

Psychology study finds liberty goes hand in hand with religion—including islam

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Many public intellectuals and political movements in the West consider the popular embrace of religious belief—particularly Islam—to increase the risk of suffering oppression in one's country. However, a new set of

psychology studies provides convincing evidence that this view is a misleading oversimplification. According to the lead researcher, "Religion and oppression go together like ice cream sales and street violence, or like cows and Republicans. To figure out how much one causes the other, if at all, you have to take other related things into account. And Islam is nowhere close to being the most oppressive cultural system in the world. When comparing Muslim-majority countries to countries with a similar degree of development, their levels of oppression are about average."

The set of three studies has been published as "Religion and Oppression: Cross-National and Experimental Investigations," in the current issue of *Religion Brain & Behavior*. The authors—Ian Hansen, PhD, at York College, CUNY; Valerie Jackson, PhD, at University of California-San Francisco; and Andrew Ryder, PhD, at Concordia University—examined data from two previously-conducted cross-national surveys, one of ten [countries](#) (10,068 participants) and one of 52 countries (73,303 participants). The authors also conducted an experimental study with a student sample from a diverse urban public college in New York, one with a relatively religious population.

Results from the two cross-national surveys at first appeared to confirm the common Western view that religion and [oppression](#) go together. Countries that the organization Freedom House ranked lower in civil liberties and political rights were somewhat likely to have a more religious population—with the average person expressing stronger belief in God, and reporting more frequent prayer and religious attendance. Countries that more people had fled from as refugees—another measure of oppression—were also somewhat likely to be more religious in this way. However, the religion-oppression relationship was curvilinear, not linear: countries with less religious populations were some of the least and most oppressed in the world.

More importantly, the authors found that being higher in a United Nations measure—"a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human [development](#): a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and have a decent standard of living"—went together both with having a less religious population and with being a freer country. This raised the possibility that upward mobility in human development caused both declining religiosity and increasing freedom, rather than freedom directly causing religious decline or vice versa. When the authors controlled for human development, they found that the relationship between religion and oppression flipped direction. Among any group of countries that scored similarly in human development, the more religious the people in those countries were, the less oppressed the countries were.

In the third, experimental, study, the authors gave some participants an opportunity to affirm their adherence to religiously devoted beliefs and practices (e.g., belief in God, belief in afterlife, attending religious services). This opportunity made participants less supportive of violating the rights of their enemies and militarizing their society than participants in control and alternative experimental conditions. So, just as more religious countries seemed less likely to suffer oppression (when controlling for human development), arousing devotional religious thoughts in an individual seemed to reduce support for oppression also.

The Specific Case of Muslim-Majority Countries

In the 52-country sample, the authors did an additional analysis, dividing up the countries by religious plurality/majority to see how relationships differed by religious groups. They divided the full sample up into countries with a Catholic plurality, a Muslim plurality, a religiously unaffiliated plurality, and so on—six groupings total. In each of the four groupings that were not plurality Catholic or Protestant, the authors again found that the more religious the country was, the less oppressed it

was. This finding notably included Muslim countries—meaning that the more religious a Muslim-plurality country was, the less oppressed it was. These four "religion-goes-with-freedom" relationships held whether controlling for [human development](#) or not.

Development-adjusted rankings of religion-grouped countries also suggested that Muslim countries were not particularly oppressive. Muslim-plurality countries were ranked towards the middle—not the top—of the six religious groupings on the two development-adjusted oppression measures.

More information: Ian G. Hansen et al. Religion and oppression: cross-national and experimental investigations, *Religion, Brain & Behavior* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/2153599X.2017.1358208](https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2017.1358208)

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