept. In effect, the advantages of religious identification may be twofold: Individuals not only gain from the sense of belonging offered by social group membership in general (Haslam et al., 2009) but should also benefit when they accept religion as a set of guiding beliefs that offers a worldview entailing life purpose and meaning (Mahoney et al., 2005; Pargament, 1997). Moreover, those two factors appear to interact such that neither faith alone nor communities alone, but rather "communities of faith," foster the greatest well-being (Lim & Putnam, 2009). **Religious Identity and Intergroup Conflict.** Despite the benefits of religious identification for individual well-being, as with other social identities, religion often engenders conflict between

groups (Wellman & Tokuno, 2004). Although intergroup strife is not unique to disputes among religious groups, religion is often the defining marker of a cohesive and compelling collective identity. Yet it has been argued that some social identities, such as nationalism or ethnic group membership, may serve a function equal to or greater than that achieved by religious identification (Evan, 1997; Kinnvall, 2004; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007; Worchel, 2004). For example, the assertion that ethnicity is the "bedrock" of social identity is based on the notion that ethnic group membership is impermeable: "Once born a Kurd, always a Kurd" (Worchel, 2004, p. 292). Consequently, when ethnic conflict erupts, the unchanging nature of ethnicity often results in actions aimed at eliminating the out-group (e.g., genocide). Clearly, however, such atrocities do little to win out-group members over to the in-group's side. Conversely, the power of a religion is often determined by the number of people who have adopted and adhere to that set of beliefs, a conversion that is not possible where ethnicity is concerned. Indeed, "one of the valued outcomes of a holy war is the number of infidels who can be converted to the victor's religion" (Worchel, 2004, p. 293). That the goal of religious conflict is often to capture the mind rather than the body (Worchel, 2004) might lend religious identity particularly powerful social and psychological underpinnings (particularly within Christian and Islamic traditions), especially when that identity is under attack.

In this regard, it has been argued that some ostensibly political or ethnic conflicts were (and are) essentially the result of religious group differences (Eriksen, 2001; Rao, 1999). In the former Yugoslavia, for example, the three primary ethnic groups that inhabit Bosnia-Herzegovina differ mainly in their religious ideology: Most Serbs are Orthodox Christian, Croats are primarily Catholic, and Bosnians are almost all Muslim. Stemming from the link between ethnic and religious identities in this context, the Bosnian conflict has been likened to the political disputes among Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland (Eriksen, 2001). Likewise, religion in India has engulfed the politics of identity more so than any other force, including caste, tribe, gender, and class (Rao, 1999), a sentiment illustrated by Gandhi's (1949) assertion that "politics divorced from religion has absolutely no meaning" (p. 122). This religious-political discord has been propelled, in part, by members of the *hindutva* movement who advocate Hindu nationalism, thereby fostering religious in-group bias and out-group derogation (i.e., anti-Muslim and anti-Christian sentiments; Eriksen, 2001; Rao, 1999). Similarly, the religious basis for Islamic terrorism has taken on political connotations in an effort to enhance Islamic identity and unity (Kahani-Hopkins & Hopkins, 2002). Unfortunately, this mission often exists alongside extreme interpretations of religious doctrine that sanction the use of violence to protect geopolitical interests (Venkatraman, 2007).

Religious identity has been directly examined within several intergroup contexts, including the Protestant-Catholic divide

in Northern Ireland (Cairns, Kenworthy, Campbell, & Hewstone, 2006; Muldoon et al., 2007), the array of conflicts in the Middle East (Bekerman & Horenczyk, 2004; Shechtman & Tanus, 2006), and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States (Byng, 2008; Moskalkenko, McCauley, & Rozin, 2006). Although this is certainly not an exhaustive list of the research regarding conflicts wherein religious identity might be an important factor, these studies nonetheless serve as illustrative examples of the role religious identification might have in promoting intergroup violence. The abovementioned conflicts could be attributed, in part, to divergent cultural or political belief systems; however, there is also reason to believe that they are related to religious group identity.

