



Religious variations in fundamentalism in Malaysia and the United States: Possible relevance to religiously motivated violence



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ABSTRACT

Passages can be found in nearly all religious scriptures sanctioning violence against members of other religions, but they seem to be especially prominent in the Koran. Assuming that fundamentalists are most likely obey what they read in sacred scriptures, this study sought to estimate the degree of fundamentalists among college students from Malaysia and the United States using a scale from 1 to 10. Roughly 40% of Malaysian students and 14% of U.S. students used 10 to rate their degree of fundamentalism. Malaysian Muslims were the most fundamentalist, followed closely by Malaysian Hindus, with Malaysian Christians being a distant third. In the U.S. sample, far fewer Muslims, Hindus, and Christians used 10 to represent their degree of religious fundamentalism. Virtually no correlation was found between religious fundamentalist and parental education and family income in either country. Instead, high involvement in religious activities and closely following religious codes of conduct plus having parents who strictly enforced religious teachings were much stronger predictors of religious fundamentalism than parental social status. Overall, the Koran's authorizing religiously motivated violence against non-believers along with high degrees of religious fundamentalism among Muslims and their growing interaction with non-believers may best explain the rash of terrorist violence in recent decades.

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1. Introduction

Concerns over religiously motivated terrorism have grown in recent decades, especially terrorist acts by “Muslim extremists” (Alam & Husband, 2013; Archick, Belkin, Blanchard, Ek, & Mix, 2011; Cesari, 2013; Henne, 2012; Pierce, 2014; Schüller, 2012). Why would terrorist acts by Muslims have grown? Obviously, Israel's confiscation of territory formally occupied by Muslims, and recent efforts by Western countries to overthrow Islamic governments in North Africa and the Middle East are likely contributors (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007; B. Lewis, 1990). Others factors could be the growing contact Muslims have with non-Muslims as well as high rates of poverty and unemployment among Muslims (Omran & Roudi, 1993; Rafiq, 1992; Smelser, 2007).

One other factor could be involved: Islam's most sacred text (the Koran) contains multiple passages explicitly advocating the killing of non-believers (Blanton, 2011; Bukay, 2007; Pierce, 2014; Spencer, 2009). Five examples are as follows:

Koran (9:5) – “Fight and kill the non-Muslims wherever you find them, take them captive, harass them, lie in wait and ambush them using every stratagem of war.”

Koran (8:12) – “[C]ast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve [in Allah]. Therefore strike off their heads and strike off every fingertip of them.”

Koran (2:191-193) – “[F]ight them until there is no more Fitnah [disbelief and worshipping of any god but Allah] and worship is for Allah alone.”

Koran (9:123) – “Believers, make war on the infidels who dwell around you. Deal firmly with them. Know that Allah is with the righteous.”

Koran (9:73) – “Prophet, make war on unbelievers and the hypocrites and deal rigorously with them. Hell shall be their home, an evil fate.”

Because Islam teaches that the Koran represents the unchanging word of God (Allah) transmitted without error to His prophet Mohamed (Arberry, 1996; Cook, 2000), a committed Muslim is obliged to obey these and all other Koranic passages (Bukay, 2007).

It is true that many Koranic passages seem contradictory to those cited above by advocating kindness and peaceful coexistence (Aziz, 2007). However, when scrutinized, one finds that these additional passages either pertain to how Muslims should treat other Muslims or

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should behave toward potential converts. Nowhere in the Koran is peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims ever encouraged (Pierce, 2014; Saritoprak, 2005; Spencer, 2013). The only exception is that the Koran (9:29) contains one passage stating that non-Muslims who refuse to convert to Islam should be spared from death if they pay “jazia”, a special tax signalling full submission to Islamic authority (Levy, 2002, pp. 310; Spencer, 2009).

Of course, the Koran is not the only sacred text depicting and even advocating torture and murder. Especially for texts originating in the Middle East (as opposed to the Far East) one can find gruesome passages. The Bible, for example, describes horrendous slaughter of humans by God Himself as well as violence committed by His followers on His behest (Aziz, 2007, pp. 62–67; Bleibtreu, 1991; Niditch, 1993). Other Biblical passages prescribe death for religious reasons. In one, Israelites who observe anyone worshiping a god other than their own or “bowing down to ... the sun or the moon or the stars in the sky” are told to “take the man or woman who has done this evil deed to your city gate and stone that person to death” (Deuteronomy 17; also see Deuteronomy 13:6 & 13:8–15). In another Biblical passage, after Israelites defeat an enemy they are given the following instructions: “You shall strike every male with the edge of the sword. But the women, the little ones, the livestock ... you shall plunder for yourself” (Deuteronomy 20:10–17). Similar Biblical instructions on treatment of Israel's enemies appear in Numbers 31:3, 7, 9–10, 15, 17–18. Even in the New Testament, one finds Jesus reportedly making the following statement: “But those mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me” (Luke 19:17).

