

## Outgroup Attitudes as a Function of East Asian Religiousness: Marked by High or Low Prejudice?

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### Abstract

Research on religion and prejudice has mostly been limited to Western Christian participants and beliefs. Evidence, overall, favors the idea of a religion-prejudice link. Does this also hold for East Asian religions, usually perceived as tolerant, and cultures, characterized by holistic thinking and tolerance of contradictions? We review here four recent studies and provide meta-analytic estimation of the East Asian interreligious prejudice. East Asian religiosity was associated with low explicit prejudice against religious outgroups in general (Study 1; adults from Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan) and three specific religious outgroups, *i.e.* Christians, Jews, and Muslims, but not atheists (Study 2; Taiwanese students), and low implicit prejudice against ethnic (Africans) and religious (Muslims) outgroups (Study 3; Taiwanese students). The mean effect size of the East Asian religious (low) prejudice was  $r = -.21$ . Moreover, Westerners from a Christian background primed with Buddhist pictures showed higher prosociality and, those valuing universalism, lower ethnic prejudice compared to the control, no pictures, condition (Study 4). Thus, the general idea that religion promotes prejudice lacks cross-cultural sensitivity: East Asian religion seems to be followed by low prejudice with regard to many, though not all, kinds of outgroups.

### Introduction

#### Outgroup attitudes as a function of East Asian religiousness: Marked high or low prejudice?

Throughout human history, religion has been a central component of the life of many people and a significant motivator for a variety of human behaviors (Pargament, 2013; Saroglou, 2014). Still today, the majority of the world population is religious, what will probably increase in the next 40 years (Pew Research Centre, 2015). As far as intergroup relations are concerned, early psychologists such as Allport (1954) were fascinated by the amazing power of religion, driving people to behave both prosocial-

ly, especially toward ingroup members (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010; Saroglou, 2013), and antisocially, mainly toward outgroup members (Hall, Matz, & Wood, 2010; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005; Whitley, 2009). This paradoxical role of religion has been investigated in a number of studies but a critical question remains open: Is this paradoxical role of religion universal across different cultures and religions? In particular, do East Asian religions, especially Buddhism, perceived to be an open-minded and compassionate religion (Flanagan, 2013), also promote outgroup prejudice or, on the contrary, low prejudice? Across recent studies whose results will be summarized in this paper we addressed this question and highlighted that, in accordance with the positive stereotype of Buddhism, East Asian religiosity is consistently followed by prosociality and low prejudice toward various outgroups.

#### Religion, prosociality, and prejudice in the West

The role of religion regarding pro and anti-social attitudes is indeed paradoxical: religion may foster both prosociality and prejudice. Think for instance of Mother Teresa who dedicated her life in helping the poorest but also, in contrast, of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which typically denote religious intergroup violence. Indeed, psychological research confirms on one hand that religiosity is related to prosocial attitudes, values, emotions, and behaviors (Preston *et al.*, 2010; Saroglou, 2013); and religious priming, *i.e.* nonconscious exposure to religious stimuli, activates prosocial concepts and behaviors (Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007; Preston & Ritter, 2013; Shariff and Norenzayan, 2007; Tsang, Schulwitz, & Carlisle, 2010). However, on the other hand, research has also established that religiousness often predicts prejudice toward outgroups in general, and in particular towards people who are perceived to threaten one's religious values. This is the case with people of other race, ethnicity, and religion, as well as atheists, homosexuals or single mothers (Hall *et al.*, 2010; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005; Whitley, 2009). Priming experiments have also shown that exposure to religious concepts subtly increases negative attitudes and intergroup prejudice (Ginges, Hansen, & Norenzayan, 2009; Johnson *et al.*, 2010; LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, & Finkle, 2012).

