

Collective religious rituals, not religious devotion, spur support for suicide attacks

February 18 2009

In a new study in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, psychologists Jeremy Ginges and Ian Hansen from the New School for Social Research along with psychologist Ara Norenzayan from the University of British Columbia conducted a series of experiments investigating the relationship between religion and support for acts of parochial altruism, including suicide attacks. Suicide attacks are an extreme form of "parochial altruism" - they combine a parochial act (the attacker killing members from other groups) with altruism (the attacker sacrificing themselves for the group).

While the relationship between religion and popular support for suicide attacks is a topic of frequent conjecture, scientific study of the relationship is rare. The researchers found that the relationship between religion and support suicide attacks is real but is unrelated to devotion to particular religious beliefs or religious belief in general. Instead, collective religious ritual appears to facilitate parochial altruism in general and support for suicide attacks in particular.

The researchers surveyed Palestinian Muslims about their attitudes towards religion, including how often they prayed and went to mosque. The researchers found that devotion to Islam, as measured by prayer frequency, was unrelated to support for suicide attacks. However, frequency of mosque attendance did predict support for suicide attacks. In a separate survey of Palestinian Muslim university students, the researchers found again that those who attended mosque more than once a day, were more likely to believe that Islam requires suicide attacks,

compared to students who attended mosque less often.

A similar pattern of results was found in research carried out with other religious groups. In another experiment, the researchers conducted phone surveys with Israeli Jews living in the West Bank and Gaza and asked them either how frequently they attended synagogue or how often they prayed to God. All participants were then asked if they supported the perpetrator of a suicide attack against Palestinians. Analysis of the responses showed that 23% of those asked about synagogue attendance supported suicide attacks while only 6% of those queried about prayer frequency supported suicide attacks.

In the last experiment, the psychologists surveyed members of six religious majorities in six nations (Mexican Catholics, Indonesian Muslims, Israeli Jews, Russian Orthodox in Russia, British Protestants and Indian Hindus) to see if the relationship between attending religious services and support for acts of parochial altruism holds up across a variety of political and cultural contexts. These results also showed that support for parochial altruism was related to attendance at religious services, but unrelated to regular prayer.

This study indicates that religious devotion does not cause support for suicide attacks or other forms of parochial altruism. However, the findings suggest that regularly attending religious services may make individuals more prone to supporting acts of parochial altruism. The researchers theorize that collective religious rituals and services create a sense of community among participants and enhance positive attitudes towards parochially altruistic acts such as suicide attacks. Although, the researchers note, the greater sense of community, developed via religious services, may have many positive consequences. They observe, "Only in particular geopolitical contexts is the parochial altruism associated with such commitments translated into something like suicide attacks."

Source: Association for Psychological Science

Citation: Collective religious rituals, not religious devotion, spur support for suicide attacks (2009, February 18) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-02-religious-rituals-devotion-spur-suicide.html>

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