Research article

When authoritarianism meets religion: Sacrificing others in the name of abstract deontology

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Abstract

Authoritarianism is a stable construct in terms of individual differences (social attitudes based on personality and values), but its manifestations and behavioral outcomes may depend on contextual factors. In the present experiment, we investigated whether authoritarianism is sensitive to religious influences in predicting rigid morality. Specifically, we investigated whether authoritarians, after supraliminal religious priming, would show, in hypothetical moral dilemmas, preference for impersonal societal norms even at the detriment of interpersonal, care-based prosociality toward proximal persons and acquaintances in need. The results confirmed the expectations, with a small effect size for the religious priming × authoritarianism interaction. In addition, these results were specific to participants' authoritarianism and not to their individual religiosity. The interaction between authoritarian dispositions and religious ideas may constitute a powerful combination leading to behaviors that are detrimental for the well-being and the life of others, even proximal people, in the name of abstract deontology. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

Authoritarianism, Morality, and Abstract Deontology

Authoritarianism is a major construct of social attitudes that denotes conservative ideology and submission to established authorities. It translates to a combination of basic personality traits (high conscientiousness and low openness to experience: Sibley & Duckitt, 2008, for a meta-analysis) and values reflecting conservation (security, conformity, tradition: Duriez & Van Hiel, 2002). Authoritarianism originates from the perception of the world as dangerous and threatening and is motivated by the need to maintain security, order, and stability possibly through reaffirmation of in-group norms and values (Duckitt, 2009; Duckitt & Sibley, 2009, for reviews).

The present work focuses on authoritarianism's consequences on morality, more particularly on the conflict between abstract, non-interpersonal morality and interpersonal, care-based morality. In the following paragraphs, we will explain this moral conflict and the possible involvement of authoritarianism.

In the moral domain, authoritarianism predicts specific outcomes characterized by normativity, conservatism, and system justification. For instance, in debatable moral issues, authoritarianism relates to the preference of conservative morality ("moral regulation") over individual freedom (Ashton, Danso, Maio, Esses, Bond, & Keung, 2005). It predicts support for authority's decisions and low support for individual rights and liberties (Altemeyer, 1996). Authoritarian low moral reasoning is based on principles that transcend self-interest and a reliance on the conventional norms of one's society (McFarland, 2010). Authoritarian morality seems to be explained by avoidance and inhibition-based motives relative to other people in order to protect the larger community (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Baldacci, 2008). Not surprisingly thus, authoritarianism predicts prejudice towards members of different kinds of out-groups (Duckitt, 2009).

However, as far as the domain of interpersonal relations is concerned, authoritarianism does not reflect low quality in interpersonal relations. Contrary to the social dominance orientation that is marked by competitiveness, low empathy, low agreeableness, and Machiavellianism (Duckitt & Sibley, 2009), authoritarianism is overall unrelated to prosocial personality traits, emotions, and principles (Duckitt, 2009; Janoff-Bulman et al., 2008).

What happens then when it comes to moral dilemmas where abstract deontology, i.e., rules having to do with moral integrity, honesty, and loyalty, are in conflict with prosocial concerns in the context of interpersonal relations? Life provides plenty of such examples: Tell the truth or avoid doing so to prevent harming someone who is terribly ill? Obey the police and denounce a friend or protect him? Strictly respect established rules or forgive a professional fault in some circumstances? In more extreme terms: defend strictly a specific

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ideology (note that all ideologies contain noble principles) or avoid doing so to prevent the harming or killing of innocent people?

In a previous study (Saroglou, Van Pachterbeke, & Dupont, 2010), we built nine hypothetical dilemmas that create conflict between abstract deontology (rules and norms that have some importance for personal moral integrity and social functioning but whose violation in these cases would not hurt anybody specifically) and care-oriented moral concerns for known people, such as friends and acquaintances (no harm, helping). We hypothesized and found that people scoring high in authoritarianism tend to make abstract deontological choices in these dilemmas. In other words, authoritarianism implies respect of abstract norms even at the detriment of empathy and care-based prosociality towards familiar targets.

Authoritarianism and Abstract Deontology in Context: The Impact of Religious Priming

Extensive research on the interface of personality and social psychology suggests the importance of understanding the interaction between (i) stable personality predispositions and related social attitudes and (ii) situations and contexts that have an impact on the presence of a given construct or shape the manifestation of its consequences (Funder, 2008; Leary & Hoyle, 2009). For a long time, authoritarianism has been conceptualized as an overall stable and trans-situational construct of individual differences (Altemeyer, 1996). Some studies have shown that it increases after situations of threat or uncertainty (Duckitt, 2009; Duckitt & Sibley, 2009, for reviews). However, little is known on how specific contexts shape the consequences of authoritarianism. In one recent study, it was found that priming an in-group norm preservation orientation resulted in students' authoritarianism being predictable of anti-immigrant attitudes (Dru, 2007).