#### Do East Asian cultures and religions differ?

From a cross-cultural psychological perspective, it is important to specify that the above knowledge is based on studies carried out essentially among Christians from North America and Europe—with few existing studies on Muslims and Jews confirming it (*e.g.*, Ginges *et al.*, 2009; Hunsberger, 1996). Surprisingly enough, it is unknown whether the above knowledge generalizes to people from major East Asian religions and cultures, *i.e.* Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists, and folk believers living in Asian countries.

Philosophers, religious scholars, and cultural psychologists have argued that Eastern religions, especially Buddhism and Taoism, may escape the temptation of monotheistic religions for dogmatism, rigidity, and subsequent intolerance and prejudice (Flana-

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gan, 2013; Harvey, 1990; Ji, Lee, & Guo, 2010; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). In this line, the epistemic need for closure (the need to have firm answer to all questions and avoid doubts and uncertainty), order, and structure, a need explaining religious prejudice among Christians (Brandt & Renya, 2010; Hill, Terrell, Cohen, & Nagoshi, 2010), is simply unrelated to intense Buddhist beliefs and practice, at least among Westerners converted to Buddhism (Saroglou & Dupuis, 2006). In parallel, East Asian culture has been found to tolerate contradictory ideologies (Gries, Su, & Schak, 2012; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Importantly, people who easily tolerate contradictory elements do not systematically attribute stereotypical--positive or negative--qualities to the ingroup or outgroups (Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, & Peng, 2012) and are less prone to ingroup favoritism (Ma-Kellams, Spencer-Rodgers, & Peng, 2011). Moreover, the concern for compassion, harmony, and interdependence between all life forms is particularly present in East Asian religions, and this on various levels: between individuals, between groups, and between humans and the universe (Davidson & Harrington, 2002; Flanagan, 2011; Ji *et al.*, 2010). Accordingly, Buddhist religiosity has been found to positively relate to valuing universalism (Saroglou & Dupuis, 2006), contrary to Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religiosity, which is unrelated or negatively related to universalism (Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004). Finally, Western Christianity has historically been marked by the strong presence of the notion of sin whereas it is not the case in Eastern religions. Although sinful people (such as people holding divergent beliefs) may be forgiven in the Christian tradition, they are not tolerated (see Boski, 2015). This crucial notion of sin may also contribute to the West-East discrepancy on religion and prejudice.

We will review below four recent studies conducted in our lab investigating the role of religiousness, as an individual disposition, and religion, as a set of beliefs, symbols, and practices, on pro- and anti-social attitudes and behaviors in East Asian cultural and religious contexts. Given the great emphasis on compassion, tolerance of contradictory elements, and interdependence in East Asian religious and cultural contexts, we had hypothesized that Eastern religiousness should relate mostly to prosociality and low prejudice. Second, we had hypothesized that, even in another (Western) cultural context, the priming of East Asian religious concepts would increase prosocial behaviors and decrease prejudice. Finally, given that in three of these studies, information was consistently provided specifically on interreligious prejudice, *i.e.* how East Asian religiosity relates to prejudice against religious outgroups, we will provide here a meta-analytic estimation of the mean effect size of this association.

### Recent empirical evidence

In these recent studies, we first investigated in East Asian religious and cultural contexts the relationships of religiosity with prosociality and prejudice against various targets: religious, ethnic, and moral (homosexuals, atheists) outgroups (Studies 1, 2, and 3). Second, we investigated the power of East Asian religious concepts in automatically ac-

tivating prosociality and decreased prejudice toward an ethnic outgroup (Study 4). The data were collected among young adults and older adults both in East Asia (mainly Taiwan) and Europe (mainly Belgium). Furthermore, the studies conducted used questionnaires of self-reported religiosity and explicit measures of prejudice, but also subliminal priming, *i.e.* exposure to religious concepts beyond participants' conscious awareness, as well as implicit measures of prejudice, where discriminatory attitudes are assessed without the conscious control of participants).