Although the conflict in Northern Ireland has always been highly political in nature (i.e., disagreements between Unionists and Nationalists regarding the most appropriate constitutional status for the region), there is considerable evidence that intergroup tensions are largely based on religious group membership. Indeed, self-identification as a Protestant or Catholic often tends to be the most general and salient basis of identity for inhabitants of that area (Muldoon et al., 2007; Stringer & Cairns, 1983), promoting in-group favoritism and out-group bias (Cairns et al., 2006; Kremner, Barry, & McNally, 1986). In Israel, efforts have been made to integrate Arab (predominantly Muslim) and Jewish citizens into peaceful social coexistence while averting the threat of religious identity erosion that serves as a powerful group partition (Bekerman & Horenczyk, 2004). Specifically, an intervention designed to encourage the expression of multiple social identities, including religion, among Arab–Israeli adolescents of various faiths (Christian, Muslim, and Druze) resulted in increased empathy and decreased aggression toward Jews among Christians, reduced anxiety and religious identity among Muslims, and increased Israeli identity (shared with Jews) among both Druze and Christian groups (Shechtman & Tanus, 2006). The salience of multiple identities may have served to diminish the divisions emanating from religious differences, thereby providing an opportunity for greater intergroup cooperation; however, the abating of religious identity under conditions wherein religion underlies the conflict may unfortunately undermine the psychological benefits of that identification for the individual as well (Muldoon et al., 2009). Finally, although some have contested the religious underpinnings of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, there is overwhelming evidence of the fundamentalist religious ideology held by the attackers, which was inextricably linked to their personal and collective identity (Post, 2005). Interestingly, levels of religious identity salience (primarily Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish) were significantly higher among American university students 4 days following those attacks than they were 6 months afterward (Moskalkenko et al., 2006), suggesting that the relation between identification and sociopolitical events may be reciprocal. This finding coincides with Branscombe et al.’s

(1999) rejection-identification model, which posits that out-group threat (e.g., terrorist attacks) strengthens identification with the devalued in-group. Moreover, such identity strengthening may be adaptive for coping with intergroup stressors (Haslam & Reicher, 2006), particularly when the identity is relevant to the conflict experienced (Muldoon et al., 2009). Indeed, in the context of religious intergroup strife, religious identification may be a source of both threat and comfort.

Religious Extremes as Identity

Fundamentalism. The idea of religious identity as a driving force behind intergroup conflict raises the flag of fundamentalism, perhaps evoking notions of authoritarian aggression (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004) or conjuring images of terrorist violence (Rogers et al., 2007). Although a complete discussion of religious fundamentalism is beyond the scope of the present article (see Hood, Hill, & Williamson, 2005), some insights are noteworthy, particularly when this complex phenomenon is viewed through the lens of social identification. Several factors are thought to feed into (Abrahamic) fundamentalist ideology, including *dualism* (i.e., absolute evaluations of good vs. evil), *authority* (e.g., of a sacred book or leader), *selectivity* (i.e., choosing certain beliefs or practices over others), and *millennialism* (i.e., confidence in eschatology as God’s will); however, one facet is thought to be vital—*reactivity*, that is, “hostility toward the secular modern world” (Herriot, 2007, p. 6). In effect, hostility is directed toward the out-group, which comprises anyone who is not part of the religious in-group, along with mainstream members of one’s own religious group who are not viewed as true believers or religious enough (Herriott, 2007; Hood et al., 2005). This process of relegating to the margins in-group members who diminish the group’s distinctiveness and blur group boundaries is particularly likely to occur in times of threat or uncertainty (Abrams, Marques, Bown & Henson, 2000; Hogg, 1996). Yet, paradoxically, the expanding out-group increasingly threatens the fundamentalist in-group, thereby exaggerating the enhancement of positive group distinctiveness, esteem, and moral certainty (Branscombe et al., 1999; Graham & Haidt, 2009; Herriot, 2007; Hood et al., 2005; Rogers et al., 2007).

Despite several theoretical and empirical advances, the struggle to understand how or why religious identification becomes extreme in nature continues. It has been suggested that religious “zeal” buffers the negative effects of personal uncertainty and self-threats (e.g., mortality salience; McGregor, 2004). However, several factors thought to ground fundamentalism are also held to some extent by anyone who follows a particular set of religious beliefs (e.g., one true religion, authority of a sacred book; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004). Yet mainstream religious individuals who hold such beliefs do not consistently demonstrate the hostility and confrontation of their fundamentalist counterparts, instead

frequently promoting prosocial attitudes and behaviors (Graham & Haidt, 2010; Shariff, 2009). Thus, it may be more likely that intergroup tension (rather than individual psychology) fuels fundamentalist attitudes whereby the perception of both earthly and eternal threats serves to magnify in-group identification and aggression toward the out-group (Herriot, 2007; Rogers et al., 2007; Wellman & Tokuno, 2004). Moreover, under conditions of heightened intergroup strain, highly identified individuals appear to be especially intolerant of intragroup dissension on issues relevant to group status in an intergroup (as opposed to intragroup) context (Matheson, Cole, & Majka, 2003). Thus, tensions both across and within groups might promote conditions wherein fundamentalist attitudes flourish.

