



Searching for certainty: Religious beliefs and intolerance toward value-violating groups



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ABSTRACT

Religiosity has been consistently linked to prejudice toward a variety of outgroups. This article proposes that this is the case only when religiosity reflects a specific aspect of seeking guidance and security in daily practices and complex sociocultural norms. Outgroups that challenge the epistemic certainty that belief in God provides are rejected in an effort to protect this certainty. The results from two studies found that uncertainty avoidance was related to belief in God and this belief mediated the relationship between uncertainty avoidance and intolerance within the context of general human rights (Study 1), and the derogation of value-violating groups (e.g., homosexuals or followers of other religions) but not of groups that pose no threat to religious values (old or poor people) (Study 2). The interpretative dimension of religiosity (i.e., the way in which people process religious content) is not connected to security seeking, as reflected in the lack of a correlation with uncertainty avoidance and with different prejudice measures. The results are discussed in relation to past research on religiosity and prejudice, and suggest that for people who avoid uncertainty, only those types of religious beliefs that provide a sense of certainty are linked with intolerance toward value-violating groups.

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1. Introduction

Uncertainty is an uncomfortable and aversive state, and experiencing it can thus constitute a threat (Hogg, 2007; Kruglanski, 1989; Van den Bos, 2009). Therefore, people generally feel a need to either eliminate uncertainty or find a way to make it tolerable and cognitively manageable. They do this in a variety of ways, most notably by adhering to personal goals, values or cultural worldviews (for overview: Jonas et al., 2014). Thus, our attempts to reduce uncertainty constitute a self-regulatory process through which people assign value to their daily practices and sociocultural norms. It may be expected that religious beliefs also buffer against and provide relief from the experience of uncertainty by offering simple maps of meaning and by providing guidance with respect to general perspectives on life (Brandt & Reyna, 2010; Hommel & Colzato, 2010). To maintain the stability and certainty that some types of religious beliefs provide, people who threaten a particular belief are often rejected and even treated with hostility (e.g., Brandt & Reyna, 2010; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). One strategy that people use to protect the certainty that religious beliefs provide is through intolerance toward

value-violating groups (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2005; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005). In this paper, we aimed to demonstrate that uncertainty avoidance is related to not all religious beliefs, but only to those that provide a sense of certainty, and that these particular beliefs are protected from threats to this certainty by intolerance toward value-violating groups. In that way, our study contributes to the existing literature on the relationship between religiosity and feelings of uncertainty. This study also helps to shed light on how certain types of religiosity can interact with uncertainty avoidance, thereby leading to intergroup prejudice.

1.1. Religious beliefs as a cognitive response to uncertainty

Managing uncertainty includes various proximal defenses (e.g., the avoidance of potentially threatening stimuli, objects and situations; see: Corr, 2011) and distal defenses (e.g., eager and unequivocal engagement with an incentive or commitment; see: Harmon-Jones, Amodio, & Harmon-Jones, 2010). Using distal responses, people can activate palliative-approach-motivated states by pursuing concrete incentives (e.g., chocolate, gambling for money) or abstract incentives such as ideals, ideologies, and religious beliefs. Researchers believe that these abstract incentives may be more reliable because they can be effortlessly evoked in the

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privacy of one's own mind, free from exertion, conflict, the risk of failure, or aversive consequences (for review: I. McGregor, Nash, & Prentice, 2010).

Many studies suggest that religious beliefs as distal reactions may be particularly effective in relieving anxiety (e.g., I. McGregor, Haji, Nash, & Teper, 2008; I. McGregor et al., 2010; Vail et al., 2010; for review: Jonas et al., 2014). Why might religious beliefs act in this way? They represent adherence to a set of religious teachings that are believed to contain the inerrant truth about both existential and ethereal existence (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). Such beliefs are firm, stable, and certain knowledge structures that provide a sense of meaning, coherence, and control while reducing ambiguity (e.g., Hood, Hill, & Williamson, 2005; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). They also allow people to understand their experiences and to act with purpose in their environments.