In the first three, correlational and cross-sectional, studies, conducted by Clobert, Saroglou, Hwang, and Soong (2014), East Asian religiosity, measured as high beliefs and/or practice among people who self-identified with Buddhism, Taoism, or folk religion, in three East Asian countries (Japan, South-Korea, and Taiwan), was found to relate positively with prosociality but also with explicit and implicit low prejudice toward other ethnic and religious groups (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Coefficients of Correlations of Religiosity With Prejudice and Prosociality (Clobert et al., 2014: Studies 1, 2, and 3)*

	Prejudice				Prosociality
	Religious	Anti-gay	Anti-atheist	Ethnic	Sharing
Religiosity					
Study 1 ( <i>N</i> = 2,923)	-.12**	.07*	...	...	...
Study 2 ( <i>N</i> = 222)	-.26**	...	.14*	...	...
Study 3 ( <i>N</i> = 102)	-.32**	...	...	-.17*	.36**

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

*Note.* In Study 1, religious prejudice was measured explicitly through the non-acceptance of people "from another religious tradition than yours". In Study 2, the explicit non-acceptance of Christians, Jews, Muslims, and "Yxtos" was collapsed as a single measure of religious prejudice. In Study 3, religious prejudice represented implicit prejudice against Muslims whereas ethnic prejudice represented implicit prejudice against Africans. Finally, in Study 3, prosociality was measured as the spontaneous propensity to share with others and not keeping for oneself hypothetical lottery gains.

More precisely, the first study included a total of 2,923 adult participants from Japan, South-Korea, and Taiwan, mainly from a Buddhist/Taoist tradition (data from the International Social Survey Program 2008). Prejudice was measured as a self-reported disliking of members of religious outgroups in general ("a person from a different religion or with a very different religious view from yours") as possible spouse and possible political representative. Participants with high self-identification as religious and/or high religious practice tended to show low disliking of religious outgroups in general.

In the second study, participants were 222 Taiwanese students raised in a Buddhist, Taoist, or Confucian tradition. They provided information on their interest and invest-



ment on religious beliefs, rituals, morality, and group/tradition (12 items). Prejudice was again explicitly measured as the disliking of a target as possible neighbor, spouse, and political representative, but this time the religious outgroups were specifically named: Muslims, Christians, Jews, and even a fictitious religious group. Again, like in Study 1, high religiosity was found to relate to low prejudice, *i.e.* low disliking of these specific religious outgroups.

In the third study, 102 Taiwanese student participants were administered two Implicit Association Tests (negative vs. positive perception of an outgroup vs. the ingroup), one involving an ethnic (Africans) and the second a religious (Muslims) outgroup. Prosociality was also implicitly measured, in terms of participants' spontaneous propensity to share with others hypothetical gains instead of keeping them only for themselves. More specifically, participants were asked to list each expenditure they would make (along with a percentage allocated to each expenditure) if they won 1,000,000 Euros at the lottery. The percentage of money they allocated to other people than themselves was coded as a measure of prosociality. Participants with high scores on religiosity (3-item index of personal, intrinsic religiosity) tended to show more generosity but also low implicit discrimination of both the ethnic and the religious outgroups. Study 3 extended thus through implicit methodology the findings of Studies 1 and 2 based on explicit measures. This was necessary to counter any suspicions that the East Asian religiosity-low prejudice link could be simply attributable to social desirability and positive self-presentation motives.

Of importance is also to note that the relationship between East Asian religions and low prejudice was not unlimited. Two specific kinds of outgroups were concerned (see also Table 1). East Asian religiosity was indeed found to predict explicit prejudice against atheists, when measured, *i.e.* in Study 2. Also, the relationship between East Asian religiosity and prejudice against homosexuals, when measured, *i.e.* in Study 1, was significantly positive ( $r = .07$ ). Nevertheless, it was weak and even disappeared ( $r = .03$ ) when controlling for age and gender (Clobert *et al.*, 2014, Study 1).

