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Fundamentalism and out-group hostility

Muslim immigrants and Christian natives in Western Europe

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In the heated controversies over immigration and Islam in the early 21st century, Muslims have widely become associated in media debates and the popular imagery with religious fundamentalism. Against this, others have argued that religiously fundamentalist ideas are found among only a small minority of Muslims living in the West, and that religious fundamentalism can equally be found among adherents of other religions, including Christianity. However, claims on both sides of this debate lack a sound empirical base because very little is known about the extent of religious fundamentalism among Muslim immigrants, and virtually no evidence is available that allows a comparison with native Christians.

Religious fundamentalism is certainly not unique to Islam. The term has its origin in a Protestant revival movement in the early 20th century United States, which propagated a return to the "fundaments" of the Christian faith by way of a strict adherence to, and literal interpretation of the rules of the Bible. A large number of studies on Protestant Christian religious fundamentalism in the USA have shown that it is strongly and consistently associated with prejudices and hostility against racial and religious out-groups, as well as "deviant" groups such as homosexuals. By contrast, our knowledge of the extent to which Muslim minorities in Western countries adhere to fundamentalist interpretations of Islam is strikingly limited. Several studies have shown that, compared to the majority population, Muslim immigrants more often define themselves as religious, identify more strongly with their religion, and engage more often in religious practices such as praying, visiting the mosque, or following religious prescriptions such as halal food or wearing a headscarf. But religiosity as such says little about the extent to which these religious beliefs and practices can be deemed "fundamentalist" and are associated with out-group hostility.

The WZB-funded Six Country Immigrant Integration Comparative Survey (SCIICS) among immigrants and natives in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and Sweden provides for the first time a solid empirical basis for these debates. The survey with a total sample size of 9,000 respondents was conducted in 2008 among persons with a Turkish or Moroccan immigration background, as well as a native comparison group. Following the widely accepted definition of fundamentalism of Bob Altermeyer and Bruce Hunsberger, the fundamentalism belief system is defined by three key elements:

- that believers should return to the eternal and unchangeable rules laid down in the past;
- that these rules allow only one interpretation and are binding for all believers;
- that religious rules have priority over secular laws.

These aspects of fundamentalism were measured by the following survey items that were asked to those native respondents who indicated that they were Christians (70%), and to those respondents of Turkish and Moroccan origin who indicated they were Muslims (96%):

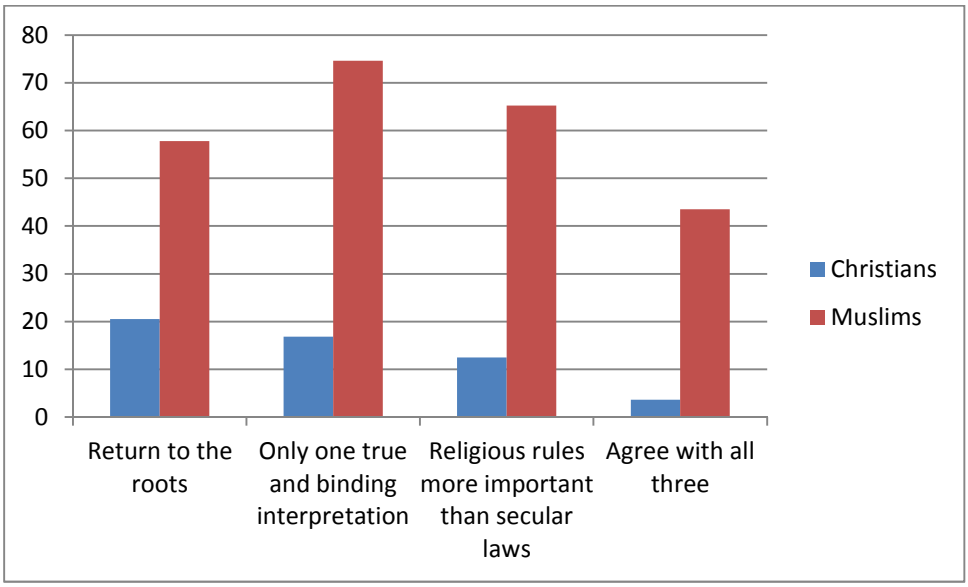
"Christians [Muslims] should return to the roots of Christianity [Islam]."

"There is only one interpretation of the Bible [the Koran] and every Christian [Muslim] must stick to that."

"The rules of the Bible [the Koran] are more important to me than the laws of [survey country]."