In all of the studies cited above, uncertainty was experimentally induced via a number of methods, such as increasing mortality salience, personal uncertainty, or a lack of personal control, or via expectancy violations. We focused, however, on the need for cognitive closure (Kruglanski, 1989) as it constitutes a fundamental epistemic motive underlying how people approach and process social information. Cognitive closure is defined as an individual's desire for clear and certain explanations, over and above their willingness to accept uncertainty and ambiguity (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Thus, uncertainty avoidance is a core definitional element of cognitive closure. Recently, this claim was supported by neuropsychological analysis (Kossowska, Czarnek, Wronka, Wyczesany, & Bukowski, 2014). Individual differences related to the need for closure reflect dispositional variability in the preference for order, predictability, tolerance of ambiguity, and closed-mindedness. The motivational tendencies to avoid or attain closure affect the ways in which people interpret and respond to information in their social environments and can even influence their tendencies to either support and perpetuate the status quo (i.e., cognitive conservatism), or to question and criticize it. Some studies have indeed revealed that the need for closure is positively related to religiosity (Duriez, 2003; Saroglou, 2002) or religious fundamentalism (Brandt & Reyna, 2010).

We suggest however that not all types of religious beliefs, but particularly the orientation toward and the development of a personal relationship with God, may be seen as fulfilling the human need for certainty. These types of beliefs imply acceptance of, and submission to, a divine authority, and thus provide meaning and a clear moral program. For this reason they attract people who prefer structure and certainty in the face of life's complexity and uncertainty. We propose that other types of religious beliefs, i.e., symbolic religious beliefs (Wulff, 1991), quest religious orientation (Batson & Johnson, 1976) or the affirmation of the religious realm (Allport & Ross, 1967), may have a different function that does not regulate uncertainty.

1.2. Uncertainty, religious beliefs and intolerance toward value-violating groups

Nearly every religion preaches tolerance and love for others, including value-violating outgroups. However, for decades, studies have shown links between religion and ethnocentrism, authoritarianism, social distance, and different types of prejudice, particularly racially tainted bias (Batson & Burris, 1994; Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Hall, Matz, & Wood, 2010; Hunsberger, 1995; Whitley, 2009). Some studies show also that the link between religiosity and various forms of prejudice may be mediated by cognitively rigid ideologies (e.g., Johnson et al., 2011; Shen, Haggard, Strassburger, & Rowatt, 2013). In the present research, we aim to provide new insight into this relationship. Namely, we propose

that religiosity, especially understood as the development of a personal relationship with God, reflect a specific aspect of seeking guidance and security in daily practices and complex sociocultural norms. Consequently, as a reaction to uncertainty, religious beliefs lead to prejudicial attitudes, especially against those who are the most threatening to religious worldviews. These groups particularly comprise those who violate moral taboos (e.g., homosexuals) or specific religious doctrines (e.g., followers of other religions). We therefore hypothesized that the belief in God would mediate the relationship between uncertainty avoidance and prejudice. We do not expect these relations referring to this the interpretative dimension of religiosity.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

The participants were 225 Polish citizens (121 were female; 1 respondent did not reveal his/her gender; mean age = 43.8, SD = 12.11, range: 20–84 years) who were recruited via community advertisements. Participants were predominantly Roman Catholic (Roman Catholics 96.4%; Protestants 1.3%, no religion 2.3%). Of these participants, 32.8% had completed higher education, 47.4% had completed secondary school, and 19.9% had completed primary education; 15.5% participants indicated that they had a lower than average income, whereas 6.1% reported a higher income. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

2.1.2. Materials and procedure

To assess individual differences in uncertainty avoidance, we used the Need for Closure scale (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). The items were rated on a six-point scale (from 1 = *completely disagree* to 6 = *completely agree*) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .71$, $M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.56$). A higher mean score indicated a higher individual need for closure and thus a greater tendency to avoid uncertainty.

As a measure of religiosity, participants completed the Post-Critical Belief Scale (Duriez, Fontaine, & Hutsebaut, 2000; 33 items), rooted in the two dimensions of religion posited by Wulff (1991): (1) inclusion versus exclusion of transcendence, representing the belief in God component of religion (2) literal versus symbolic, representing the interpretative component of religion. We expected that only the first dimension would be related to uncertainty avoidance and thus lead to prejudice toward value-violating groups. Ratings were obtained on a 7-point scale, from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). Higher values on the inclusion vs. exclusion dimension indicate higher levels of the inclusion of transcendence and the belief in God (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$, $M = 4.74$; $SD = 1.34$). Higher values on the literal vs. symbolic dimension indicate higher levels of a literal interpretation of religion (Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$, $M = 3.79$; $SD = 1.00$).

