Study: Islamic fundamentalism is not a marginal phenomenon in Europe

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Demonstrations against the Paris attacks at the Place de la Republique in the French capital. Credit: Olivier Ortelpa

Last week's attacks in Paris, committed in the name of a god, reopen a badly-healed scar in Europe. The world once again turns towards religious fundamentalism. A new study shows that hostility towards other out-groups is not an isolated phenomenon among Muslims living in Europe; but nor is it a synonym of violence. According to the author of

the study, Ruud Koopmans, director of the WZB Berlín Social Science Centre (Germany), "Islam is not the problem".

The attack on the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo -which sold five million copies of its latest issue around the world on Wednesday 14 January- was not merely an act of aggression against freedom of expression and against human life; it was also an attack on the religious values of a large majority of Muslims living in the European Union, whose ideals are peaceful and even flexible among the youngest members of the community.

For Ruud Koopmans, sole author of a study published in early January in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* and director of the WZB Berlin Social Science Centre (Germany), religious fundamentalism is defined in three ways: that believers should return to the eternal and unchangeable rules laid down in the past; that these rules only allow one interpretation and are binding for all believers; and that religious rules should have priority over secular laws.

The sociologist insists that religious fundamentalism -also interpreted as strict religiosity- is an ideology, that is a set of ideas that refer to attitudes towards the way of viewing life.

"Fundamentalism does not necessarily include or justify violence, as this is a form of behaviour and not an ideology," explains Koopmans in a phone call from Berlin (Germany). The specialist compares this fundamentalism with fascism and communism, other ideologies that are not synonymous with violence.

Nevertheless, "religious fundamentalism may encourage radicalisation. In general, it should not imply violence, although out-group hostility may be evident," continues the expert.

But religious fundamentalism is not unique to Islam: the term originated with a Protestant movement in the early 20th century in the USA, which propagated a return to the 'fundaments' of the Christian faith and to a literal interpretation of the rules of the Bible.

Extended ideologies but not universal

Koopmans' study, based on a survey in 2008 of 9000 Europeans, compares the religious fundamentalism of immigrants and the children and grandchildren of Turkish and Moroccan Muslim immigrants (Sunni Muslims and to a lesser extent Alevites) of Turkish and Moroccan origin and native European Christians (Catholics, Protestants, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehova's Witnesses and Pentecost believers) in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and Sweden, countries with a long generational history of immigration.

"Broadly speaking, between 40% and 45% of European Muslims have fundamentalist religious ideas, that is they agree with the three definitions of the term. Austria is the country with the highest percentage, 55%, while Germany has the lowest, 30%", explains Koopmans.

According to the scientist, fundamentalism is not a marginal phenomenon among Muslims in Western Europe. "Although a majority of Muslims have more liberal views of the religion, this minority of fundamentalist Muslims is significant", underlines the researcher who adds that although these attitudes are widespread "they are not universal among European Muslims".

The results show that if first and second generations are considered and if each definition is taken independently, almost 60% would return to the roots of Islam, 75% think there is only one interpretation of the Koran possible to which every Muslim should stick, and 65% say that religious

rules are more important to them than the rules of the country in which they live. "However in second generation Muslims the levels are slightly lower (between 50% and 70%)," states the expert.

According to the study, Islamic fundamentalism, also known as Islam, prevails in Europe if compared to Christian fundamentalism, in which only 4% of Christians shared the ideas of the three statements of the definition. Among Protestants, fundamentalism reached 12%. "All fundamentalists are strictly religious but this does not mean that all strictly religious individuals are fundamentalists. Strict religiosity is more frequently associated to Islamic fundamentalists than to Christians," claims the author.

In addition, Christian and Islamic fundamentalism decrease when the social and economic status is higher, "and this is even more so among the Muslim community", indicates the sociologist. Nevertheless, "although in Europe religious fundamentalism is more widespread in Islam, in the USA it is Christian fundamentalism, especially among Protestants, which has the greatest support," observes Koopmans who points out that the data from the study cannot be extrapolated to the rest of the world.

In Spain, with a more recent history of immigration, and for this reason not included in the study, followers of religious fundamentalism, in particular Islam, reach similar figures. A study conducted by the American PEW Research Centre revealed that Islamic fundamentalists make up more than 30% of the followers. "In fact, there is not much variation in the European countries," declares the Researcher.

Hostility towards out-groups

The reactions generated as a result of the latest attacks in the French capital have merely served to fortify a growing Islamophobia and rejection of Muslims. "But Islam is not the problem. Nor is it true that a

majority of Muslims have fundamentalist ideals," says the expert.

Religious fundamentalism is not new. Since the nineties, these attitudes are found among Christians and in Islam, remaining stable in the case of the latter.

"What is relatively recent is the growth of violence, linked to the situation in Syria and Iraq, and which has served to aggravate the problem", maintains Koopmans. Other studies claim that between 10% and 15% of EU Muslims are prepared to use violence to defend their faith.

Although violence does not necessarily form part of this ideology, hostility towards other out-groups including homosexuals, Jews, and Westerners (in the case of Muslims) or Muslims (in the case of Christians) is evident. As a whole, Muslims are shown to be more hostile towards the three out-groups mentioned above, with between 25% and 30% rejecting these groups. Christian hostility is not as much as 5%.

However, independently, Christian fundamentalists show greater hostility towards Muslims (more than 50%) and towards Jews (between 30 and 35% of Christian fundamentalists were revealed to be hostile). In the case of Islamic fundamentalists, more than 70% of followers feel hostility towards homosexuals, Jews and Westerners.

Religious fundamentalism is closely linked to hostility towards other out-groups," says Koopmans. But social and economic levels also have a bearing. Individuals with a high social and economic status are more tolerant and less xenophobic.

  More information: Koopmans, Ruud. "Religious Fundamentalism and Hostility against Out-groups: A Comparison of Muslims and Christians in Western Europe" *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41(1): 33-57