Figure 1 shows that religious fundamentalism is not a marginal phenomenon within West European Muslim communities. Almost 60 per cent agree that Muslims should return to the roots of Islam, 75 per cent think there is only one interpretation of the Koran possible to which every Muslim should stick and 65 per cent say that religious rules are more important to them than the laws of the country in which they live. Consistent fundamentalist beliefs, with agreement to all three statements, are found among 44 per cent of the interviewed Muslims. Fundamentalist attitudes are slightly less prevalent among Sunni Muslims with a Turkish (45% agreement to all three statements) compared to a Moroccan (50%) background. Alevites, a Turkish minority current within Islam, display much lower levels of fundamentalism (15%). Against the idea that fundamentalism is a reaction to exclusion by the host society, we find the lowest levels of fundamentalism in Germany, where Muslims enjoy fewer religious rights than in any of the other five countries. But even among German Muslims fundamentalist attitudes are widespread, with 30 per cent agreeing to all three statements. Comparisons with other German studies reveal remarkably similar patterns. For instance, in the 2007 *Muslime in Deutschland* study 47 per cent of German Muslims agreed with the statement that following the rules of one's religion is more important than democracy, almost identical to the 47 per cent in our survey that finds the rules of the Koran more important than the German laws.

Figure 1: Religious fundamentalism among native Christians and Muslim immigrants in Western Europe



Another striking finding in Figure 1 is that religious fundamentalism is much more widespread among Muslims than among Christian natives. Among Christians agreement to the single statements ranges between 13 and 21 per cent and less than 4 per cent can be characterized as consistent fundamentalists who agree with all three items. In line with what is known about Christian fundamentalism, levels of agreement are slightly higher (4% agreeing

with all statements) among mainstream Protestants than among Catholics (3%), and most pronounced (12%) among the adherents of smaller Protestant groups such as Seventh Day Adventists, Jehova's Witnesses and Pentecostal believers. However, even among these groups support for fundamentalist attitudes remains much below the levels found among Sunni Muslims. Turkish Alevites' view on the role of religion is however more similar to that of native Christians than of Sunni Muslims.

Because the demographic and socio-economic profiles of Muslim immigrants and native Christians differ strongly, and since it is known from the literature that marginalized, lower-class individuals are more strongly attracted to fundamentalist movements, it would of course be possible that these differences are due to class rather than religion. However, the results of regression analyses controlling for education, labour market status, age, gender, and marital status reveal that while some of these variables explain variation in fundamentalism within both religious groups, they do not at all explain or even diminish the difference between Muslims and Christians. A cause for concern is that while among Christians religious fundamentalism is much less widespread among younger people, fundamentalist attitudes are as widespread among young as among older Muslims.

Research on Christian fundamentalism in the United States has demonstrated a strong association with hostility towards out-groups, which are seen as threatening the religious in-group. To what extent do we find this linkage also in the European context? To answer this question, we use three statements that measure rejection of homosexuals and Jews, as well as the degree to which the own group is seen as threatened by outside enemies:

"I don't want to have homosexuals as friends."

"Jews cannot be trusted."

"Muslims aim to destroy Western culture." [for natives]

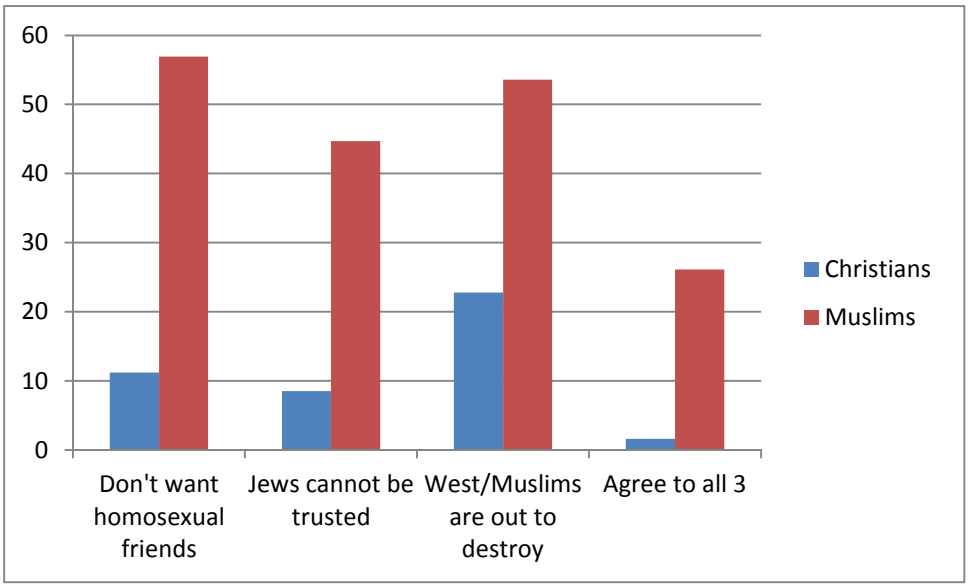
"*Western countries are out to destroy Islam."* [for persons with a Turkish or Moroccan migration background]