Recent world events related to political-religious terrorism suggest that dispositional tendencies and contexts leading to terrorist acts in the name of abstract principles may result from a powerful combination of authoritarianism with religious ideas. Religious ideas alone are not sufficient to provoke terrorism: they need to be endorsed by radical people. And personal dispositions alone may not be sufficient to create terrorists: when authoritarians adopt radical ideology, such as certain religious ideas, there is an increase in the extremeness of acts willing to be undertaken.

In the present study, we investigated the possibly "explosive" interaction between authoritarianism and religion. More precisely, we hypothesized that priming religious concepts would impact—activate or increase—authoritarians' tendency to prefer abstract deontology when it conflicts with care-oriented prosocial choices.

Religion may reinforce or amplify moral inclinations in affinity with authoritarian attitudes and values. Not only is individual religiousness positively associated with authoritarianism (Bouchard, 2009; Wink, Dillon, & Prettyman, 2007), but religion and authoritarianism also share common values (reflecting preference of conservation over openness to change: Feather, 2005) and an investment in non-interpersonal morality that refers to external sources of authority such as the

group (loyalty), power figures (authority), and divinity (purity) (Graham & Haidt, 2010). Like authoritarianism, religion reflects orientation of collectivism instead of individualism (Saroglou & Cohen, in press), the need for cognitive order and closure (Saroglou, 2002), and the need for a reduction of the (emotional) uncertainty provoked by different kinds of physical and moral threats (Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010).

One could argue that religion does not only include authoritarianism-like moral attitudes and behaviors but also positive, care-oriented morality. This is true when one reviews research on religion and prosociality (Saroglou, in press). As found in recent studies, religious primes increased accessibility of prosociality-related words and the willingness to volunteer (Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007), generosity in a dictator's game (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007), cooperation, and charity donation (Preston & Ritter, 2010) and decreased retaliation (Saroglou, Corneille, & Van Cappellen, 2009). However, religious priming was also found to activate more abstract morality of moral integrity: it decreased hypocrisy (Carpenter & Marshall, 2009) and increased honesty (Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007). Furthermore, religious priming can increase racial prejudice (Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2010), aggression (Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, & Busath, 2007), and support of ethno-religious terrorism (Ginges, Hansen, & Norenzayan, 2009, Study 3).

One way to find coherence among these a priori divergent findings, a way that is particularly interesting with regard to the objectives of the present study, is to presume that religion is a complex semantic network and thus activates different concepts to different people, depending on personal dispositions. Whereas prosocial concepts and behaviors in the above-mentioned studies seemed to be activated by religion often "universally" (i.e., in both religious and nonreligious people), a series of three recent experiments showed that religion activates submissive concepts and behaviors among people with high dispositional submissiveness (but not among people with low dispositional submissiveness). More precisely, the same religious primes that in the study of Pichon et al. (2007) activated prosocial concepts and behavioral prosocial intentions were found to (i) increase accessibility of submission-related concepts; (ii) increase retaliation if requested by the experimenter; and (iii) increase informational conformity to numeric estimations provided by anonymous others (Saroglou et al., 2009; Van Cappellen, Corneille, Cols, & Saroglou, 2011).

Dispositional submissiveness to authority is a key component defining authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1996). Therefore, we expected that, when primed with religious concepts, authoritarians would show increased preference for abstract moral deontology even at the detriment of interpersonal care.

Finally, the above-mentioned studies (Saroglou et al., 2009; Van Cappellen et al., 2011) also showed that the effects of religious priming on activating submission/conformity-related concepts and behaviors are, consistently across the three experiments, a function of individual disposition for submissiveness but not of individual religiosity. In other words, religious concepts implicitly activate submission/conformity among submissive people but not necessarily among religious or nonreligious people. Therefore, we expected that authoritarianism, but not religiosity, would interact with religious

priming to increase preference for abstract deontology at the detriment of interpersonal care.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 152 Belgian adults (68 men and 83 women), recruited by an undergraduate student who asked his acquaintances and neighbors as well as visitors of a university library to participate. Mean age was 24.7 years (*SD*=7.4, range=16–62). The participants were French-speaking native Belgians, raised mostly in a Catholic Christian environment, with a majority having a university education. In terms of personal religiosity (see for the measure below), participants were typical of young adults in this country (Saroglou, 2003); their mean level was under the cut-off. No financial or other compensation was provided for participation. Forty per cent of people who were approached agreed to participate in the study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two priming conditions, i.e., neutral and experimental (religious priming). They participated in the experiment individually.

