



Acta de Investigación Psicológica -  
Psychological Research Records

ISSN: 2007-4832

actapsicologicaunam@gmail.com

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de  
México  
México

Triandis, Harry C.  
Toward Understanding Violence in Islam  
Acta de Investigación Psicológica - Psychological Research Records, vol. 3, núm. 1, abril,  
2013, pp. 969-986  
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México  
Distrito Federal, México

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=358933343006>

- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's homepage in redalyc.org

redalyc.org

Scientific Information System  
Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal  
Non-profit academic project, developed under the open access initiative

## **Toward Understanding Violence in Islam**

Harry C. Triandis<sup>1</sup>

University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana

### **Abstract**

In the context of reduced violence world-wide, as documented by Pinker (2011), Islam is an exception; i.e., it is more violent than other cultures. Can contemporary cultural psychology explain aspects of this difference? It is hypothesized that violence is more frequent in cultures that are vertical collectivist than in cultures that are horizontal individualist. The paper reviews data that are generally consistent with this hypothesis. Furthermore, most Muslims are not violent, but perhaps 1 percent do engage in jihad. What personality aspects might explain this difference? It is argued that self-deception is very common among humans and the jihadists are especially susceptible to self-deception. Religion provides important benefits but it is also often related to violence. One way to reduce aspects of Islamic violence is for the West to ridicule Islam less. The paper also provides Islam with a more realistic model of its religion.

*Key words:* Violence, Culture, Collectivism, Individualism, Religion, Islam.

## **Entendiendo la violencia en el Islam**

### **Resumen**

En el contexto de reducción mundial de la violencia, tal como lo documenta Pinker (2011), el Islam es una excepción p.e., es más violento que otras culturas. ¿Es posible que la psicología cultural actual explique los aspectos de dicha diferencia? Se hipotetiza que la violencia es más frecuente en culturas que son colectivistas verticales que en culturas que son individualistas horizontales. Este trabajo revisa datos que son generalmente consistentes con la ya mencionada hipótesis. Además, la mayoría de los islámicos no son violentos, aunque tal vez el 1 por ciento de ellos sean partícipes del jihad. ¿Qué aspectos de la personalidad podrían explicar esta diferencia? Se argumenta que el auto-engaño es bastante común entre los seres humanos, y que los jihadas son especialmente susceptibles al auto-engaño. La religión provee beneficios importantes pero también es comúnmente asociada con la violencia. Una manera de reducir aspectos de la violencia islámica es que el oeste haga menos ridiculizaciones del Islam. Este trabajo también describe al Islam con un modelo más realista de su religión.

*Key words:* Violencia, Cultura, Colectivismo, Individualismo, Religión, Islam.

Original recibido / Original received: 18/12/2012

Aceptado / Accepted: 25/02/2013

---

<sup>1</sup> Thank to Darm Bhawuk, Don Dulany, Jack Feldman, and Yueh-ting Lee for critical comments on an earlier draft.

While there is violence in most parts of the world, some parts are more violent than others. People often believe that Islam is violent because of what they read in their newspapers, often forgetting that religions on both sides may have instigated the violence. They see violence in Palestine (Jews v Muslims), the Balkans (Orthodox Serbians v Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbians v Bosnian and Albania Muslims), Kashmir (Muslims v Hindus), Sudan (Muslims v Christians and animists), Nigeria (Muslims v Christians), Iran, Iraq and Pakistan (Shiah v Sunni), Indonesia (Muslims v Christians), Chechnya and the Philippines (Muslim insurrection). Recent events are remembered better. Thus the terrorism in America, Indonesia, Britain, and Spain, and the March 22, 2012, event in Toulouse, France, where Mohamed Merah, who had killed seven people, jumped out of a window stating that he did not fear death because he was “going to paradise” are remembered well.

There is also some evidence that Muslims are more ready to fight than are other groups. A study by Liu et al. (2012) had data from 5800 students from 30 cultures. One item used by Liu et al. was “willingness to fight for one’s own country.” The countries that were “high” on this measure included Malaysia, Tunisia and Indonesia (the three predominantly Muslim countries in the sample of 30). Low were Switzerland and Italy (p.267). Of course, this finding can also be interpreted in non-religious ways: in these countries people are more “patriotic.”

Religious intolerance has become an increasingly serious problem in Indonesia, one of Islam’s less fundamentalist countries. *The Economist* (June 9-15, 2012) has reported Muslim mob attacks of Christian churches, and even Muslim sects, such as the Ahmediyah, which the Islamic hardliners consider heretical.

Can our current understanding of cultural psychological differences provide some clues about the difference between countries that are high or low in interreligious violence?

Most of the instances of violence mentioned above are related to religion. There are two kinds of religions: external and internal (Triandis, 2009b). The external assume the existence of supernatural beings. The internal focus on what happens inside persons. The outstanding examples of internal religions are original Buddhism, where the internal struggle is to reach *nirvana*, and the versions of Islam that focus on the little *jihad*, which concerns cleaning oneself from sins and controlling oneself. In this paper when Islam is mentioned it refers to the external religion. All external religions are related to violence (Pinker, 2011), but this paper focuses only on Islam, in order to limit its length.

In this essay, after some preliminary comments, I will review some major ways in which cultures are different from each other, and then compare Islamic cultures to these patterns of differences. I will finally suggest ways to de-escalate the violence in Islamic cultures.

### **Some Preliminary Considerations**

Many conflicts appear related to fundamentalist religion, especially certain aspects of Islam. Yet most Muslims oppose violence (Gabriel, 2006), and their very way of greeting each other, “Peace be with you,” suggests that they value peace.

