Studies help understand why some people are so sure they're right

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Case Western Reserve University researchers found that religious and nonreligious people can become convinced they're right in the face of contradicting evidence, despite differing in the way they think. Credit: Case Western Reserve University

Dogmatic individuals hold confidently to their beliefs, even when experts disagree and evidence contradicts them. New research from Case Western Reserve University may help explain the extreme perspectives, on religion, politics and more, that seem increasingly prevalent in society.

Two studies examine the personality characteristics that drive dogmatism in the religious and nonreligious. They show there are both similarities and important differences in what drives dogmatism in these two groups.

In both groups, higher critical reasoning skills were associated with lower levels of dogmatism. But these two groups diverge in how moral concern influences their dogmatic thinking.

"It suggests that religious individuals may cling to certain beliefs, especially those which seem at odds with analytic reasoning, because those beliefs resonate with their moral sentiments," said Jared Friedman, a PhD student in organizational behavior and co-author of the studies.

"Emotional resonance helps religious people to feel more certain—the more moral correctness they see in something, the more it affirms their thinking," said Anthony Jack, associate professor of philosophy and co-author of the research. "In contrast, moral concerns make nonreligious people feel less certain."

This understanding may suggest a way to effectively communicate with the extremes, the researchers say. Appealing to a religious dogmatist's sense of moral concern and to an anti-religious dogmatist's unemotional logic may increase the chances of getting a message through—or at least some consideration from them.

The research is published in the *Journal of Religion and Health*.

Extreme positions

While more empathy may sound desirable, untempered empathy can be dangerous, Jack said. "Terrorists, within their bubble, believe it's a highly moral thing they're doing. They believe they are righting wrongs

and protecting something sacred."

In today's politics, Jack said, "with all this talk about fake news, the Trump administration, by emotionally resonating with people, appeals to members of its base while ignoring facts." Trump's base includes a large percentage of self-declared religious men and women.

At the other extreme, despite organizing their life around critical thinking, militant atheists, "may lack the insight to see anything positive about religion; they can only see that it contradicts their scientific, analytical thinking," Jack said.

The studies, based on surveys of more than 900 people, also found some similarities between religious and non-religious people. In both groups the most dogmatic are less adept at analytical thinking, and also less likely to look at issues from other's perspectives.

In the first study, 209 participants identified as Christian, 153 as nonreligious, nine Jewish, five Buddhist, four Hindu, one Muslim and 24 another religion. Each completed tests assessing dogmatism, empathetic concern, aspects of analytical reasoning, and prosocial intentions.

The results showed religious participants as a whole had a higher level of dogmatism, empathetic concern and prosocial intentions, while the nonreligious performed better on the measure of analytic reasoning. Decreasing empathy among the nonreligious corresponded to increasing dogmatism.

The second study, which included 210 participants who identified as Christian, 202 nonreligious, 63 Hindu, 12 Buddhist, 11 Jewish, 10 Muslim and 19 other religions, repeated much of the first but added measures of perspective-taking and religious fundamentalism.

The more rigid the individual, whether religious or not, the less likely he or she would consider the perspective of others. Religious fundamentalism was highly correlated with empathetic concern among the religious.

Two brain networks

The researchers say the results of the surveys lend further support to their earlier work showing people have two brain networks—one for empathy and one for analytic thinking – that are in tension with each other. In healthy people, their thought process cycles between the two, choosing the appropriate network for different issues they consider.

But in the religious dogmatist's mind, the empathetic network appears to dominate while in the nonreligious dogmatist's mind, the analytic network appears to rule.

While the studies examined how differences in worldview of the religious vs. the nonreligious influence dogmatism, the research is broadly applicable, the researchers say. Dogmatism applies to any core beliefs, from eating habits —whether to be a vegan, vegetarian or omnivore— to political opinions and beliefs about evolution and climate change. The authors hope this and further research will help improve the divide in opinions that seems increasingly prevalent.

More information: Jared Parker Friedman et al, What Makes You So Sure? Dogmatism, Fundamentalism, Analytic Thinking, Perspective Taking and Moral Concern in the Religious and Nonreligious, *Journal of Religion and Health* (2017). dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10943-017-0433-x

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