Finally, it is noteworthy that fundamentalism is not unique to religion, often driven instead by (or alongside) nationalist and/or ethnic markers (Herriot, 2007). Certainly, the posited central component of fundamentalism, reactivity, could be demonstrated through heightened levels of hostility toward a threatening out-group by any number of groups (or subgroups within a broader category). In this way, even highly identified atheists might share the very characteristic of fundamentalism that they rail against. Indeed, just as religious fundamentalism would not exist without hostility toward the threatening secular out-group (Herriot, 2007), atheism would not exist without the presence, and rejection, of religion.

Irreligion. Perhaps in response to religious fundamentalist violence (Myers, 2008), perceived threats to civil liberties governed by religious ideals (Gey, 2007), anger toward God for events of a more personal nature (Exline & Rose, 2005), or disillusionment with the perceived incompatibility of religion and science (Vetter & Green, 1932), some individuals reject or abandon any notions of religious faith. Thus, in a discussion of why individuals embrace and identify with their religious group, it is worth considering why others do not. Considerable variability exists regarding the extent to which religious identification is valued (or present at all), conceivably as a result of individuals' perceptions that their needs are being sufficiently met by identification with other groups or relative indifference to questions of an existential nature. Nonetheless, there are those who actively promulgate their rejection of religion. Sometimes referred to as the "new atheists" (Myers, 2008) or (more colorfully) "evangelical heathens" (Heiner, 2008), some atheists are devout *unbelievers* (Dawkins, 2006; Harris, 2006; Hitchens, 2007). Although the ideological gap between "religious traditionalists and secular humanists" has been widening for decades (Jost, 2007), few researchers have examined the social identification of atheism. Yet some individuals identify highly with other members of their *irreligious* group, as might be evidenced by membership in organizations such as the Freedom from Religion Foundation. Moreover, it could be argued that atheism, like religion, coincides with an epistemological and ontological framework through which to understand and interpret the world, namely, naturalistic materialism (Fales, 2007; Taylor,

2007). Certainly, such a belief system also offers potential explanations regarding what can be known and what can exist and is likely to be of great import to those whose self-identification as an atheist is central.

Although the reactions of religious individuals to an atheist out-group have been assessed (Hunter et al., 2004), there is a relative paucity of research empirically assessing the responses of highly identified atheists. However, we have observed that, on experiencing an identity threat that targeted their religious affiliation (or lack thereof), atheists' appraisal-coping, affective, and action-taking responses were similar to those of religious individuals, albeit the breadth of atheists' responses was narrower and the magnitude of responses was lower (Ysseldyk et al., 2009b). However, atheists were also less likely to appraise the identity threat as central to their well-being compared to those who were religious. The lack of the sacred element (Pargament, 1997) or the relative shortage of defining symbols and structures that buttress identification (Haslam et al., in press) in the former belief system might account for atheists' more temperate responses. Nonetheless, given that differences in the responses between highly identified atheists and believers were not striking when their respective groups were threatened, it may be that philosophical belief systems that are held in high regard—religious or otherwise—anchor both self and group identity, such that "an attack on our cherished ideas becomes an attack on us" (Smyth, 2002, p. 151). Clearly, more research is needed to disentangle the complexities in the making and maintenance of atheist versus religious belief systems and identity.

Implications for Future Empirical Pursuits

To further clarify the role of religious identification in understanding (and hopefully managing) intergroup conflict, enhancing individual well-being, and gaining a greater appreciation of religious belief systems as identity—including when held with zeal and when rejected entirely—several empirical research pursuits are worth considering. First, examination of the unique characteristics associated with religious leadership, as well as the physical structures and practices that reinforce religious identification, may be fruitful in determining how it is shaped and maintained. Second, rather than approaching religious identity as constant across groups, consideration of varying religious ideologies could reveal important differences concerning both individual and intergroup processes. Third, social identities do not exist in isolation, and religious identification might interact with other identities in unique ways to influence psychosocial functioning. And finally, given the sacred belief system linked to conceptions of religious identity, discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation is likely to be particularly harmful to individual well-being and may result in magnified intergroup responses when religion itself is targeted; an examination of differential strategies for dealing with such threats may therefore be constructive.