Islam is enormously heterogeneous (Allawi, 2009; Esposito, 2003; Triandis, 2009b). For example, the Egyptian Imam accepted suicide bombings while the Imam in Saudi Arabia condemned them (Esposito, 2003). Muslims disagreed about the destruction of the Buddhist statues in Bamyán, Afghanistan. Some agreed and others condemned this act (Allawi, 2009).

In the 1950s Islam was more modern than in the 1970s (Allawi, 2009). According to Ali A. Allawi, a historian of the intellectual life of Islam, the transformational event was the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. The loss of the war led to questioning of whether “more modernity” or “more Islam” was the right answer for the future. More Islam won. A National Public TV Program (5/22/12) explored the differences between the rich West and the poor Rest, and concluded that the key factor was science and technology. Those cultures that emphasized Islam were poor, unless they had oil. On the other hand Turkey after Kemal Atatürk became relatively prosperous. Thus apparently more Islam was not the right solution. It is notable that in the Egyptian elections of 2012 many voters advocated Shariah law, which will result in less investment from abroad, and therefore to a lower gross national product.

The wealth of Saudi Arabia and its link to Wahabi thought has resulted in the establishment of many madrassas (schools) around the world that teach about the injuries that Muslims have suffered at the hands of Westerners and the need for revenge. The schools also provide military training (Triandis, 2009b). As a result violence has increased.

Islam ranges from al-Qaeda to mystical Sufism. i.e., from extreme violence to no violence. The overwhelming Muslim majority is against violence (Gabriel, 2006) but is intimidated by the few who advocate *jihad*.

The ferocity of the war between the Shiah and Sunni factions is notable. Consider what happens in Iraq in 2012. Triandis (2009b) quotes some Sunnis who say that the Shiah are “infidels” and vice versa. Such statements indicate extreme cognitive simplicity, dogmatism, and a black or white cognitive style (Rokeach, 1960). However, fundamentalists of all religions have this cognitive style (Triandis, 2009b).

According to Gonzalez (2009), three factors help to explain the Shiah-Sunni conflict.

- 1) The Middle East can be characterized as a set of tribal societies where charismatic leaders, sometimes proclaiming that they are a Messiah, rule. They often harbor revenge tendencies toward other in-groups. Violence is endemic, and reflects old grudges, unresolved previous conflicts, and prejudices. There is extreme loyalty to the in-group with rejection of the out-group. In some cases, individuals only have one trade: “fighting.” The conflict starts because the leaders wish to have more power, but they make it legitimate in the eyes of their followers by casting it as a difference of religious dogma.
- 2) There are no powerful states that can impose law-and-order on the previously mentioned fighting. Pinker (2011) has found that a powerful state that emphasizes law-and-order is one of the major ways to reduce violence.
- 3) In that part of the world the animosities of the war-lords are increased by the support they receive from powerful states. Support goes back 2500 years, to

the conflict between Persia and the Roman Empire; a conflict which became the conflict between Shiah Iran and Sunni Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and present day Lebanon. The Shiah-Sunni conflict started in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, as a war in Iraq, over the succession to the leadership of the Prophet Mohammad, and has continued in various forms ever since.

A reconciliation conference of Sunni and Shiah, sponsored by Jordan, and supported by all the relevant states, resulted in 2005 in the "Amman Message" which lasted only two years. When al-Qaeda blew up a Shiah shrine, the fighting started all over again (Allawi, 2009).

Dissatisfaction with the government, as found in the Arab Spring of 2011-2012, has resulted in many deaths. There is great dissatisfaction with the government in Southern Europe, but the number of deaths is small. This difference is no doubt due to dictatorships vs. democracies, but one may wonder if some of the variance is also due to the trigger happy inclinations of the Arabs.

What factors can account for so much more violence in parts of Islam than in other parts of the world? In this essay the general picture about violence, as described by Pinker (2011), will provide the background, then more specific factors related to culture will be examined. Finally, the cultures of Islam will be examined in relation to the previous discussion.

The author's perspectives are based on an examination of common values found around the world. In almost all cultures people value (1) health (both physical and mental), (2) happiness, (3) longevity, and (4) the non-destruction of the environment (Triandis, 2009b). Peace is consistent with these four criteria, while violence works against every one of them.

### **In Worldwide Perspective Violence is Declining**

Pinker (2011) presents an impressive data-set that indicates that violence is declining. In the past 10,000 years, as we moved from hunter / gatherers to information societies, violence has decreased on many fronts. Over the centuries, there is less violence toward minorities, women, children, homosexuals, and animals. Non-state societies, such as hunter / gatherers, average 524 homicides per 100,000 per year. In modern societies this statistic is close to 1/100,000/year. Pinker credits powerful states that are concerned with law-and-order, increases in commerce, the feminization of the population (males age 15-30 commit most homicides; societies that abort female babies have more violence than those that give equal rights to women), the expanding circle (paying attention to the welfare of those beyond the family, own village, own country to events around the world; feeling close to diverse others and feeling guilty when one hurts others; Increased literacy, urbanization, mobility, access to the mass media), and the increased use of reason (less superstition, less use of fantasies, more concern with reality; emphasis on human rights). Over time there is more empathy, more self-control, more use of a moral sense; and more respect for others, especially for women by men.

Pinker shows that there is more violence in poor countries, among the lower social classes, and in segments of the population that are impolite. For example, the average homicide rate in the world is about 6/100,000/year, but in Japan, where harmony and politeness are very important, it is 2.2/100,000/year.