To measure intolerance toward value-violating groups, we asked participants to complete an 18-item scale adapted from the Humans Right Questionnaire (Diaz-Veizades, Widaman, Little, & Gibbs, 1995). Participants assessed the extent to which they would deny the civil, political, social, cultural and economic rights of groups who violate social order and security (1 = not at all, 7 = fully, Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$, $M = 2.81$; $SD = 1.12$). Items used to assess support for civil and political rights referred to the protection of personal liberty, security, and spiritual integrity. Those items that assessed support for social, cultural and economic rights made reference to rights protecting individual employment, social and economic progress, and those that assure an adequate standard of living.

Participants also completed one single-item measure of their self-assessed religiosity (“To what extent do you consider yourself a religious person?” 1 – not at all, 7 – very much, $M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.66$). This question was asked at the end of the survey to ensure that individuals were not primed with religion prior to having their attitudes assessed.

Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire individually during a group session they attended voluntarily. They received the packet of questions and were told that we were studying how people assess the personalities and social beliefs of others. Participants were debriefed at the end of the study.

2.1.3. Results

The correlations between the studied variables are presented in Table 1. To test the effects of uncertainty avoidance and the two dimensions of religious beliefs, we used the PROCESS program (Hayes, 2013; model 4). The variables were mean-centered. We controlled for gender, age, education, and income. In line with our hypothesis, uncertainty avoidance had a significant and positive effect on belief in God ($b = 0.10$, $t = 5.54$, $p < .001$) and intolerance ($b = 0.59$, $t = 2.52$, $p = .012$). Belief in God predicted intolerance ($b = 0.19$, $t = 2.44$, $p = .020$). Using 10,000 bootstrapped samples, we found an unstandardized indirect effect of uncertainty avoidance on intolerance through belief in God with a 95% confidence interval that did not include zero, indicating a significant indirect effect, $IE = .100$, 95% $CI [0.025; 0.274]$. The relationship between uncertainty avoidance and intolerance remained significant when belief in God was entered into the regression model ($DE = .15$, 95% $CI [1.788; 0.799]$), suggesting that the degree of belief in God partially mediates the relationship between uncertainty avoidance and intolerance toward those who violate social order and security. We repeated the analysis for the interpretative component of religiosity, but uncertainty avoidance did not predict this type of religiosity, which also did not predict intolerance. However, we found that uncertainty avoidance predicted the levels of self-assessed religiosity ($b = 0.77$, $t = 2.42$, $p = .02$) and intolerance ($b = 0.63$, $t = 3.39$, $p < .001$). Self-assessed religiosity predicted intolerance ($b = 0.12$, $t = 2.32$, $p = .02$). Using 10,000 bootstrapped samples, we found a significant unstandardized indirect effect of uncertainty avoidance through self-assessed religiosity with a 95% confidence interval, $IE = .09$, 95% $CI [0.0067; 0.2561]$. The strength of the relationship between uncertainty avoidance and intolerance remained significant when self-assessed religiosity was entered into the regression model ($DE = .54$, 95% $CI [0.100; 0.977]$), suggesting that the level of self-assessed religiosity partially mediates the relationship between uncertainty avoidance and intolerance.

2.2. Discussion

Study 1 shows that the tendency to avoid uncertainty correlates with belief in God measured both with the inclusion vs. exclusion dimension of religiosity and by self-assessment but not with the literal vs. symbolic aspect of religiosity (i.e., the way people interpret religious events). As expected, the orientation and development of a personal relationship with God, as a central dimension

of any religion, offers a global worldview and a moral program and thereby reduces the complexity of life and creates a psychologically safe environment.

Furthermore, both uncertainty avoidance and belief in God were linked to a comparable degree with intolerance. In turn, the literal vs. symbolic dimension, although it was moderately positively correlated with belief in God, was not linked with either uncertainty avoidance or intolerance. Moreover, belief in God partially mediated the relationship between uncertainty avoidance and intolerance, whereas the interpretative component of religiosity did not. The relationship between the components of religiosity and prejudice confirms previous findings, and the role of uncertainty avoidance in that equation offers a new explanation based on the cognitive preference for order and predictability.

In Study 1, we measured intolerance by drawing on general human rights. In Study 2, we focused on the attitudes towards different outgroups including those value-violating groups considered the most threatening to the stability of religious worldviews.