Figure 2 shows that out-group hostility is far from negligible among native Christians. As much as 9 per cent are overtly anti-semitic and agree that Jews cannot be trusted. In Germany that percentage is even somewhat higher (11%). Similar percentages reject homosexuals as friends (13 % across all countries, 10% in Germany). Not surprisingly, Muslims are the out-group that draws the highest level of hostility, with 23 per cent of native Christians (17% in Germany) believing that Muslims aim to destroy Western culture. Only few native Christians display hostility against all three groups (1.6%). If we consider all natives instead of just the Christians, levels of out-group hostility are slightly lower (8% against Jews, 10% against homosexuals, 21% against Muslims, and 1.4% against all three).

Even though these figures for natives are worrisome enough, they are dwarfed by the levels of out-group hostility among European Muslims. Almost 60 per cent reject homosexuals as friends and 45 per cent think that Jews cannot be trusted. While about one in five natives can be considered as Islamophobic, the level of phobia against the West among Muslims – for which oddly enough there is no word; one might call it "Occidentophobia" – is much higher still, with 54 per cent believing that the West is out to destroy Islam. These findings concord with the fact that, as a 2006 study of the Pew research institute showed, about half of the Muslims living in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom believe in the conspiracy theory

that the attacks of 9/11 were not carried out by Muslims, but were orchestrated by the West and/or Jews.

Figure 2: Out-group hostility among native Christians and Muslim immigrants in Western Europe



Somewhat more than one quarter of Muslims display hostility towards all three out-groups. Contrary to the results for religious fundamentalism, out-group hostility is more widespread among Muslims of Turkish (30% agreeing with all three statements) than among those of Moroccan origin (17%). Although the difference is smaller than in the case of religious fundamentalism, Alevites (13% agreeing to all three statements) display considerably lower levels of out-group hostility than Sunni Muslims of Turkish origin (31%). A worrying aspect is again that while among natives out-group hostility is significantly lower among younger generations, this is not the case among Muslims.

Here too, we must of course make sure that differences between Muslims and natives are not due to the different demographic and socio-economic compositions of these groups, since xenophobia is known to be higher among socio-economically deprived groups. Multivariate regression analyses indeed show this to be the case, but controlling for socio-economic variables hardly reduces group differences. Group differences are moreover much more important than socio-economic differences. For instance, the difference in out-group hostility between those with low and university levels of education is about half as large as the difference between Muslims and natives.

When we take into account religious fundamentalism, this turns out to be by far the most important predictor of out-group hostility and explains most of the differences in levels of out-group hostility between Muslims and Christians. Also the greater out-group hostility among Turkish-origin Sunnis compared to Alevites is almost entirely explained by the higher level of religious fundamentalism among the Sunnis. A further indication that religious fundamentalism is a major factor behind out-group hostility is that it is also the most important predictor in separate analyses for Christians and Muslims. In other words, religious fundamentalism not only explains why Muslim immigrants are generally more hostile towards out-groups than native Christians, but also why some Christians and some Muslims are more xenophobic than others.

These findings clearly contradict the often-heard claim that Islamic religious fundamentalism is a marginal phenomenon in Western Europe or that it does not differ from the extent of fundamentalism among the Christian majority. Both claims are blatantly false, as almost half of European Muslims agree that Muslims should return to the roots of Islam, that there is only one interpretation of the Koran, and that the rules laid down in it are more important than secular laws. Among native Christians, less than one in 25 can be characterized as fundamentalists in this sense. Religious fundamentalism is moreover not an innocent form of strict religiosity, as its strong relationship – among both Christians and Muslims – to hostility towards out-groups demonstrates.

Both the extent of Islamic religious fundamentalism and its correlates – homophobia, anti-semitism and "Occidentophobia" – should be serious causes of concern for policy makers as well as Muslim community leaders. Of course, religious fundamentalism should not be equated with the willingness to support, or even to engage in religiously motivated violence. But given its strong relationship to out-group hostility, religious fundamentalism is very likely to provide a nourishing environment for radicalization. Having said that, one should not forget that in Western Europe Muslims make up a relatively small minority of the population. Although relatively speaking levels of fundamentalism and out-group hostility are much higher among Muslims, in absolute numbers there are at least as many Christian as there are Muslim fundamentalists in Western Europe, and the large majority of homophobes and anti-semites are still natives. As a religious leader respected by both Muslims and Christians once said: "let those who are without sin, cast the first stone."