Religions have long been involved in violence. The Bible describes 1.2 million deaths. About 1 million people were killed between 1095 and 1208, when the Crusaders attacked the Muslims. This was, when taking into account the number of people on earth at the time, as lethal as the Nazi Holocaust. The Inquisition killed 350,000 people. The Wars of Religion in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century killed 6 million. Taking into account the size of the population at that time, the number of deaths was proportionally as high in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as in the 20<sup>th</sup>, with its two World Wars. These were the two most violent periods in human history. Allawi (2009) proudly points out that Islam has not killed millions the way the Wars of Religion did.

The *jihadists* of Islam present a strong contrast to the reduced violence described by Pinker. Mark A. Gabriel (2006), an Egyptian with a doctorate in Islamic studies from a Cairo University, who lives in the USA, describes the terrorist mind as one of extreme cognitive simplicity, prejudice, and opposition to every peace plan around the world. The U.N. Declaration of Human Rights was considered “unIslamic” by bin-Laden, because it considers all religions as equally valid. According to bin-Laden only Islam, of his specific sect of Islam, is valid. The *jihadists* wish to impose Shariah law on the whole world, and nothing short of that will satisfy them.

The intellectual debates between the *jihadists* and most Muslims, as discussed by Gabriel, contrast sharply with the modern debates in the West. In Islam there is no doubt that Allah exists. He is totally anthropomorphic. Such debates as “Is God dead?” (Friedrich Nietzsche) are rare in Islam, which is based on human-made fantasies about probably non-existing entities (Triandis, 2009b), such as Allah, angels, devils, and paradise. The highest values in most Islam are conquest of lands (Lewis, 2003) and, at least among a minority of Muslims, the imposition of Shariah law. Once this is achieved it is argued that paradise will prevail on earth. It is most unfortunate that such unsophisticated thinking is causing so much violence.

The perspective of the majority in Islam, as discussed by Lewis (2003) and Esposito (2003), is entirely devoid of multiculturalism, i.e. it is totally Islamocentric. However, there are some exceptions, such as Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia, Mohammad Katami in Iran, and Aburrahman Wahid in Indonesia, who advocated democracy, pluralism and tolerance for other cultures (for details see Esposito, 2003).

The instigators of violence in Islam use human-made hypothetical constructs about probably non-existing entities, to motivate naïve Muslims to commit violent acts, including suicide. This system has worked well from the beginning of Islam since it helped Islam subjugate North Africa, Spain, the Balkans, and other parts of the world. A model for this system was provided by the Prophet Muhammad himself at the battle of Badr, in 624 CE, when some 300 of his followers won a battle against some 900 Meccans. He told his followers that a thousand angels

would come to their aid during the battle, and if they fought well they would go to paradise but if they didn't they would go to hell. It worked! One can assume that a miracle was involved, but we know from studies by industrial engineers that it is possible to triple the productivity of workers with effective motivation (see Triandis 2009b for more details).

### **In the Context of Declining Violence Worldwide Islamic Majority Countries are an Exception**

What factors might account for this exception? Islam means submission. That is cognitively simple, and may predispose believers to a cognitively simple world view. Cognitive simplicity is the major attribute of fundamentalism (Triandis, 2009b). Fundamentalism is related to violence (see Triandis, 2009b for details).

### **Culture and Violence**

Contemporary cross-cultural psychology (Kitayama & Cohen, 2007, Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989, 1994, 1995, 2009a, 2009b, Triandis & Gelfand, 2012) emphasizes the contrast between collectivist and individualist cultures. Hundreds of publications have used this contrast. However, three other dimensions have also proven important:

1. Cultural simplicity (as found among hunters and gatherers) v cultural complexity (as found in information societies) (Chick, 1997).
2. Cultural tightness v cultural looseness (Gelfand et al., 2011; Pelto, 1968; Triandis, 1994). Cultures with many norms imposed tightly (e.g., if one does not do what is expected one is killed) v imposed loosely (e.g., if one does not do what is expected people smile). Examples: Taliban v rural Thailand.
3. Vertical (highly hierarchical) v Horizontal (less hierarchical) cultures.

Triandis (1995) used four attributes to define collectivism.

- a) collectivists define the self by using some collective, such as family village, religion. Muslims think of themselves as Muslims more frequently than they think of themselves as having other attributes (Allawi, 2009). This was probably also true of members of other religions in the past, but contemporary samples usually do not mention their religion.
- b) Collectivists give priority to the goals of the in-group rather than their personal goals. Thus, it is understandable that suicide bombers blow themselves up "for the good of Islam" and do not think of themselves as worthy of a long life, though the instigators of suicide bombing promise them paradise, so there maybe some consistency between the goals of the collective and the individual.
- c) The behavior of collectivists is determined by group norms rather than personal attitudes. Thus, when individuals come from a collectivist culture and the authorities of their in-group urge them "to sacrifice for Allah," that can take priority over personal attitudes. However, the promises given to those who blow

themselves up also may play a role. One of them said: "I know my life is poor compared to Europe and America, but I have something awaiting me that makes all my suffering worthwhile. Most boys can't stop thinking about the virgins." (Stern, 2003, p. 55) One suicide bomber, whose attack was prevented, had wrapped toilet paper around his genitals to protect them for later use in paradise (Stern, 2003).

- d) When collectivists do not like their group, they tend to stay with it, rather than look for another group. Thus, even when Muslims do not like Islam they do not leave it. This tendency is made even stronger because leaving Islam is "apostasy" and is punished by death.

There are many kinds of collectivism and individualism, the most important being the vertical (V) v horizontal (H) varieties (Shavitt, Torelli, & Riemer, 2011; Triandis, 1995; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998).

The correlates of simplicity-complexity are primarily ecological (Triandis 2009a). Especially important is the size of the population settlement. Simple cultures consist of bands of 50 to 200 individuals, while complex societies have millions of members. The death rates in Pinker's (2011) report in simple cultures are 13.4% per year, while in the complex cultures they are 2.7%.

