

Review

The influence of religion on the acceptance and integration of immigrants: A multi-dimensional perspective

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Abstract

We review the role of religion in the acceptance and integration of immigrants. Majority groups' religion can exert both a positive and negative effect on tolerance and acceptance of immigrants, depending on the dimension of religiosity and depending on whether immigrants do or do not share the same religious affiliation. Immigrants' religion can also exert both a positive and negative effect on their integration, by providing a social network and a system of meaning but also potentially facilitating extremism, depending on value conflicts with the majority group and acceptance by the majority group. We conclude by highlighting avenues for future research, including the study of manifestations of religion in the public sphere.

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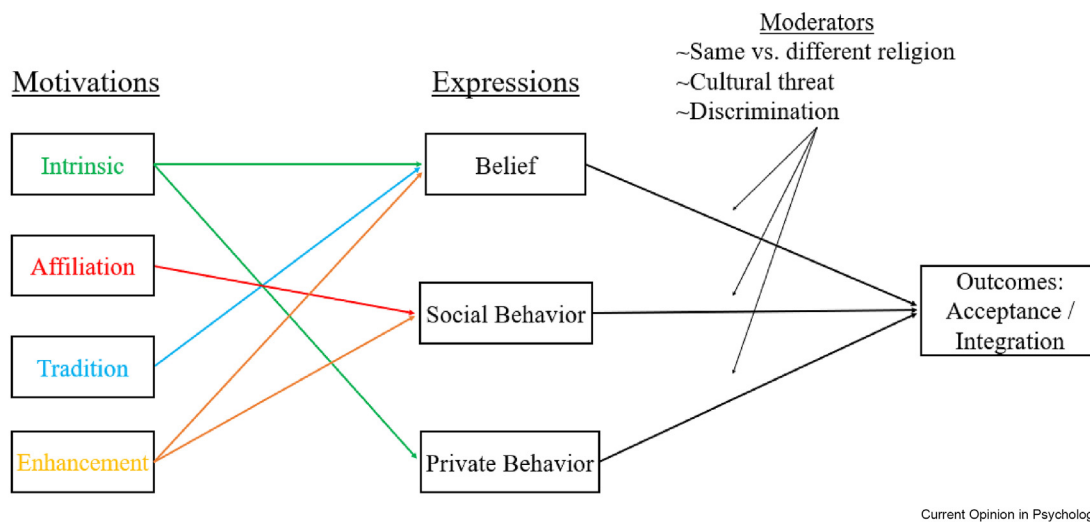
Religion functions as a belief system and as a potent social identity by which people differentiate their ingroup from the outgroups [1]. As a social identity, religion plays a powerful role in shaping immigration attitudes of majority groups as well as in the integration of immigrants. We begin by presenting a multidimensional model of religion which accounts for various motivations to be religious as well as various ways religion is expressed. Next, we use this model to review and integrate the literature on how religion shapes majority groups' acceptance of immigrants

from diverse backgrounds and how immigrants' religion shapes their integration.

Religion can have complex and contradictory effects on diverse outcomes, such as by both increasing and decreasing prejudice towards outgroups [2], including towards immigrants [3]. One resolution to explain such contradictory findings is that religion is made up of several types of expressions which can exert opposing effects [4–8]. For instance, engaging in collective rituals such as attendance at religious services is associated with increased prejudice towards outgroups, while private devotional practices and endorsement of religious beliefs are not [5,6,9–11]. This distinction might reflect how private devotional practices and religious beliefs manifest an endorsement of a God who created a universal moral order, whereas engaging in collective rituals manifests a commitment to one's religious group. However, attendance at religious services is also sometimes associated with pro-immigration attitudes [12–14], whereas fundamentalist beliefs are sometimes tied to anti-immigration sentiment [15,16]. To resolve why religious expressions may demonstrate such inconsistent findings, we have recently suggested that more than one motivation may underlie a particular religious expression [17]. Furthermore, we have mapped associations between religious motivations and religious expressions among religious Christians in the United Kingdom and religious Jews in Israel [18] (see [Figure 1](#)). Specifically, an intrinsic motivation directed towards connecting with the divine, searching for personal significance, and seeking self-improvement is associated with professed belief and with engaging in private religious behavior; an affiliative motivation directed towards belonging to a community is associated with engaging in religious social behavior such as communal prayer; a motivation to maintain one's religious tradition and observe its rules is associated with professed belief; and a motivation to socially enhance oneself by committing to one's religious ingroup and denigrating outgroups is associated with both religious belief and social behavior. We bear this two-layered multi-dimensional model in mind, with several expressions—the observable elements of religion—being underlied by several different motivations, when reviewing how religion might shape the acceptance and integration of immigrants.