While Muslims are not alone in committing atrocities on behalf of their religion either historically (Rapoport, 1983) or in modern times (Ranstorp, 1996), several investigations have concluded that the frequency with which they have killed civilians in the name of their religion over the past half century has been much higher than for members of any other religion (Chaliand & Blin, 2007; Hoffman, 2013; Kurzman, 2012; Moghadam, 2009). Nevertheless, throughout the world, the vast majority of Muslims live peacefully with members of other religions. Like people generally, most Muslims seem to adopt a live-and-let-live policy toward members of other faiths and even toward the nonreligious.

It seems reasonable to assume that most members of any religion would not seriously contemplate killing someone because he or she belonged to a different faith. The only exceptions would be fundamentalists with strong commitments to follow a literal interpretation of every commandment in their religion's sacred text. Accordingly, it would be informative to obtain estimates of the proportion of Muslims and members of other religions who consider themselves extreme fundamentalists. The present study provides such estimates for college students living in two countries. A secondary goal was to determine the extent to which religious fundamentalism is associated with family social status.

2. Methods

Malaysia and the United States are very different countries. About the only notable similarities are that (a) they are both former British colonies and (b) the design of their national flags have much in common. Otherwise, Malaysia is a developing south Asian predominantly Muslim country located near the equator with fairly high reproduction rates (Leete & Tan, 1993; Yaakob, 2006) while the U.S. is highly developed and much larger with a primarily Christian population located in North America with a generally temperate climate and fairly low reproduction rates (Finer & Henshaw, 2006; Jordan, 1992).

2.1. The samples

Large convenience samples of undergraduate college students in Malaysia and the United States were surveyed in 2009 and 2010. The

2059 Malaysian students were all attending the University of Malaya (in Malaysia's capital of Kuala Lumpur) while the U.S. students were attending the following eight universities: Boise State University in Idaho (145 respondents), California State University at Fullerton (251 respondents), Evangel University in Missouri (264 students), Minot State University in North Dakota (173 respondents), Pennsylvania State University (110 respondents), the University of Missouri (258 respondents), the University of Texas in the Permian Basin (1048 respondents), and the University of Texas in San Antonio (261 respondents), for a total of 2511 respondents. As a qualifying comment on the sampling procedure, approximately 300 of the 1048 UTPB sample were recruited by students attending UTPB and may not have been attending college students themselves, although all were at least 18 years old.

Table 1 shows the averages and proportional distributions of key demographic variables for respondents in both countries. The sex proportions in both samples contained more females than males. A major reason is that more females are currently attending college in both Malaysia and the United States (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2006; Firebaugh & Dorius, 2010).

Regarding social status, Table 1 shows substantial differences between the Malaysian parents and the U.S. parents, with the latter averaging roughly two years more of education. To obtain information regarding income variations, each respondent was asked to estimate his or her family's income using a scale from 1 (extremely low) to 10 (extremely high). According to Table 1, the average family income rating for the U.S. students was 6.04, compared to 4.77 for the Malaysian students. Thus, in terms of both years of education and family income, the U.S. students had substantially higher social status background than did the Malaysian students.

Table 1 indicates that there are tremendous ethnic/racial differences in the two countries sampled. Most strikingly, not a single respondent in our Malaysian sample was white, black, or Hispanic. In the U.S. sample, however, 94.1% of the respondents classified themselves within one of these three categories.

2.2. Variable measurement

The questionnaire was developed and refined in English. Then it was translated into Bahasa Malaysia, Malaysia's official language. To help ensure that the Malaysian translation was equivalent to the English

Table 1
Demographic composition of the samples.

Demographic traits	Malaysian sample	United States sample
Gender		
Males	652 (31.7%)	1027 (40.9%)
Females	1406 (68.3%)	1484 (59.1%)
Total	2058	2511
Age		
Mean (standard deviation)	20.86 (2.36)	23.96 (9.27)
Range	18–42	17–81
Total	2058	2511
Marital status		
Single (including engaged, domestic partners)	1971 (95.7%)	2004 (79.8%)
Married	37 (1.8%)	341 (13.6%)
Divorced/separated/widowed/single mom	1 (0.0%)	80 (3.2%)
No response or other	50 (2.4%)	86 (3.4%)
Total	2058	2511
Ethnicity		
White/European Ancestry	0	1394 (55.5%)
Black/African Ancestry	0	173 (6.9%)
Hispanic/Latin/Native American	0	745 (29.7%)
Malay/Bumiputera/Indonesian	1474 (71.6%)	5 (0.2%)
East Asian (Chinese, “Asian” in US)	477 (23.2%)	66 (2.6%)
Other Asian (primarily Indian)	85 (4.1%)	51 (2.0%)
Other (Mixed, Arabic, Persian, Euro-Asian)	3 (0.1%)	64 (2.5%)
No (or unintelligible) response	19 (0.9%)	13 (0.5%)
Total	2058	2511

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