It is reasonable to assume that cognitive simplicity and cultural simplicity are related. In the case of violence, revenge is a good example of cognitive simplicity. The discovery of win-win solutions requires cognitive complexity. Another example is the thought "those who belong to group X must be killed." The history of the Shiah-Sunni conflict, described by Gonzalez (2009), is replete with such thinking.

Gelfand et al., (2011) found that tightness is correlated with population density, scarcity of resources, terrorism, natural disasters, disease, great religiosity, autocracy, close monitoring of social behavior, many prohibitions, and censorship. Pelto (1968) used the legitimate use of force as one characteristic of tight cultures. While Pinker does not discuss tightness-looseness it is safe to assume that tightness, such as found in the Taliban, is associated with more violence than looseness, as found in rural Thailand.

The different kinds of collectivism and individualism result in four kinds of societies: VC (Vertical Collectivist), HC (Horizontal Collectivist), VI (Vertical Individualist), and HI (Horizontal Individualist). The VC pattern is found in most traditional societies, such as rural China or India. The major value is conformity to the authorities. Bond and Smith (1996) found more conformity in collectivist cultures, as measured by the Asch paradigm, than in individualist cultures. Domestic violence is higher in collectivist cultures (e.g., Egypt, 78%) than in individualist cultures (e.g., New Zealand, 1%). Domestic violence is against the law in Western Europe (in 84 % of the countries), but not as much in the Arab countries where it is against the law only in 25% of them. Violence tends to be high in collectivist societies, primarily because these societies are poor, and poverty is related to violence (Pinker, 2011). There is less violence in more literate societies because greater value is placed on the life of the more educated than on the life of less educated individuals.



The HC pattern is found in the Israeli kibbutz. The major value is cooperation. Violence is generally low in such societies. The VI pattern is found in academia and major corporations, where achievement and competition are the important values. Competition often results in violence so that these cultures are moderately violent. The HI pattern is found in Scandinavia, Australia, and New Zealand where the major value is the *uniqueness* of the individual (Triandis and Gelfand, 1998, 2012). There is very little violence in such societies. Affluence and globalization tends to shift cultures from VC to HI. Thus, violence is high in VC cultures and lower in VI, HC and HI cultures in that order. In short, it appears that societies where hierarchy is very important are more violent than societies where it is relatively unimportant (see also Liu et al., 2012, p. 254).

### **Are the Cultures of Islam More Violent than Other Cultures?**

Gregory Davis (2006) argues that Islam is a military-political world view. He claims that the “sacred” books of Islam present the “House of Islam” (the believers) and the “House of War” (the non-believers), and it is the obligation of all believers to fight the non-believers until they submit to Allah, and adopt Shariah law.

Davis’ book is scholarly, but he pays too much attention to the “sacred” texts. It is probable that 99 percent of Muslims go about their everyday business without thinking of the “sacred” texts, or feeling the obligation to establish Shariah law throughout the world. Consider the case of the Christians. Their “sacred” texts tell that it is easier for a poor rather than a rich person to enter paradise (Mark 10, 25). How many Christians *try* to be poor? In fact, some Christians believe that if one is rich that is a clue that one has been chosen by God to go to paradise! In short, religions provide a complex set of stimuli, and believers sample *only* some of them. But there may be one percent of Muslims who do sample the violent aspects of the “sacred” books.

In one case Davis is correct. The sacred texts of Islam are consistent with the “Manual for the Raid” that was found in the luggage of Mohammed Atta, the chief terrorist of the 9/11/01 events, as reported in the *New York Times*. This manual stated that the 9/11/01 events were “God’s work.” Atta was doing “God’s work” as defined in some of the Islamic “sacred” texts.

Thus, the key issue for us is to tell the difference between the probable ninety-nine percent of Muslims who are not terrorists and the one percent who are.

### **Self-deception**

Humans have a strong tendency toward self-deception (Triandis, 2009b). Some humans use more self-deceptions than others, and we can expect that those who use many self-deceptions will be part of the 1 percent and will engage in *jihad*. Self-deception occurs when humans use their hopes, needs, desires, ideology, theory, prejudices, habits, stereotypes, sacred values and other psychological processes *to construct* the way we see the world (Triandis, 2009b). The insight that we have self-deceptions when we use psychological processes to construct

the way we see the world, goes back to the Buddha, about 2500 years ago, who said : “Where self is, truth is not; where truth is, self is not.”

Self-deceptions are ubiquitous. Almost every human creation, including this essay, includes traces of self-deception. The question is *how much* self-deception is included. Even in science, when we state a hypothesis we use our hopes needs and desires that it will be supported!

Bin-Laden stated that someday the whole world will become Islamic (Triandis, 2009b). This was probably consistent with his hopes, needs, and desires, and is clearly a monumental oversimplification, making it a cognitively simple self-deception. How many of the 1 percent have similar self-deceptions?

In any case the fantasy that the whole world will adopt Shariah law is a self-deception and since that fantasy is probably common among the 1 percent of Muslims who engage in *jihad* we can assume that self-deception is one important factor distinguishing the 1 percent from the 99 percent.

As suggested above, self-deceptions tend to be cognitively simple. Triandis (2009b) examined over one hundred historical self-deceptions and found that most of them were cognitively simple. For example, when the French Revolution started, in 1789 with the Fall of the Bastille, the King of France, Louis XVI, wrote one word in his diary: “Nothing.” Of course, it was consistent with his hopes, needs, and desires that nothing happened, but it is amazing that the initiation of one of the greatest events of world history was seen *so simply* as something deserving no comment.

Another attribute of many self-deceptions is megalomania. The following example illustrates this.