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Figure 1



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Empirically validated associations between religious motivations and expressions, with potential moderators regarding the acceptance of immigrants and immigrants' integration (adapted from Vishkin, Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikan, & Ginges, 2022).

Majority group's religion and immigration attitudes

Does the religiosity of majority group members promote or hinder the acceptance of immigrants? As suggested above, the answer depends on the particular aspects of religiosity under question. Religious social behavior, such as participating regularly in communal prayer, has been shown to be a source of intolerance towards outgroups, such as by predicting support for suicide attacks directed at religious outgroups [6]. The role of religious social behavior as a source of intolerance towards outgroups extends to attitudes towards immigrants: among American Catholics, Turkish Muslims, and Israeli Jews, religious social behavior increases opposition to immigrants from a different background [3].

In contrast to religious social behavior, religious belief has been shown to be a source of tolerance. Thinking about God and God's preferences increases prosocial intentions toward outgroups [5], increases the valuation of the lives of outgroup members in a moral dilemma [9,10], and decreases dehumanization of outgroups [11]. The role of belief as a source of acceptance of outgroups extends to immigrants as well: among American Catholics, Turkish Muslims, and Israeli Jews, religious beliefs—particularly those relating to compassion, such as expressed in the statement “God is always forgiving”—engendered welcoming attitudes towards immigrants of similar ethno-religious backgrounds (with no effect on immigrants from different backgrounds) [3].

Nevertheless, effects of religious social behavior and belief are not uniform. First, religious attendance has

been related to pro-immigration attitudes as well [12–14]. Such contradictory effects of religious social behavior can be reconciled by the two-layered multi-dimensional model of religiosity (Figure 1), in which religious social behavior is underlied by both a motivation to affiliate (which can increase acceptance of others) and a motivation for social enhancement (which can decrease acceptance of others). Second, effects of religious belief are also not uniform. In particular, a characteristic of strict adherence to religious belief is religious fundamentalism and authoritarianism, which in turn engender intolerance towards members of outgroups [19–23], including towards immigrants [15,16]. Such inconsistent findings related to religious belief can also be reconciled by the two-layered multi-dimensional model of religiosity, according to which religious belief is underlied by both an intrinsic motivation to connect to the divine (which can expand one's moral scope to include outgroups), as well as by the motivation to maintain tradition (which can limit one's moral scope to exclude outgroups).

An important moderator of the effects of belief and social behavior on attitudes towards immigrants is whether their religion is or is not matched to the religion of the majority group. In the study among Americans, Turks, and Israelis, both effects were moderated by religion: social behavior increased opposition to immigrants, but only towards immigrants who are dissimilar to in-group members in religion or ethnicity, while belief increased acceptance of immigrants, but only towards immigrants from the ingroup (similar to in-group members in religion and ethnicity) [3]. Another study found that contextual primes of one's religion, such as being in the

vicinity of a religious symbol, increased tolerance towards immigrants from the religious ingroup, but did not affect support for immigrants from the religious outgroup [25]. Mismatch between religious affiliations is exacerbated by religiosity: A field experiment in five European Countries found discrimination towards immigrants from Muslim majority countries (relative to members of the majority group), and this discrimination was exacerbated towards such immigrants who were highly religious [26].

Another important moderator of attitudes towards immigrants is threat. To a large extent, anti-immigration sentiment stems from a threat to one's social identity [27–29]. While perceived material threat increases opposition to open-door policies for immigrants with similar backgrounds (lest they take one's job), perceived cultural threat increases opposition to open-door policies for immigrants from different ethnic and religious groups [30]. Cultural threat from immigrants who are religious outgroups is particularly salient for individuals who feel that membership in a specific religious faith is essential to their national identity, in both Europe and the United States [12,31]. The influence of aspects of religion which arouse anti-immigration sentiment, such as religious social behavior, may be exacerbated in the presence of perceived cultural threat from immigrants.

In summary, religious social behavior predicts reduced acceptance of outgroups, including towards immigrants, possibly due to parochial motivations underlying it (i.e., social enhancement). Meanwhile, religious belief predicts increased acceptance of outgroups, including towards immigrants, possibly due to the universalist and devotional motivations underlying it (i.e., intrinsic motivation). Both of these associations are moderated by whether majority groups and immigrants share a religious identity. Moreover, the effects of religious social behavior and religious belief might be moderated by the different motivations which can underlie it—specifically, religious social behavior motivated by a desire to affiliate (versus a desire to socially enhance) may increase acceptance of outgroups such as immigrants. Meanwhile, religious belief motivated by a desire to maintain tradition (versus an intrinsic religious motivation) may arouse fundamentalism, which decreases acceptance of outgroups such as immigrants. Finally, perceived cultural threat from immigrants of a different religion may strengthen the influence of aspects of religion which arouse anti-immigration sentiment.