Procedure

The participants first completed a word-search puzzle that served as a priming manipulation. This task has already been successfully used to activate goals (e.g., Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Trötschel, 2001) as well as behaviors (e.g., Pichon et al., 2007). A 10 × 10 matrix of letters was presented besides a list of 10 words which were embedded in the matrix; participants had to retrieve the words in the grid (see one of the above references for a detailed description of the task).

Words to be found in the puzzle were either religious (experimental condition) or nonreligious, i.e., without religious reference. Within each of these two conditions, we varied valence: in both the neutral and the experimental conditions, half of the participants were primed with positive and half with negative words. However, the valence of the primes did not show any direct effect or interaction with the content (religious vs. nonreligious) of the words in predicting the dependent variable (abstract deontology).

The religious words were *angel*, *baptism*, *communion*, *praise*, *wedding*, *miracle*, *Christmas*, *heaven*, *salvation*, and *tradition* (10 positive) or *antichrist*, *apocalypse*, *crusade*, *demon*, *hell*, *fanaticism*, *guru*, *sin*, *Satan*, and *cult* (10 negative). The nonreligious words were *amusement*, *chance*, *charm*, *balance*, *flower*, *freedom*, *optimism*, *smile*, *sympathy*, and *tolerance* (10 positive) or *unemployment*, *anger*, *pain*, *boredom*, *envy*, *fear*, *separation*, *stress*, *sadness*, and *illness* (10 negative). The religious positive and the nonreligious positive words were taken from Pichon et al. (2007; they have also been used in the studies Saroglou et al., 2009 and Van Cappellen et al., 2011). The additional words, i.e., the negative religious and the negative nonreligious, come from a list of 47 words we created. They were selected after being pretested with 52 participants with similar characteristics (age, education, religious background, linguistic community, method of recruitment) to the 152 participants of the main study. These individuals evaluated all of them on seven-point Likert scales in terms of (i) reference to religion (1=*not at all religious* and 7=*totally religious*) and (ii) valence (1=*negative* and 7=*positive*). These participants indeed evaluated the 10 religious words (*M*=5.95, *SD*=0.51) as highly religious compared with the 10 nonreligious words (*M*=1.83, *SD*=0.39), $t(18)=20.33$, $p<0.01$. The two sets of words, i.e., the negative religious and the negative nonreligious, were similar in negative valence (respectively, *M*s=2.46, 2.35, *SD*s=0.37, 0.31), $t(18)=-0.67$, n.s.

To measure the effects of this priming on abstract deontology in moral judgment, we presented each participant with a set of nine moral dilemmas (Saroglou et al., 2010). Each dilemma describes hypothetical situations in which a conflict is present between (i) impersonal principles and rules (loyalty, honesty/not lying, strict equity in treatment) and (ii) care-based willingness to help or protect an acquaintance or friend in need. Here is a sample dilemma: "*You visit a friend who has been hospitalized for one year due to late-stage cancer. He spent his life running a small industry. He is very proud of it, having started it from nothing and expanding it to having, one year ago, 60 workers in a familial atmosphere. The person handed the management of this firm on to his son just after his cancer diagnosis, hoping that his son would carry on his work. The patient asks you for news about the firm. You know that, aiming gains, his son sold the firm to a multinational that restructured it. Do you tell the patient or do you lie?*"

The other dilemmas include the following situations: (i) helping an acquaintance that is a foreign student stay in the host country versus refusing to do so because his origin country's fellowship stipulated the moral obligation to return to help his country; (ii) denouncing a friend to the police, who are looking for him, because he is responsible for a car accident versus lying by saying you know nothing about it; (iii) giving hospitality to an illegal immigrant versus refusing to do it because the law prohibits it; (iv) favoring a family to stay in peace on its property versus accepting the legal fact that a company will build a noisy warehouse in the ground adjacent to the family's home; (v) as a worker in a factory producing weapons that will be used by a foreign regime against the population, accepting to sabotage the production versus refusing to do so out of professional loyalty; (vi) as a syndicalist on strike that blocks the access to a supermarket, making an exception and allowing a woman to enter the shop to buy food for her children versus refusing this act; (vii) being helpful to a good neighbor whose lease risks not to be renewed because he is noisy within the large building by telling the apartment's owner that the neighbor does not make a noise; and (viii) forgiving, as manager, a 20-year employee who made the same security fault twice versus dismissing him out of respect for firm's rules.