The Norwegian nationalist Anders Breivik, who killed 77 people in the summer of 2011 to protest Norwegian multiculturalism, provides a good example of self-deception. He sees the world according to his ideology. Presumably it was his hope, need, and desire that Norway would change its policy. He is obviously cognitively simple when thinking that he can change Norway’s policy with this one act. Psychiatrists disagreed concerning his mental state. Some saw him as schizophrenic, others as just a strong ideologue. Probably the latter are correct. In his court testimony he stated that his act “was the greatest event in Europe since World War II.” This statement reveals his megalomania. He apparently forgot Yugoslavia, the creation of the European Union, the end of the Cold War and other events.

However, in rare cases self-deception is related to feeling that the self is insignificant. The extreme example of this case is Gandhi. He was certainly “a great soul,” as they call him in India, and an important player in the achievement of Indian independence, yet he felt that his career was based on an illusion (Lelyveid, 2011, p. 325). His self-deception was that the differences between Hindus and Moslems, the Brahmins and the untouchables could be ignored, and a unified India could result. This was certainly consistent with his hopes, needs and desires, but reality was very different, resulting in a partition of the country that was associated with an estimated 700,000 to one million deaths and about 10 million refugees (Muslims crossing into Pakistan or Hindus crossing into India).

Triandis (2009b) attempted to present the world without self-deceptions. He argued that we humans are products of random evolutionary processes in a vast universe, and we should try to become cozy on this planet by helping as many people as possible, the whole of humanity if possible, to reach good health, happiness, longevity and the non-destruction of the environment. This view condemns violence, but the 1 percent glorifies it.

### Factors that Increase Violence

Some people join *jihad* because of personal factors. For example, the BBC (on 9/13/11) carried a report about two brothers from Pakistan. The younger brother decided to join the *jihad*, to do Allah's work, but the older brother, who was the head of the family objected. The older brother was able to go to the training camp of the younger brother and convince him to return home, with the argument that their mother was very sick and wanted to see him. The older brother attributed the decision of the younger brother to join the *jihad* to the fact that he was not a good student in school and had failed in business. In short, the *jihad* was an *escape from reality*. He said: "We are all good Muslims, doing our prayers, but *jihad* is extremist."

A report on NPR (on 4/26/12) mentioned a Pakistani woman who is mobilizing mothers to talk to their sons and convince them not to join the *jihad*. However, one of the problems is money. Joining often means that the son is "employed." If employment opportunities existed in poor countries like Pakistan some of the sons would not join the *jihad*. In fact, this woman was able to find jobs for 79 men, who are now happily employed in non-militant pursuits.

There are *situations* that call for violence. The so called Arab spring provided opportunities to "professional *jihadists*" to find employment. For instance, in the beginning of the Syrian uprising there were no *jihadists*, but after a few months Iraqi *jihadist* came into Syria to try their hand in overthrowing the regime. Triandis (2009b) reported that there are militants who realize that their bosses are directing militant operations in order to obtain large salaries (in some cases, of the order of \$100,000 per year), and though the militants wish to stop working for them, they are afraid of being killed if they defect. Thus, in some cases *jihad* is a "lucrative business."

Sacred values are especially important in inspiring *jihadists* (Ginges, Atran, Sachdeva, and Medin, 2011). When such values are activated people are likely to buy into a cause that glorifies self-sacrificing violence for "the greater good."

Bashiriyeh (2011), found the greatest violence in Islamic countries, less in mid-Africa, even less in Eastern Europe, a moderate amount of violence was found in the USA, considerably less in New Zealand and Europe; finally minimal violence was found in Scandinavia. This agrees with the hypothesis, that VC to HI cultures reflect a slope of decreasing violence across cultures. Generally countries that were collectivist and high in hierarchy had more violence than countries that were individualist and high in equality. Individualist countries are more affluent than collectivist countries, so there was also less homicide in wealthy than in poor countries.

Another factor that may increase violence in Islam is polygamy. When some men have four wives others may have none. Males are more aggressive than females (Pinker, 2011), especially those age 15-30. When their marital prospects are blocked, and individuals are told about the wonders of paradise if they are killed for Allah, *jihad* may become very attractive.

Empirical research shows that hot periods of the year account for more violence than cool ones (Pinker, 2011). Much of Islam is in the hot parts of the world, so that is one more factors that may account for the high rates of violence. Finally, emphasis on Human Rights is related to low violence, but, as discussed above, many Muslims reject the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Allawi (2009) rejects it because the Declaration states that individuals should be free to enter or leave any religion of their choice. That he states is totally unacceptable in Islam, since leaving Islam is apostasy and is punishable by death.

Another factor is the importance that most Islam gives to conquest. When asked to identify the best period of Islam many Muslims mention the period when Islam expanded into North Africa, Spain and the Balkans (Gabriel, 2006; Triandis, 2009b). That was defined as "the Golden Period of Islam." Yet that was an extraordinarily violent period in Islam (Gabriel, 2006). For example, Abu-Bakr, the immediate successor of Muhammad, killed 84,000 Muslims because they refused to pay the 10 percent tax, as required by Islam. By today's standards, this "Rightly Guided Caliph" (as Muslims call him) was a war criminal guilty of genocide.

Another clue comes from the research of Ginges, Hansen, & Norenzayan (2009). They found that individuals who went to the mosque very regularly were more likely to approve of suicide attacks than those who mostly prayed at home. It maybe that in mosques they encounter more fundamentalist belief systems, but it may also be an aspect of their personality. We might eventually develop both demographic and personality tests predicting violence.

