

Religious Cognition and Intergroup Bias in the Trolley Dilemma: Experimental Fieldwork in Fiji

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Abstract : There is extensive debate about the causal role of religion in intergroup conflict. It is commonly accepted that religious beliefs promote in-group cohesion, but religion is often believed to exacerbate inter-group conflict. Fiji is religiously diverse and has a lengthy history of ethno-religious conflict. In a preregistered field experiment using a modified version of the trolley problem dilemma, Christian and Muslim Fijians were asked, first from their own perspective, and then from their God's perspective, whether a religious ingroup member should sacrifice their life to save five children who were ingroup or outgroup members. Almost all Muslim participants believed that the person should always sacrifice themselves to save the children. Amongst Christian participants, thinking from God's perspective increased their likelihood of saying the children should be saved by 35% and removed a 27% gap between responses to saving ingroup versus outgroup children. These results replicate previous findings from a Palestinian sample and demonstrate, in another cross-cultural context with a history of violent conflict, that religious cognition can decrease bias and promote the application of universal moral principles.

Keywords : conflict, moral dilemma, psychology, religion, thought experiments

Conference Title : ICMP 2019 : International Conference on Moral Psychology

Conference Location : Dublin, Ireland

Conference Dates : August 15-16, 2019