In all nine moral dilemmas, participants had thus to choose one of two options: to take a prosocial (i.e., in favor of the other person's expressed needs; coded as 0) or an abstract deontological (i.e., respect of impersonal principles and rules; coded as 1) decision. A mean abstract deontological score was computed. In a previous series of four studies (Saroglou et al., 2010), evidence was provided that this measure reflects the conflict between care and the principles of loyalty and

authority and that the preference of abstract deontology is related to conservative values, authoritarian ideology, epistemic need for closure, and low prosociality in specific contexts.

Finally, participants were administered measures of authoritarianism and religiosity. They were administered Funke's (2005) version of Altemeyer's (1996) Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale (RWA; our French translation and slight adaptation to the Belgian context; seven-point Likert scale). This measure borrows many items from the initial RWA and comprises items that cover the three RWA facets: conventionalism, authoritarian submission, and authoritarian aggression. Three items were split in two (more than one idea was included in the original version: items 1, 2, and 9), and two items were replaced (items 3 and 7). A global individual score was computed by averaging the scores on the 15 items ($\alpha = 0.74$). In order to check whether the expected effects were specific to participants' authoritarianism and not to individual religiosity, we also measured personal, subjective religiosity through a typical three-item index (see Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008) measuring, through a seven-point Likert scale, the importance of God in life, the importance of religion in life, and the frequency of prayer ($\alpha = 0.94$)

RESULTS

The mean score on abstract deontological choices was 0.36 ($SD = 0.18$), and the mean of authoritarianism was 3.89 ($SD = 0.78$). In order to test our hypothesis, we regressed abstract deontology on authoritarianism (centered), experimental condition (contrast coded with $-1 =$ nonreligious prime and $+1 =$ religious prime), and the product of their interaction. The prime had no main effect on moral choices ($\beta = 0.008$, *n.s.*). Authoritarianism—across conditions—was marginally related to the number of abstract deontological responses ($\beta = 0.037$, $p = 0.06$). More importantly, as hypothesized, the interaction between condition and authoritarianism in predicting abstract deontology was significant, $\beta = 0.040$, $p < 0.05$ (three participants were excluded from the analysis because of relatively high Cook's distances: see Cook, 1977). A simple slope analysis (see also Figure 1) revealed that the religious prime
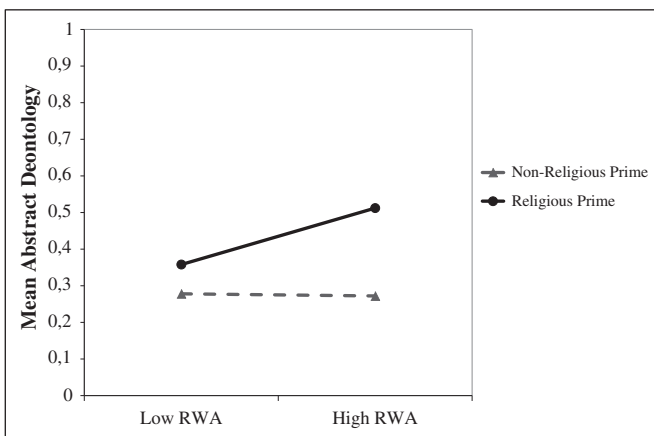
had no effect on the number of abstract deontological responses among low authoritarians (one *SD* below the mean), $\beta = -0.024$, *n.s.*, but increased the abstract deontology of high authoritarians (one *SD* above the mean), $\beta = 0.039$, $p = 0.05$. No effect of a three-way interaction (adding the valence of the primes as a third term in the above interaction) was observed.

Authoritarianism was overall positively correlated with individual religiosity ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$). It could be that religious participants were also sensitive to the effects of the religious primes on increasing abstract deontology and that this was the cause of authoritarians' sensitivity to the effects of the priming on abstract deontology. We thus regressed abstract deontology on religiosity (centered), experimental condition (contrast coded), and the product of their interaction. Religiousness—across conditions—was unrelated to the number of abstract deontological responses ($\beta = 0.008$, *n.s.*), and there was no interaction between condition and religiousness in predicting abstract deontology, $\beta = 0.003$, *n.s.* (one participant was excluded from the analysis because of relatively high Cook's distance). Note also that re-computing the RWA × religious priming interaction after omitting one RWA item that referred to religion (i.e., importance of religious texts for living in society) did not change the results; the interaction remained significant ($\beta = 0.042$, $p < 0.05$).