Still another clue is provided by a study by Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key & Buasath (2007). People who read from the Bible, that God sanctions aggression, were more aggressive than those in a control group. The authors concluded that "scriptural violence sanctioned by God can increase aggression, especially among believers" (p. 204).

In sum the more religious, cognitively simple individuals are more likely to be in the one percent than in the ninety-nine percent group, and those who have many cognitively simple self-deceptions, and are exposed to sacred texts that advocate violence and frequently attend religious services may be more violent.

### **The Instigators of Violence**

In addition to the *jihadists* who carry out the violence, there are imams, and the leaders of al-Qaeda and similar organizations who instigate violence. These are smart, well educated, and cognitively complex individuals, who are interested in power, and use religion as a cover to legitimize the violence (Triandis, 2009b). In most cultures individuals who are just interested in power are unpopular, but when they appear to the general public as pious workers for Allah they are well liked.

Imams advocating violence sometimes emerge as leaders of the Muslim congregation. However, different versions of Islam have different views about Imams. The Sunni Imams are simply emergent leaders. The Shiah imams are more special since they are believed to be chosen by God. The training of Imams has not been formalized. For example, there is no evidence that it includes a course in comparative religions, which is often found in the curricula of seminaries. In Germany and Austria there have been training and certification efforts, but in other countries this has not happened yet. Professors Rauf Ceylan of the University of Osnabrück, and Christine Langenfeld of the Georg-August University in Göttingen have been the leaders in this endeavor. It is likely that training that is totally Islamocentric will result in prejudice toward other religions, and may be a component in increased violence.

### **The Positive Aspects of Religion**

Religion provides experiences that people find invaluable. People might have mystical experiences that make them feel sure that something “real” exists “in heaven.” But such experiences can be created also with the electrical stimulation of the brain. Newberg, D’Aquili, & Rause, (2001) used single photon emission computerized tomography of the brain during the meditation of their patients, and found that the boundary between the brain areas that are activated when “self” and “not self” are perceived becomes blurred during meditation. So, the individual sees the self immersed in the infinite. The same measurements were taken during intense prayer. The area of the brain that is involved in the weakening of the self-not self boundary is the area which, when injured, results in the patient’s inability to lie down in bed, because the patient does not know where the body ends and the bed begins.

Rhythm is important in religion and rituals, and of course also in music and dance. Animals also have rituals, so that rituals have deep evolutionary roots. In animals, rituals permit communication, and recognition that the other animal is a friend. Newberg and his co-authors describe the complex mating rituals of butterflies, such as males flying around females brushing their wings. Both the male and female do behave in complex ways before they mate.

Religious experiences involve the same neurological structures as sex, and that is why there is rhythm in both systems (during intercourse and in religious ecstasy). Rhythm and repetition are the essential elements of ritual.

In humans, rituals generate emotional discharges such as tranquility, ecstasy, and spiritual transcendence. Participation in spiritual activities reduces blood pressure, lowers rates of respiration, increases cortisol levels, and improves the immune system (Newberg et al., p.86). In Sufi dancing arousal is intense. Activation of the orientation area of the brain leads to a sense of no separation between “self” and “not-self.” In mysticism there is contact with the Absolute, and with the intensely loved one. Mystical experiences are the source of all religion. For those who are not religious, great art, such as great music, e.g., Bach, Beethoven, can provide the ecstasies that are normally provided by religion.

Religion reduces uncertainty, improves health, and is especially good for our mental health (Triandis, 2009b). The experience of something larger than ourselves is what Einstein called the “cosmic religious feeling.” It is the experience of the universe as a single significant whole (Newberg et al., p.154). Triandis (2009b) argues that humans need a goal that is greater than themselves. To treat all humanity as brothers and sisters is an immense goal. But religions have a negative side as well. They are not only associated with violence but also with guilt. Counseling psychologist Ray (2009) described how many of his patients feel guilty because sexual behavior that is perfectly normal is considered “a sin” in their religion.

Religion helps people deal with uncertainty, and with dangerous, unpredictable situations (Barber, 2011). Barber showed that in most cultures the more predictable the environment (economic, health) the less emphasis is given to religion. In a study of 137 cultures disbelief in God was higher when there was economic and health security. Thus the current emphasis on religion in American politics may be a reflection of the economic crisis. We can predict that Greeks will become extremely religious in the next ten years.

### **Religions Become More Violent When They Are Under Attack**

Consider one of the more famous cases of religious violence. During the night of St. Bartholomew in 1572, 50,000 to 100,000 Protestants were killed by French Catholics. Some of the Catholics had a “mystical experience, a moment akin to resurrection, in which they came closer to God” (Carroll, 2009). Violence is especially likely when a religion feels under attack. Catholics felt under attack by Protestants; all religions now feel under attack by modernity (science, technology, emphasis on reason; de-emphasis of customs and faith, of traditional authority and of embeddedness in nature, as found among American Indians). Some parts of Islam are especially defensive about modernity. Modernity is inconsistent with the attributes of much of current Islam, though 12<sup>th</sup> century Islam was consistent with the modernity of that time. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century there have been movements toward modernity in Islam, such as Kemal Atatürk in Turkey and others (Esposito, 2003), but on the whole Islam feels defensive and also rejected by the West. The existence of blasphemy laws, such as those found in Pakistan, suggests that in some parts of Islam people feel that their religion is extremely weak and needs protection.

The problem with the rejection of traditional Islam, as found in the Turkey of the 1920s, is that it involved a culture becoming more like the West—more complex, loose, individualistic, and horizontal. That means loss of some of the traditional elements of the culture, i. e., those elements that people find “comfortable” and also the elements that define who they are in unique ways. Such changes can easily “disorient” people and that may have implications for their mental health. On the other hand, economic development divorced from global markets is rare. Thus, there is a serious dilemma. Muslims might ask: should we risk our mental health or remain poor?