Across these three studies, ethnic and moral (antigay and anti-atheist) prejudices were not systematically studied. However, religious prejudice, *i.e.* prejudice against other religious groups, as a function of East Asian religiosity was consistently investigated. We are thus able to conduct here a short meta-analysis (see Table 2). Overall, a moderate weighted mean effect size ( $r = -.21$ ) was found in favor of the hypothesis of a negative association between East Asian religiosity and prejudice against other religious groups. In sum, East Asian interreligious low prejudice seems both constant across studies and of not negligible strength.

**Table 2**  
Meta-Analysis of Effect Sizes for the Association Between East Asian Religiosity and Religious Prejudice

	<i>r</i>	<i>N</i>	Lower limit	Upper limit	Fisher's <i>Z</i>	-1.00	-0.5	0	0.5	1.00
Study 1	-.12	2,923	-.089	-.161	-.1206					
Study 2	-.26	222	-.133	-.379	-.2661					
Study 3	-.32	102	-.134	-.484	-.3316					
Weighted mean effect	-.21	3,247	-.085	-.336	-.2174					

Homogeneity			Meta-analysis						
<i>Q</i> -value	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Model	<i>N</i> of studies	Point Estimate	Lower limit	Upper limit	<i>Z</i> -value	<i>p</i>
7.713	2	.021	Fixed	3	-.141	-.107	-.174	-8.049	.000
			Random	3	-.214	-.085	-.336	-3.226	.001

Note. *Z* = standardized effect sizes. *Q* = homogeneity statistic.

Finally, in a fourth study designed to prime East Asian religious symbols and concepts (Clobert & Saroglou, 2013), participants, who were 177 French-speaking Belgian students, were invited to complete in the lab a computer task aimed to measure implicit prejudice against a key ethnic outgroup, *i.e.* Flemish people (Implicit Association Test). Prosociality was also assessed, using the same measure of spontaneous sharing of hypothetical gains as in Study 3. Interestingly, for half of the participants, the lab was decorated with three Buddhist pictures in the wall (statue of Buddha, an individual in meditation, a group in meditation), whereas for the other half of them, there were no any pictures in the wall (control condition). Post-experimentally, participants were also assessed on religiosity and endorsement of universalism as a value, *i.e.* concerns for social justice, equality, and preservation of the environment, as in Schwartz's model. Participants in the Buddhist priming condition, compared to those in the control condition, turned out to be afterwards more prosocial, *i.e.* more prone to spontaneously share hypothetical gains with other people—the same method used as in the above described third study (see Table 3). Furthermore, a moderated multiple regression showed a significant interaction between universalism and the exposure to Buddhist pictures in predicting low prejudice against Flemish. More specifically, in the Buddhist priming condition, participants who strongly valued universalism showed low discriminatory attitudes against Flemish,  $\beta = -.33$ ,  $p = .05$ . This was not the case in the control condition or, for low universalists, in any condition. Of importance to note that the above findings are to



be attributable to Buddhism specifically and not to religion or prayer/meditation in general, since, in an additional condition, with Muslim primes (pictures) of similar content, *i.e.* individual and collective prayer, no such prosocial and tolerant effects were found.

**Table 3**  
*Means and Standard Deviations for All Measures, Distinctly by Condition (Study 4)*

	Buddhist Priming		Control		Mean Comparisons		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> (2,115)	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$
Implicit Ethnic Prejudice (IAT)	-0.07	0.14	-0.02	0.10	0.24	.62	.003
Prosociality (% of Gains Shared)	32.93	26.77	20.85	19.44	4.93	.03	.07

*Note.* Ethnic prejudice in that study was the one by French-speaking Belgians toward Flemish (Dutch-speaking Belgians). Prosociality was measured as in Study 3.

## Discussion

Four studies provided consistent evidence in favor of the idea that the paradoxical relationship of religion with both prosociality and prejudice is not universal. Consistently across these studies, it was found that East Asian religiosity, including Buddhism, and Buddhist concepts, respectively, are followed by and activate not only prosociality but also low prejudice toward ethnic and/or religious outgroups. This differs from previous research in Western Christian and more broadly Western monotheistic contexts attesting for the religion's role in enhancing both (mostly ingroup) prosociality and outgroup prejudice.