Religious Identity: Leaders and Landmarks. The leadership structure associated with religion stands apart from that of other social groups. Specifically, within each religious tradition, there is typically an individual or entity who holds the primary authority over group members (e.g., Buddha, Christ, Mohammed) and yet, because they are not tangibly living on earth, no personal identity exists to cloud the pure archetype of the social identity itself (Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005). Indeed, it has been suggested that the most influential and effective leaders are perceived as prototypical of the group identity (Platow & van Knippenberg, 2001; Reicher et al., 2005); as such, the unchanging nature of religious figureheads fulfills this purpose without compromise.

Further to these ideal prototypes, there exists a secondary layer of religious leadership that actively promotes the faith and traditions of the group. These leaders operate within the relevant sociopolitical context and embed the activities that define the group within dominant physical landmarks (e.g., temples, churches, mosques) across community landscapes (Haslam et al., in press). For example, the apostle Paul led by example to establish a series of Christian churches, in which he promoted several key practices (e.g., baptism, communion) that allowed followers to *live out* their shared identity (Esler, 2003; Haslam et al., in press). Indeed, in Paul's words, "For to me, *to live is Christ* and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21, italics added).

In effect, the dual layer of religious leadership binds prototypical stability with contextual flexibility to promote the group's collective cause with contemporary relevance. This leadership structure, coupled with enduring practices and landmarks that embody the system of beliefs, may be vital to understanding the strength and intensity often associated with religious identification.

Religious Identity Across Ideologies. Although most religious groups share some commonalities, there are, of course, important differences across ideologies. Religiosity is normally defined in terms of an individual's religious orientation, namely, intrinsic (i.e., looking to religion for spiritual development, guidance, and meaning) and extrinsic (i.e., using religion primarily for personal or social gain; Allport & Ross, 1967). However, it has been argued that the intrinsic–extrinsic understanding of religiosity was developed in the midst of a culture heavily influenced by individualism and American Protestantism and thus the "good" intrinsic versus "bad" extrinsic distinction might not be accurate across all religious affiliations (A. B. Cohen, Hall, Koenig, & Meador, 2005). Religious identification may be motivated by one or both of these orientations differently, depending on the religious group to which one belongs (A. B. Cohen & Hill, 2007). Among members of "descent" religions (i.e., groups into which one is born more often than converted), religions originating within collectivist cultures (e.g., Judaism or Hinduism), or those in which ritual traditions are highly valued (e.g., Roman Catholicism), the external aspects of religiosity may be equally or more important than the internalization of religious beliefs (A. B. Cohen

et al., 2005; A. B. Cohen & Hill, 2007). Conversely, among individuals of "ascent" religions (e.g., Protestantism), group membership may be of value to the individual primarily *because* of the internalized belief system that members share. As such, identification may be motivated, interpreted, and valued differently across religions.

In a study wherein religious identification was assessed based on the importance of faith to the individual's sense of identity (rather than group ties per se), Protestants reported higher levels of religious identification than did Catholics or Jews, and Catholics higher levels still than Jewish individuals (A. B. Cohen & Hill, 2007). More social understandings of religious identification (i.e., derived from Tajfel and Turner's, 1979, theorizing) have demonstrated that Muslims identified with their religious group more so than did Christians in both Germany (Fischer, Greitemeyer, & Kastenmüller, 2007) and Canada (Ysseldyk et al., 2009c). High levels of religious identification among Muslim individuals in these countries should not be particularly surprising, given that they represent a minority religion (Branscombe et al., 1999), along with relatively persistent insinuations that even mainstream Muslims may be connected to Islamic terrorism (Byng, 2008). Of course, such group differences might also stem from varying levels of dogmatism versus freedom of thought across religions. In addition, the historical or theological roots of various religious affiliations may shape identification and the coping strategies religious individuals employ, as has been suggested to explain the tendency for Muslims to engage in collectivist, *interpersonal* coping strategies (e.g., social support) as opposed to the more individualistic, *intrapersonal* strategies (e.g., cognitive restructuring) more often used by Christians (Fischer, Ai, Aydin, Haslam, & Frey, 2009). Given these important distinctions, an examination of religious identity without consideration of religious affiliation is likely to be insufficient (Exline, 2002), if not misleading.

Religious Identity Among Multiple Group Memberships.

In addition to variations across groups, the importance of several social identities may vary within individuals (Deaux, 1996; Evan, 1997; Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Any number of social groups may shape the self-concept, ranging from personal relationships, nation, and ethnicity to the superordinate identity of the human species (Evan, 1997; Turner et al., 1987; Wohl & Branscombe, 2005). However, competition between social identities (Stryker, 2000) might be resolved by one identity asserting dominance over the others (Deaux, 1996). For example, although an individual could define himself as male (gender), Asian (ethnicity), and Buddhist (religion), one of these identities might be most prominent within that individual's self-concept. Indeed, the importance of identification with any given group in shaping an individual's self-conception, as well as the lens through which he or she views the world, is rarely uniform across identity domains (Stryker & Serpe, 1994).