In any case the current relationship between the global world and Islam is unsatisfactory. The West rejects or is unfriendly to Islam and Islam rejects and at times is violent toward the West. Eisenberger (2011) discovered that social rejection activates the same parts of the brain as physical pain. Thus, for instance, in careful experiments, Tylenol reduced the feelings associated with social rejection. In most mammals physical pain results in aggression. We can extrapolate that when Islam feels rejected (e.g., the Rushdie affair, the Danish cartoons, the issue of a French satirical magazine who used Mohammed as the “editor” with instructions to the reader to “die laughing”) it becomes more violent.

One of the clearest cases of Islam under attack by modernity and science is found in Nigeria. The Boko Haram (it means Western education is sinful) sect of Islam objects to all forms of Western education, and insists that the whole of Nigeria (a country whose South is Christian) should adopt Shariah law. Again this is a totally Islamocentric perspective. Clearly they advocate escape from modernity, e.g., science. If science is “sinful” that part of the world is condemned to remain poor. The conflict between Islam and science is described by Allawi (2009) in detail. He seems to favor the view that there are two kinds of knowledge: permanent (derived from God) and changeable (derived from science). He favors the permanent.

The advantage of changeable knowledge, i.e., based on science, is that we expect it to change as new data come in or hypotheses are falsified. The disadvantage of permanent knowledge is that any criticism that challenges any aspect of it instigates an enormously emotional reaction, as occurred when Muhammad’s image was presented in the Danish cartoons, or the Qur’an was burned by mistake in Afghanistan, in 2012, resulting in riots, much violence, and the death of several people.

Gabriel (2006) mentions that some Egyptian *jihadists* stopped violence when they realized that violence increases resistance to Islam. We need to stress that violence has made the life of Muslims in the West much more uncomfortable, and reduced the chances that Shariah law will be accepted world-wide. Few people around the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century want to see adulterous women stoned, execution for apostasy or blasphemy, thieves having their hands cut off, the elimination of usury, the prohibition of alcohol and the like. The world is no longer tolerant of many aspects of Shariah law. The dream of the *jihadists* that they can impose Shariah law on the world is a wild fantasy. It assumes that the world is in the 7<sup>th</sup> rather than in a global 21<sup>st</sup> century. It shows their ignorance and self-deception, i.e., lack of realistic thinking.

### **Is there a Way to De-escalate Violence in Islam?**

Most human prefer peace to violence. Most Muslims are embarrassed by the violence of the 1 percent, but are too timid to object (Gabriel, 2006). Since religion is so valuable to most people it is unrealistic to try to make Muslims less religious. However, it *may be* feasible to move them away from their sacred books, to more secular viewpoints. The view that Shariah law is God’s instructions to humans can be challenged. The Qur’an is not God’s word, but the product of a

great poet—Muhammad (Triandis, 2009b). Psychologists have many clients who have visions, but those who are not religious attribute their visions to non-religious factors. Muhammad was very religious and it was natural that he interpreted his visions as coming from God, but the facts are different.

Triandis (2009b) discusses the Qur'an as the product of self-deception in detail. It certainly fits the hopes needs and desires of people that they have a *perfect* blueprint for living. But the text was based on "revelations" that reflected simply the circumstances of Muhammad's life. The suras (sections) that were inspired in Mecca were peaceful; that was the period when the religion was new and Muhammad had to convince his followers that it was a religion of peace. The suras that were inspired in Medina are belligerent, and advocated killing the non-believers. That was the period when he was fighting the non-believers.

Triandis (2009b) discusses several other episodes in Muhammad's life which indicate that the revelations were reflections of his life-events rather than inspired by God. The Prophet was illiterate, so he employed scribes to record his revelations. One of these scribes altered what Muhammad had said to see if God would get upset. Nothing happened! Then the scribe concluded that He was not involved in the revelations, so he quit his job and went to another town. On one occasion Muhammad's followers raided a caravan on the wrong date. Mohammad was upset. But then he had a revelation that it was alright to raid that caravan. His wife A'isha said to him: "truly thy Lord makes haste to do thy bidding..." (Armstrong, 2006, p.168). In short, we can trace the Qur'an to events in Muhammad's life. Of course, those who are inclined to attribute events to supernatural factors will continue to believe that God was involved, but that is not necessary for those who are realists.

In short, we need to convince members of Islam that the Qur'an is a valuable work of poetry from one of the world's greatest poets, but its content is human-made, just as are *all the sacred books of all religions*, and while it was a fine guide for the good life in the 7<sup>th</sup> century it is not so in the 21<sup>st</sup>. A serious problem with this proposal is that dogmatic people reject any suggestion that their sacred text is just like all the other sacred texts. A person who takes this position is automatically called an apostate, a blasphemer. That indicates the difficulty that most Muslims experience if they are to have unconventional beliefs.

In Islam there is the assumption that the Qur'an is the "word of God." That, of course, assumes that there is a God. But modern science questions that hypothesis. Cosmologists (Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010) agree with La Place, who when he asked by Napoleon "Where is God in your description of the universe?" answered: "Sire, I do not need this hypothesis." Current research in physics explores the existence of multiple universes. It is a very different vision from the view that prevailed when the religions of the book were created.

Every force produces a counter-force. If we are to de-escalate violence we need to stop ridiculing and show more respect for Islam. At the same time Islam has to convince its 1 percent that what they are doing reduces the respect that the majority of the world population feels toward Islam, and in fact is so counter-productive that it might destroy Islam in the long run.