The present results are mainly descriptive. An important question that still needs to be investigated concerns the possible explanatory mechanisms. As mentioned in the Introduction, it has been argued that one possible explanation accounting for this East/West religious divergence might be differences in the propensity to tolerate contradictory elements. Unlike Christian religiosity, East Asian religiosity, as well as Buddhist religious concepts, might reflect a higher tolerance of contradiction which in turn may undermine prejudice. More recent initial evidence, both correlational (Clobert, Saroglou, & Hwang, 2015b) and experimental (Clobert, Saroglou, & Hwang, 2015a), confirms this idea.

This set of studies showed replicable and consistent results using diverse methodology. Across the four studies presented, the East Asian religion-low prejudice link was found (1) with both implicit and explicit measures of prejudice, thus, under and below the conscious control of participants, (2) through measures of prejudice against both ethnic and religious outgroups, and (3) in both correlational and experimental designs.

Furthermore, a short meta-analysis of the three studies attesting each time of the inter-religious low prejudice revealed that the mean effect size may be modest--many other variables may interfere with the religion-prejudice link--but is not unimportant, statistically and of course socially.

Nevertheless, these studies are subject to some limitations. They also show some limitations of the East Asian religions-low prejudice link. First, East Asian religious tolerance seemed not to be unlimited, since it did not extend to atheists. The latter are indeed known to constitute the believers' typical outgroup (see Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011) and the present work suggests that this is the case even in East Asian religious contexts. One explanation might be that people who endorse not only divergent but totally opposite worldviews, and are perceived as immoral in many aspects (Gervais, 2013) and/or as intolerantly rejecting all other faith beliefs, constitute a fundamental outgroup, even for Buddhists and Taoists.

Second, regarding prejudice against homosexuals, the results were not straightforward but allowed us to conclude that homosexuals, even if they do not benefit of the same low prejudice effect like the religious and ethnic outgroups, they constitute a less prejudiced outgroup in the context of East Asian religions compared with what is the case in Christianity. Some researchers have found a positive association between Buddhist concepts, or Buddhist religiosity, and prejudice against homosexuals (Detenber *et al.*, 2007; Ramsay, Pang, Johnson Shen, & Rowatt, 2013). However, in our work the relationship between East Asian religiosity and antigay prejudice was found to be weak and even to disappear when controlling for age and gender (Clobert *et al.*, 2014, Study 1). Third, the studies presented here only included one Western (Belgium) and three East Asian countries (Japan, South-Korea, and Taiwan). Results could have been, at least to some extent, different if the studies were carried out in Asian countries with strong current inter-religious conflict (see, *e.g.*, Myanmar).

To conclude, these findings allow us to add new light to our understanding of the complex relationships between religion and prejudice. Some East Asian religions, at least in part and under certain conditions, seem to escape from or attenuate prejudicial attitudes toward various outgroups, attitudes that are often found in the context of other Western monotheistic religions, and in particular, given the focus of previous research, in Christianity. In other words, the relationship of religion with high or low prejudice is clearly sensitive to religious and cultural differences. Therefore, it should not be taken as granted that religious affiliation, religious beliefs, or religious practice necessarily leads to prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory behavior against other religious or ethnic groups.

These results certainly do not provide us with a ranking of the "best" religions but rather push for further research in order to understand which specific religious beliefs or which aspects of religious cultures may enhance and encourage low prejudice against



outgroups. As shown by the efficiency, in Study 4, of East Asian (Buddhist) religious primes in promoting prosociality and low prejudice even in an hetero-religious, Western Christian, context (see also Clobert *et al.*, 2015a, for similar priming experiments in East Asia), such aspects and beliefs may be transposable and beneficial to other religious and cultural contexts. This may be particularly important in order to avoid, in contemporary societies, religiously fueled prejudiced attitudes, discrimination, and intergroup conflict, including interreligious violence.

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