



Responses to religious norm defection: The case of Hui Chinese Muslims not following the halal diet



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ABSTRACT

The present research sought to understand how religious individuals would respond to ingroup members' defections from the sacred norms in their religion. Given the strong connection of the dietary norms in Islam to the religion's sacred values, violations of Islamic dietary norms may evoke strong negative emotions. Therefore, we examined how young Hui Muslims in Beijing reacted when they witnessed a Muslim violated the sacred halal and haram norms of food prohibitions in Islam. The results of an experiment showed that when Hui Muslims perceived a defection from the halal and haram norms by a Muslim, they felt sad, angry and disgusted. These emotions in turn increased the preference for practices and policies that would uphold religious norms. Our results also speak to Hui Muslims' tolerance of norm violations by non-Muslims. Although following the halal and haram norms is considered morally obligatory for Muslims, our Hui Muslim participants did not expect non-Muslims to follow these norms and did not report negative emotions when they saw a non-Muslim consuming a non-halal meal.

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1. Introduction

The study of norm compliance and responses to norm violation is a core research area in social psychology (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). Groups tend to reward members who uphold group norms. This effect is particularly pronounced among religious groups (Bulbulia & Mahoney, 2008), possibly because most norms in a religion are perceived by its followers to be based on sacred values. From the perspective of religious people, religious norms, such as the halal and haram norms of food prohibitions in Islam, assume the form of moral absolutes (Rozin & Wolf, 2008; Tetlock, 2003). Although research has demonstrated that religious individuals would reward others who sacrifice their personal interests to comply with religious norms (Bulbulia & Mahoney, 2008), no known research has investigated how religious individuals would respond to defections from the sacred norms in their religion (e.g., sexual abuses of young boys by Catholic priests; commission of adultery by Christian pastors). The current study was carried out to fill this gap.

We hypothesize that defection from sacred religious norms would cause members of the religion to experience negative emotions. Some religious norms, because of its connection to the sacred values of the religion, are regarded as moral absolutes. As such, defecting from these norms signals both moral decadence and betrayal of the sacred values in the religion, evoking moral outrage against the defector. As such, religious individuals are likely to feel sad and angry about the defection.

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There are some *theoretical* discussions on the relationship between violation of moral norms and the emotion of disgust, although the discussion does not focus on violation of sacred religious norms. Rozin, Haidt, and Fincher (2009) contend that people are motivated to protect important moral values from being contaminated. According to Rozin et al. (2009), the primary disgust output program is harnessed to an evaluation system designed to reject potential foods on the basis of their nature or perceived origin. The primary disgust outputs involve nonverbal expression of disgust, behaviors such as avoidance of contaminated food, and physiological reactions (e.g., nausea, vomiting) directed toward expelling the contaminated food that the organism has consumed. The triggers of the primary disgust output program are sensory inputs (e.g., bitter tastes in the mouth associated with the intake of contaminated food). The trigger activates an evaluation system comprising cognitive appraisals of the trigger, feelings, and contamination ideations.

Through some combination of biological and cultural evolution, the disgust evaluation system is used for another purpose (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1993; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). The initial evaluation system designed to reject contaminated food later evolved to respond to an enlarged eliciting category, including a class of moral offenses that could potentially compromise the moral purity of the society. In this connection, some studies have shown that people high in disgust sensitivity are particularly prone to give harsher judgments on purity-related moral issues such as homosexuality (Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, & Bloom, 2009). From this perspective, defection from sacred religious norms would also elicit the emotions of disgust.

2. Attitudinal responses to religious norm defection

Norm defection is socially contagious; it could spread across individuals. Furthermore, observations of others violating a norm could lead the observers to violate other norms (Keizer, Lindenberg, & Steg, 2008). Negative emotional responses to norm defection can motivate members of the religious group to contain the spread of norm defection, if such emotional responses could strengthen the religious group members' preferences to support practices and policies that would reinforce adherence to religious norms.

The motivation to uphold traditional norms is particularly strong when sacred norms are violated. A series of studies showed that when a dispute (e.g., territorial conflicts between two peoples) is framed as a sacred issue (defense of the sacred land of the people), the disputants are willing to engage in acts of violence to fight for the holy cause, even when the perceived efficacy of such acts is questionable (e.g., the Christian Crusades in the Middle Ages; Ginges & Atran, 2009, 2011). This is the case because to these disputants, violence is morally mandated. In addition, any material incentives to encourage people to compromise over a sacred value often backfire, leading to stronger opposition to such compromise (Ginges & Atran, 2013). In short, religious individuals are unwilling to compromise over the sacred values in their religion. Hence, they would respond to religious norm defection with intense negative emotions, which would motivate a stronger preference for life practices and government policies that would uphold the valued norms in the religion.

3. The context of the present research

To understand how religious individuals would respond to ingroup members' defections from the sacred norms in their religion, we examined how young Hui Muslims in Beijing would react when they witness a Muslim violates the sacred *halal* and *haram* norms of food prohibitions in Islam. We hypothesize that when members of a religious group (e.g., Hui Muslims) perceive a defection from the sacred norms in their religion, they would experience negative emotions, which would in turn increase the preference for practices and policies that would enforce compliance with the religious norms. Before we present the study, we will briefly describe (a) the Hui Muslims in China, and (b) the *halal* and *haram* norms in Islam.

3.1. Hui Muslims in China

China is a multiethnic country. The Han people are the majority group. They constitute 92% of the population of China, and few of them are Muslims. The Hui people, one of the 56 officially recognized ethnic groups in China, are a predominantly Muslim ethnic group. In year 2000, about 10 million Hui people reside in China. Most Hui people speak Chinese. They are found throughout the country, although most of them live in the Northwestern provinces and the Central Plain. Most Hui people practice Islam and follow Islamic dietary laws. As is the case in many other Islam cultures, Hui Muslim men often wear *taqiyah* (a white rounded cap) and Hui Muslim women headscarves.

3.2. The *halal* and *haram* norms

The *halal* and *haram* norms in Islam provide an ideal context for testing our hypotheses. In Arabic, the word *halal* means "permitted" or "lawful," and the word *haram* means "forbidden" or "unlawful." According to the Islamic dietary guidelines gathered from the Qu'ran, Muslim followers are not allowed to consume alcohol and pork or pork byproducts. To Islamic followers, alcohol is an intoxicant and the flesh of swine is a harmful diet; they are bad for both the physical and moral health of the Muslims.

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