Thus, to decrease Islamic violence it may be wise to accept that some of the violence is due to what was done by the West (e.g., colonialism) and also to show less rejection and use no ridicule of Islam. At the same time it is necessary to push members of Islam toward a more realistic appraisal of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Qur'an, and to an increased understanding of science and the role of globalization and modernity.

## References

- Allawi, A. A. (2009) *The crisis of Islamic civilization*. New Haven Yale University Press.
- Armstrong, K. (2006). *Muhammad: A Prophet for our Time*, New York: Harper Collins
- Barber, N. (2011). A cross-national test of the uncertainty hypothesis of religious belief. *Cross-Cultural Research*, 45, 318-333.
- Bashiriyeh, H. (2011) *Culture and Violence: Psycho-cultural Values Involved in Homicide Across Nations*. Unpublished dissertation, University of Koblenz, Germany.
- Bond, R. & Smith, P. B. (1996). Culture and conformity: A meta-analysis of studies using Asch's (1952b, 1956) line judgment task. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119, 111-137.
- Bushman, B., Ridge, R.D., Das, E., Key, C. & Busatbh. G. I. (2007). When God sanctions killing: Effect of sanctioned violence on aggression. *Psychological Science*, 18, 204-207.
- Carroll, S. (2009) *Martyrs and murders: The Guise family and the making of Europe*. New York: Oxford Press.
- Chick, G. (1997). Cultural complexity: The concept and its measurement. *Cross-Cultural Research*, 31, 275-307
- Davis, G. (2006). *Religion of peace? Islam's war against the world*. World Ahead Publishing.
- Eisenberger N. (2011) Why rejection hurts. In M. Brockman,(Ed.) *Future science: Essays from the leading edge* (pp. 190-207). New York: Vintage Books
- Esposito, J. L. (2003). *Unholy war: Terror in the name of Islam*. New York: Oxford Press.
- Gabriel, M.A. (2006) *Journey inside the mind of an Islamic terrorist*. Front Line, of Strand Corporation.
- Gelfand, M. J. et al. (2011) Differences between tight and loose cultures: A 33-nation study. *Science*, 332, 1100-1104.
- Ginges, J. , Hansen, I., & Norenzayan, A. (2009). Religion and support for suicide attacks. *Psychological Science*, 20, 224-230.
- Ginges, J., Atran,S., Sachdeva,S., and Medin,D. ( 2011) Psychology out of the laboratory: The challenge of violent extremism. *American Psychologist*, 66, 507-519.
- Gonzalez, N. (2009). *The Sunni-Shia conflict: Understanding sectarian violence in the Middle East*. Notia Press.

- Hawking, S. & Mlodinow, L. (2010). *The grand design*. New York: Random House.
- Kitayama, S., & Cohen, D. (2007). *Handbook of Cultural Psychology*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Lelyveid, J. (2011). *Great soul: Mahatma Gandhi and his struggle with India*. New York: Random House.
- Lewis, B. (2003) *The crisis of Islam: Holy war and unholy terror*. New York: Modern Library.
- Liu, J. H., Paez, D., Hanke, K., Rosa, A., Hilton, D. J., Sibley, C. G., . . . Suwa, K. (2012). Cross-cultural dimensions of meaning in the evaluation of events in world history? Perceptions of historical calamities and progress in cross - cultural data from thirty societies. *Journal of Cross- Cultural Psychology*, 43, 251-272..
- Markus, H., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98, 225-253
- Newberg, A., D'Aquili, E., & Rause, V. (2001) *Why God won't go away: Brain science and the biology of belief*. New York: Ballantine Books
- Pelto, P. J. (1968). The difference between "tight" and "loose" societies. *Transaction*, 37-40.
- Pinker, S. (2011) *The better angels of our nature: Why violence has declined*. New York: Penguin Publishing.
- Ray, D. W. (2009) *The God virus: How religion impacts our life and culture*. Bonner Springs KS IPC Press
- Rokeach, M. (1960) *The open and closed mind*. New York: Basic Books.
- Shavitt, S., Torelli, C. J., & Riemer, H. (2011). Horizontal and vertical individualism and collectivism: Implications for understanding psychological processes. In M. J. Gelfand, C. Chiu, and Y. Hong (Eds.) *Advances in culture and psychology*. Vol 1, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stern, J. (2003). *Terror in the name of God*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Triandis, H. C. (1989). Self and social behavior in differing cultural contexts. *Psychological Review*, 96, 506-520.
- Triandis, H. C. (1994). *Culture and social behavior*. New York: McGraw-Hill
- Triandis, H. C. (1995). *Individualism and collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Triandis, H. C. (2009a) Ecological determinants of cultural variations. In R. W. Wyer, C-y Chiu, & Y-y Hong (Eds.) *Understanding culture: Theory, research and applications*. (pp. 189-210) New York: Psychology Press.
- Triandis, H. C. (2009b) *Fooling ourselves: Self-deception in politics, religion, and terrorism*. Westport CT Praeger.
- Triandis, H. C. & Gelfand, M.J. (1998) Converging measurement of horizontal and vertical individualism and collectivism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 118-128.
- Triandis, H. C. & Gelfand, M. (2012). A theory of Individualism and collectivism. In P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski & E. T. Higgins (Eds.) *Handbook of Social Psychological Theories*, Volume 2 (pp. 498-520). Los Angeles, CA Sage.

© Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2013.

Los derechos reservados de *Acta de Investigación Psicológica*, son propiedad de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) y el contenido de esta revista no puede ser copiado ni enviado por correo electrónico a diferentes sitios o publicados en listas de servidores sin permiso escrito de la UNAM. Sin embargo, los usuarios pueden imprimir, descargar o enviar por correo electrónico los artículos para uso personal.

Copyright of *Psychological Research Record* is the property of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM) and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.