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# Inter-religious feelings of Sunni and Alevi Muslim minorities: The role of religious commitment and host national identification



Borja Martinovic\*, Maykel Verkuyten

Utrecht University/Ercomer, The Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines inter-religious attitudes from the perspective of Muslim minorities living in Western Europe. We examine both Sunni and Alevi Muslims of Turkish origin living in Germany and the Netherlands, and focus on their global feelings towards multiple religious out-groups (Christians, Jews, Muslim out-group, and non-believers). We hypothesize that Sunnis would dislike religious out-groups more than Alevi, and that these group differences in religious out-group feelings can be explained by group differences in host national identification and the three B's of religious commitment: belonging (religious identification), behaviour (religious practices), and belief (liberal values). Sunnis were found to be rather negative towards Alevi, and Alevi were even more negative towards Sunnis. Furthermore, as expected, Alevi had more positive feelings towards Christians, Jews and non-believers, and this was related to their stronger host national identification, lower religious group identification, lower involvement in religious practices, and stronger endorsement of liberal values. We conclude by pointing at the need to distinguish between subgroups of Muslims instead of treating them as a uniform collective.

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## 1. Introduction

Many intergroup tensions and conflicts in the world have to do with religion. Religious group divides do not only exist in conflict regions such as Northern Ireland and the Middle East, but also in more peaceful contexts (Koopmans, 2015; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). The lack of knowledge about religious intergroup relations in these latter contexts is unfortunate, for at least two reasons. One is that religious differences are often of great importance to people's lives, and religious groups are among the more salient buttresses of identity (Seul, 1999). The other is that religious diversity has become a prominent issue in cultural diversity. In particular, immigration and integration debates in Western Europe often concern the inclusion of minorities of Islamic background, and this raises questions about the relationships between different religious groups (Alba, 2005; Zolberg & Long, 1999).

First and second generation Muslim immigrants are trying to integrate into historically Christian Western European societies that have gradually become rather secular. Recent research has therefore increasingly focused on understanding the nature and correlates of anti-Islam attitudes among native majority members (see Helbling, 2012). Yet, there is also the question of how Muslim minorities view other religious groups and non-believers. Some Muslims may hamper the

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Interdisciplinary Social Science/Ercomer, Padualaan 14, 3584CH Utrecht, The Netherlands.  
E-mail address: [b.martinovic@uu.nl](mailto:b.martinovic@uu.nl) (B. Martinovic).

development of more harmonious religious group relations by expressing quite negative opinions about, for example, Jews and non-believers (Koopmans, 2015; Verkuyten, 2007; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2009).

Muslim minorities, however, do not form a homogenous group, and there are important religious distinctions within their communities. For example, Sunni, Shia, and Alevi Muslim minorities might differ in their attitudes towards religious out-groups, and these different Muslim subgroups might not get along with each other very well either. The present study advances research on inter-religious attitudes by focusing on two Islamic subgroups from the same origin country and living in two countries of settlement: Sunni and Alevi Turkish Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands. The aim is to examine differences between Sunnis and Alevis in their feelings towards Christians, Jews, non-believers, and towards each other. Our research question is: do Sunni and Alevi minorities in Western Europe differ in their feelings towards religious out-groups, and if so, how can these differences be explained?

We investigate the three B's of religious commitment – behavior, belonging, and belief – as well as host national identification, as four mediating constructs that might account for the expected Sunni-Alevi differences in religious out-group feelings. As the four out-groups considered differ in religious identity content, it is important to establish whether the processes underlying the feelings towards each of these religious out-groups also differ. Therefore, we theorize separately about the role of host national identification and the three B's of religious commitment in shaping feelings towards each religious out-group, and we examine whether these mediating constructs can equally well explain the differences between Alevi and Sunnis' feelings towards all four religious out-groups.

### 1.1. *Sunni and Alevi Turkish Muslims*

Together with Sunni Islam, Alevism is one of the two main branches of Islam in Turkey.<sup>1</sup> It has been estimated that around three quarters of Turkish immigrant-origin minorities in Germany and the Netherlands are Sunni Muslims, and approximately 20% are Alevis (Buijs & Rath, 2002). Most of the Sunnis and Alevis have a similar history of labor migration, but some Alevis came to Western Europe as refugees. These groups share a relatively low socio-economic position in the host societies (Kaya, 2006). Furthermore, no distinction between the two groups is made in public discourse and governmental policies, because they are both defined and described as Muslims. However, Sunni and Alevi Muslims have a different understanding of what it means to be a Muslim, and they follow different religious practices. The substantial differences in religious beliefs and practices between these groups can be expected to have an impact on their feelings towards religious out-groups. Sunni Muslims ideally adhere to the five pillars of Islam: the declaration of faith, prayer (five times a day), fasting during the month of Ramadan, the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) and Zakat (giving alms). Orthopraxy is central to the Sunni faith, which is not to say that all Sunni Muslims adhere to it. Bruce (2011) has argued that this emphasis on orthopraxy restricts a personal interpretation of Islam, creating higher levels of social conformity to religious dogmas than in other religions.

In contrast, almost none of the Alevis who self-identify as Muslims follow the five pillars of Islam in the way that Sunnis do. For instance, instead of going on a pilgrimage to Mecca, they pray at the tombs of Alevi-Bektashi, and they have more voluntary congregational meetings in Cem houses (*Cemevis*). These meetings feature music, singing, and dancing (*Samâh*) in which both women and men participate. The interpretation of Islam is for Alevi Muslims less dogmatic: instead of strictly following the Qur'an, they tend to adopt a spiritual and mystical outlook on their religion. Alevis are particularly concerned with treating others in a responsible and caring way, regardless of these people's religious convictions. Some argue that 'Alevis share with Germans and Europeans a democratic, laicist and egalitarian outlook' (Kosnick, 2004; p. 985).

Research in Western Europe has shown that Turkish Alevis display much lower levels of religious fundamentalism than Turkish Sunnis (Koopmans, 2015), and that humanitarian beliefs are associated with more positive feelings towards religious out-groups (Van der Slik & Konig, 2006). Given their humanistic and egalitarian outlook, Alevi compared to Sunni Muslims can be expected to have more positive feelings towards Christians, Jews and non-believers. Yet, Alevis would not necessarily have more positive feelings towards Sunnis than that Sunnis would have towards Alevis. Alevis might even dislike Sunnis more than that they are disliked by Sunnis in return. The reason is that Alevis tend to define the humanistic, virtuous and peace-loving nature of Alevism in contrast to the alleged dogmatic, violent and intolerant character of Sunni Islam (Van Bruinessen, 1995; Sökefeld, 2008; Yildiz & Verkuyten, 2012). Many Alevis consider Sunni Islam as a threat to their Alevi identity, not only in Turkey but also in the context of Western Europe (Massicard, 2013; Yildiz & Verkuyten, 2012). In sum, we hypothesize that, compared to Sunni Muslim minorities, Alevis have more positive feelings towards Christians, Jews and non-believers, and more negative feelings towards the Muslim out-group. Below we further theorize about the reasons for the expected group differences and we formulate hypotheses about mediation mechanisms.

<sup>1</sup> In Turkey, as well as within the Alevi communities in Western Europe, there is a continuing and intense debate on the most appropriate way to define Alevi identity (Van Bruinessen, 1995). Alevi identity is defined in linguistic, cultural, political, and religious terms (Shindeldecker, 2006). Here we focus on Alevis who self-identify as Muslims, and therefore we will use the term Alevi Muslims and consider Alevism as a branch of Islam.

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