Several studies have incorporated dual identities, most often examining religious identification alongside national identity (Muldoon et al., 2007; Shechtman & Tanus, 2006; Simon & Ruhs, 2008; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007). This pursuit has offered valuable insight into the differential influences of those identities on psychosocial functioning. However, comparisons involving a broader array of identities may further clarify the complexity of social identity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002), including the hierarchical organization of multiple identities (Gaertner, Sedikides, Luke, & Iuzzini, 2008) or the synergies involved when identities intersect (Patterson, Cameron, & Lalonde, 1996). Empirical analyses of multiple identities that include religion are rare; however, one study focusing on the Sinhala Buddhist population in Sri Lanka found that religious identity was rated as more salient to individuals' self-concept than any of 10 other identities (including race, nation, caste, political affiliation, town, age, gender, occupation, education, and class; Freeman, 2003). Nonetheless, having been observed in the midst of Sri Lanka's ongoing civil war, religious identity salience was likely influenced by the conflict conditions. Certainly, an identity is more likely to come to the forefront of an individual's self-concept when that identity is socially embedded (Stryker & Serpe, 1994) or is under threat (Jetten, Schmitt, Branscombe, & McKimmie, 2005).

Religious Identity Threat and Discrimination. The perceived implications of an identity threat may evoke varying degrees of distress depending on the group membership that is targeted. Specifically, threats to some identities (e.g., discrimination on the basis of religion, nationality, or ethnicity) might be perceived as having greater ramifications than threats to identities associated with other groups (e.g., sports teams, universities, occupations). However, a religious identity threat could be perceived as paramount given the "eternal" significance of this group membership and the highly revered belief system to which it is attached (Kinnvall, 2004; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007; Wellman & Tokuno, 2004). Clearly, as demonstrated throughout history and by our current sociopolitical climate, threats to religious identification are common (Wellman & Tokuno, 2004). Yet efforts to disentangle the consequences for individual well-being and intergroup processes of religious versus other forms of discrimination are few.

As previously mentioned, several studies have advanced our understanding of the influences of dual identification (primarily religious with national or ethnic), for example, in terms of out-group affective ratings (Verkuyten, 2007) and political activity (Simon & Ruhs, 2008; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007). Given that these identities often overlap (Muldoon et al., 2007), it might be difficult to separate their differential effects. We have observed that although levels of religious and ethnic identification were comparable within individuals, religious discrimination evoked negative affective and emotionally charged coping responses to a greater degree than did ethnic discrimination among high identifiers, respectively

(Ysseldyk et al., 2009b). These results suggest that, although threats to other group identities are by no means benign, individuals might be better equipped to deal with threats that do not directly target their religious belief system itself.

Conclusion

Religious identification offers a distinctive sacred worldview and eternal group membership, unmatched by identification with other social groups, and hence religiosity might be explained (at least partially) by the immense cognitive and emotional value that religious group membership provides. The uniqueness of a positive social group grounded in a system of absolute guiding beliefs lends religious identity a twofold advantage for the promotion of well-being. However, that uniqueness may have equally negative impacts when religious identity itself is threatened through intergroup conflict.

Despite the social identity perspective's efficacy in explaining why religiosity is often held in high regard, there are, of course, other theoretical perspectives that might also inform our understanding. As alluded to earlier, religiosity could be driven by the need for life purpose and meaning (Park, 2007), the desire for control in an unpredictable world (Kay et al., 2008), or the longing for self-enhancement (Sedikides, 2009). Nonetheless, the stability of religious identification (given the stability of religious groups themselves across history and culture; Fischer et al., 2009; Kinnvall, 2004; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007) might build on (or go beyond) those explanations, for example, by satisfying the need for belongingness, by offering confidence in the midst of uncertainty, and by increasing self-esteem.

In effect, religious identification can offer a robust social support system, a comforting and compelling worldview, and a unique psychological enrichment to which many people hold fast. Nonetheless, collections of individuals sharing such strongly held beliefs may also risk taking their attitudes and actions to extremes to protect their worldview, thereby propagating seemingly untamable conflict. Thus, even in the case that a comprehensive explanation for religiosity is untenable (Pargament, 2002), a social identity framework appears to be unequivocally useful toward our understanding of this complex phenomenon.

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