DISCUSSION

In this study, priming supraliminally religious concepts enhanced authoritarians' tendency to make moral decisions—in hypothetical moral dilemmas—in favor of abstract deontological norms. These choices came at the detriment of the legitimate interests and well-being of people with whom one interacts in the everyday life. In other words, when abstract deontology was in conflict with interpersonal care, the interaction of authoritarianism with religious concepts predicted the sacrifice of proximal others' needs in the name of abstract norms and rules such as social standards (e.g., loyalty, respect to authority) and moral integrity (e.g., honesty). Note that the violation of abstract deontology in the moral dilemmas used would not have implied detrimental consequences for specific others, but was a necessary means to help and protect friends, neighbors, and acquaintances.

The effect found was small in size. Nevertheless, it was specific to participants' authoritarianism and not to their individual religiosity. This is important to mention because the two constructs are often, including in the present study, interrelated. One could suspect that the increase of abstract deontology among authoritarians was an artifact of their religiosity, provided that the more religious participants could be more sensitive to the effects of religious priming on such kind of morality. The latter was in fact not the case. Given that authoritarianism includes submissiveness, this finding is in line with three previous experiments (Saroglou et al., 2009; Van Cappellen et al., 2011) which consistently showed that the effects of religious priming in activating concepts and behaviors related to submission and conformity depend not on individual religiosity but on dispositional submissiveness.

Figure 1. Abstract deontology as a function of prime and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA)

This study extends previous research on moral consequences of authoritarianism by focusing not on negative outcomes regarding distal out-group members (e.g., prejudice, discrimination) but on detrimental effects for close others. Interestingly, in a previous study using the same moral dilemmas, preference of abstract deontology at the detriment of interpersonal care was found to be negatively related with the endorsement of the moral principle of care but was positively related to the endorsement of the moral principles of authority and, to some extent, loyalty (Saroglou et al., 2010). Authority and loyalty are mo-ral principles typical of collectivistic societies, conservative individuals, and religion, contrary to principles of interpersonal morality (i.e., care) that are rather universally endorsed (Graham & Haidt, 2010; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009).

An interesting qualification provided by the present study with respect to previous research is that contextual factors may shape the authoritarianism–conservative morality link. Indeed, it was the implicit exposure to religious concepts that activated this link. This was very likely because religion activated the importance of social conformity to norms and/or submission to authority, both being particularly relevant in the context of authoritarianism (e.g., Altemeyer, 1996; Feldman, 2003). Religion is also known to solidify one's commitment to the group's ideology (Henrich, 2009).

Previous experimental research is in favor of this explanation. As mentioned above, religion activates informational conformity and submission to authority resulting in antisocial behavior among people with dispositional submissiveness (Saroglou et al., 2009; Van Cappellen et al., 2011). Additionally, people with high scores on authoritarianism develop more anti-immigrant attitudes after an in-group norm preservation orientation becomes salient (Dru, 2007). A related explanatory hypothesis is that of moral disengagement. Religion may facilitate moral disengagement, a process that has been found to mediate the antisocial effects of authoritarianism (Jackson & Gaertner, 2010). Indeed, religious priming has been found to decrease self-attribution of authorship for events (Dijksterhuis, Preston, Wegner, & Aarts, 2008).

Note that religion seemed to activate rather than amplify the authoritarianism–abstract deontology link. In other words, in the control condition (no religious priming), authoritarianism was not significantly related to abstract deontology. Although in a previous correlational study authoritarianism was found to predict abstract deontology—without inducing additional elicitors (Saroglou et al., 2010), the present study underlines the facilitating role of contextual factors in the manifestation of authoritarian consequences.

On the basis of previous research having attested that priming religious concepts can also activate prosocial concepts and behaviors (Pichon et al., 2007; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007; Preston & Ritter, 2010), one could imagine that religious priming would have increased, at least among low authoritarians, preference for care-oriented morality. However, this did not happen, possibly for the following two reasons. First, given the overall lack of association between authoritarianism and prosociality (Bäckström & Björklund, 2007; Sibley & Duckitt 2008), it does not result that low authoritarians have the tendency to be prosocial, thus more sensitive to the activation of prosociality by religious primes. Second,

the moral dilemmas used involved complex situations of conflict between care and abstract deontology. Research suggests that religion implies non-interpersonal morality (related to integrity, purity, and conventional social standards) to a more important degree than interpersonal morality (e.g., Weeden et al., 2008).

This study focuses on authoritarians' reactions, after religious priming, to moral dilemmas obliging participants to choose between interpersonal care and impersonal societal morality and integrity. Its ecological validity may be limited by the situations involved in the moral dilemmas used and by the convenience sample. Although they were not trivial, these situations still were not extreme. Future research should investigate whether the moral conflict under study may be prototypical of antisocial effects of ideological radicalism and then whether the interaction between authoritarian personality and religious ideology may be a key one if it is to understand ethno-religious terrorism.

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