3. Study 2

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

The study was conducted online. Recruitment was facilitated by distributing the survey links through popular Polish portals. Five hundred nineteen Internet users (262 men, 257 women) completed all of the measures in the survey. The age of the participants ranged from 17 to 27 years ($M = 21.42$, $SD = 1.65$). Of the respondents, 27.0% had completed higher education, 65.2% had completed secondary education, and 17.8% left school before completing secondary education. Participants were predominantly Roman Catholic (Roman Catholics 98%; no religion 2%); 14.2% of participants assessed themselves as nonreligious, 28.8% as moderately religious and 57% as highly religious. The survey respondents received 5 PLN (approximately 1 Euro) for participating in the survey.

3.1.2. Materials and procedure

As in Study 1, participants completed the Need for Closure Scale to measure individual differences in uncertainty avoidance (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). The mean score for all items was calculated (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$, $M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.72$). A higher mean score indicated greater uncertainty avoidance. Participants completed 18 items from the short Post-Critical Belief Scale (Duriez, Soenens, & Hutsebaut, 2005) to measure the two dimensions of religiosity, the inclusion vs. exclusion of transcendence (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$, $M = 3.36$; $SD = 0.59$) and the literal vs. symbolic (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$, $M = 2.79$; $SD = 0.99$).

To measure prejudice towards different groups, we used the 54-item Intolerant Schema Measure Scale (Aosved, Long, & Voller, 2009), which measures the constructs of sexism, racism, sexual prejudice, classism, ageism and religious intolerance. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Scores for intolerance toward different groups were calculated separately: intolerance towards homosexuals

Table 1
Intercorrelations among the studied variables (Study 1).

	Belief in God	Literal vs. symbolic religiosity	Self-assessed religiosity	Intolerance
Uncertainty avoidance	.21**	.08	.21**	.26**
Belief in God		.22**	.47***	.27**
Literal vs. symbolic religiosity			.41***	.02
Self-assessed religiosity				.23**

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.

(Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$; $M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.77$), religious intolerance (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$; $M = 2.66$, $SD = 0.77$), classism (Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$; $M = 2.93$, $SD = 0.66$), sexism (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$; $M = 2.22$, $SD = 0.88$), racism (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$; $M = 2.51$, $SD = 0.78$), and ageism (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$; $M = 2.33$, $SD = 0.65$).

3.2. Results

The correlations between the studied variables are presented in Table 2. To test the effects of uncertainty avoidance and the two dimensions of religious beliefs on different intolerance measures, we used the PROCESS program (Hayes, 2013; model 4). The variables were mean-centered. We controlled for gender and education and performed analysis for both dependent measures. In line with our hypothesis, uncertainty avoidance had a significant and positive effect on belief in God ($b = 0.09$, $t = 2.25$, $p = .02$), and belief in God predicted intolerance toward homosexuals ($b = 0.41$, $t = 7.61$, $p < .001$), religious intolerance ($b = 0.24$, $t = 3.41$, $p < .001$), sexism ($b = 0.27$, $t = 3.65$, $p < .001$), and racism ($b = 0.28$, $t = 3.99$, $p < .001$) but not classism ($b = 0.09$, $t = 2.25$, $p = .02$) and ageism ($b = 0.09$, $t = 2.25$, $p = .02$). Using 10,000 bootstrapped samples, we found a significant unstandardized indirect effect of uncertainty avoidance on intolerance through belief in God with a 95% confidence interval for intolerance toward homosexuals, $IE = .03$, 95% CI [0.007; 0.072], religious prejudice, $IE = .020$, 95% CI [0.004; 0.049], sexism $IE = .02$, 95% CI [0.005; 0.053], and racism, $IE = .100$, 95% CI [0.005; 0.054]. In each condition, the strength of the relationship between uncertainty avoidance and different types of intolerance was insignificant. The results suggest that the degree of belief in God fully mediates the relationship between uncertainty avoidance and intolerance toward those who violate social order and security (homosexuals, followers of other religions, other sexes, and representatives of other races). We did not find this mediation effect for ageism and classism.

We repeated this analysis for the interpretative component of religiosity, but the individual differences in uncertainty avoidance did not predict this type of religiosity. This religiosity also did not predict prejudice, with the exception of prejudice toward homosexuals ($R^2 = .216$; $\beta = .31$; $t = 8.04$; $p < .001$).