Immigrants' religion and integration

When people immigrate to a new environment, they bring with them their national, ethnic, and religious identities. Research on immigrants in Western contexts has shown that from among these identities, religious identity gains primacy because of its more universal nature and its ability

to be transplanted to different contexts [32–34]. In addition, immigrants of minority religions can become more religious over time, particularly when their primary social contacts are with members of their religious group [35]. Thus, immigrants' religious identity becomes focal following immigration, and so can powerfully shape their integration and marginalization.

There are several benefits to affiliating with members of one's religion. These include providing a sense of belonging [36], fostering a sense of agency by affiliating with like-minded others with whom one can engage in collective action [37], and providing a social safety net in which community members can support each other in times of need [38,39]. Insofar as immigrants experience a diminished sense of belonging and of agency due to arriving in a new social environment, and also lack the support from family and community members they may have enjoyed in their culture of origin, belonging to a religious community can overcome these constraints and facilitate their integration. Immigrants who express an affiliative motivation by belonging to a religious community will be particularly likely to reap these benefits.

In contrast, immigrants may possess religious motivations which will bring them into conflict and lead to their marginalization. Religious traditions and rules frequently support traditional gender-role attitudes which limit women's economic opportunities [40,41]. To the extent that members of an immigrant community are driven by the religious motivation to maintain these religious traditions, the integration of immigrant women in such a community may be set back. In addition, many religious traditions contain elements of social enhancement based on downward social comparisons towards outgroups [42], such as is expressed in beliefs that one's religion is superior to others and that non-believers must be converted. These beliefs, when taken to the extreme, may lead to religiously-inspired violence [37,43]. To the extent that immigrants are driven by the religious motivation to self-enhance, they may engage in violent actions under certain circumstances. One such circumstance is perceived discrimination. Immigrants frequently face obstacles to religious practice, including outright religious discrimination [44]. Rejection by the majority group may increase the motivation to re-assert oneself by self-enhancing one's religious identity [45], which can then spill over into violence.

In summary, religion is a potent social identity particularly for immigrants. To the extent that the religious motivation of immigrants is to affiliate, they would experience benefits from being part of their community, such as a sense of belonging, a sense of agency, and a social safety net, which may support their integration.

Meanwhile, to the extent that their religious motivation is to maintain tradition, the integration of some immigrants, particularly women, may be set back. In addition, when their religious motivation is to socially enhance, they may be led to engage in confrontation and violence, particularly under conditions of discrimination from the majority group.

Conclusion and future directions

The literatures on the majority groups' acceptance of immigrants, and on immigrants' integration, have developed largely independent of each other. We have sought to understand how both literatures are related to religiosity by applying a two-layered multi-dimensional model of religiosity, consisting of underlying religious motivations and observed religious expressions, and taking into account contextual information such as perceptions of threat and discrimination. Given that contextual factors may activate motivations [46,47], a critical element in understanding the role of religion in immigrants' acceptance and integration is the broader sociopolitical and urban context. We highlighted the role of the religious background of immigrants, perceived cultural threat, and perceived religious discrimination as critical contextual elements in understanding the role of religion in immigrants' acceptance and integration. Another context which is frequently overlooked in the literature is the physical and urban space in which immigrants live. For instance, the chronic presence of majority and minority religious symbols in a neighborhood with both immigrants and majority group members may influence immigrants' acceptance and integration. One study found that participants near a religious location in Jerusalem reported greater acceptance of immigrants with a similar religious background compared to participants near a non-religious location [25]. Thus, understanding the urban context is an important factor to consider in future research when studying the role of religion in immigrants' acceptance and integration.

There are currently several gaps in the literature which can be addressed in future work. The current literature focuses on public opinion regarding attitudes towards immigrants, and experimental and quasi-experimental work examining the role of religion among immigrants is scarce. Moreover, within the current literature on immigration attitudes, the effect of immigrants' religion is often entangled with immigrants' ethnicity, nationality, or language. Finally, the importance of context in immigrants' acceptance and integration suggests that religious and political elites play a decisive role by emphasizing certain religious motivations, framing the immigrants as members of in- or out-groups, and providing interpretations of the teachings of Scripture and of the broader sociopolitical context.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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- * of special interest
- ** of outstanding interest

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