3.3. Discussion

In Study 2, in addition to reusing the measures of uncertainty avoidance and the dimension of individual religiosity, we introduced a set of measures of attitudes toward different out-groups, including value-violating ones. First, uncertainty avoidance, as in Study 1, correlated with the strength of belief in God, which in turn was linked with prejudice against value-violating out-groups (those of different religions and races, homosexuals, and women). Additionally, belief in God did not correlate with prejudice against the out-groups that pose no threat to religious values, such as the elderly and those who belong to different social classes.

Table 2

Correlations among the studied variables (Study 2).

	Beliefs in God	Literal vs. Symbolic religiosity
Uncertainty avoidance	.10*	.03
Intolerance towards homosexuals	.34**	.20*
Religious prejudice	.20*	.05
Sexism	.26**	.01
Racism	.23**	.05
Ageism	.04	.01
Classism	.07	-.10

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.

In sum, these results may indicate that the desire for certainty can lead to prejudice against those who are understood as posing a challenge to our norms. Moreover, as in Study 1, the interpretative dimension of religiosity did not mediate the relationship between uncertainty avoidance and outgroup prejudice. Similarly, the interpretative dimension was not linked to any type of prejudice, with the exception of a correlation with intolerance towards homosexuals, which may be related to the specificity of Polish Catholicism.

4. General discussion

The present studies found that the tendency to avoid uncertainty associated with belief in God, which in turn, increased prejudice toward racial groups, homosexuals, and followers of other religious denominations (the vast majority of our participants belonged to the Roman Catholic Church). These results are in line with the findings from previous research. Nevertheless, Study 2 also showed that no type of religiosity was linked with prejudice against out-groups that do not pose any threat to value-related religious worldviews; we observed neither classism nor ageism. This pattern of selective tolerance was anticipated by some researchers. For example, Herek (1987) suggested that general religious orientation does not foster the unequivocal acceptance of others but instead encourages tolerance toward specific groups that are accepted by contemporary religious teachings. Batson et al. (1993) explained that an especially intrinsic religious orientation is associated with both knowledge and acceptance of the teachings of one's religious community about "right" and "wrong" prejudices. It appears that rather than religion's engendering universal acceptance of all people regardless of ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, religious creed, or sexual orientation, general religiousness may instead cultivate conformity to the 'right' tolerances and the 'right' prejudices as defined by the formal and informal teachings of a person's religious community (Batson et al., 1993; Rowatt, LaBouff, Johnson, Froese, & Tsang, 2009).

In addition, we showed that the interpretative dimension of religiosity is not connected with security seeking, which is reflected in the lack of a correlation with uncertainty avoidance and with different prejudice measures. The way people process the content of their religious beliefs seems to have different functions, not all of which regulate uncertainty. For example, according to Wulff (1991), the symbolic (vs. literal) dimension of religiosity is close to either the "quest orientation" (Batson & Johnson, 1976; the non-transcendent, reductive interpretation) or to the "transcendent, restorative orientation," which is the affirmation of the religious realm in symbolic but not in literal terms. The former approach is characterized by creative suspicion of, and tentativeness toward religious experience, whereas the latter postulates a return to "second naïveté" (Ricoeur, 1970) and aims to find a symbolic meaning behind religious ideas and objects. Therefore, both approaches challenge and go beyond religious dogmas rather than treating them as a source of consolation.

However, our studies also revealed that the interpretative dimension of religiosity is weakly linked to prejudice against homosexuals, which stands at odds with previous findings. We believe that this finding is explained not only by the strong anti-homosexual stance of the Polish Catholic Church, but also by the quite strong anti-homosexual sentiments among Polish society as a whole. According to a report issued by the Pew Research Center in 2013, "Poland is the only EU country surveyed where views [on acceptance of homosexuality] are mixed; 42% say homosexuality should be accepted by society and 46% believe it should be rejected." In contrast, in most European countries, the opinion prevailed that homosexuality should be accepted (for

example, the Czech Republic 80%, Germany 87%, Britain 76%; Pew Research Center, 2013, p. 2).

In conclusion, our results confirm previous findings and offer a new cognitive explanation for certainty seeking connected with the belief in God (the inclusion vs. exclusion dimension) and interpretative aspects of religiosity (the literal vs. symbolic dimension). We argue that the underlying motive is uncertainty avoidance and that prejudice, which serves as a preventive mechanism against those who challenge one's certainty, is the price for the internal coherence and peacefulness.

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