# Violence-legitimizing verses in religious texts increase support for lethal violence

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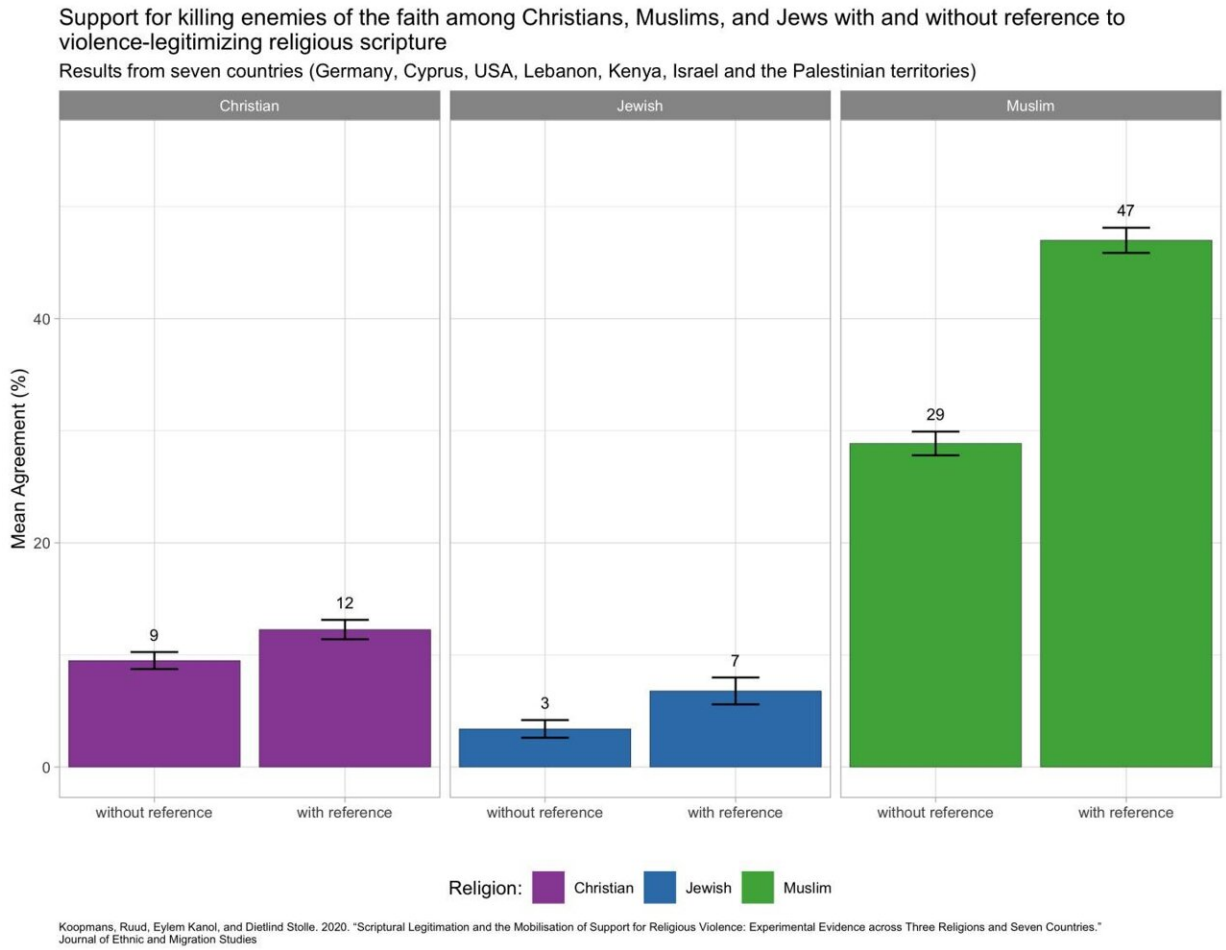


The graph shows results for seven countries: Germany, the United States, Cyprus, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian territories, and Kenya. Credit: WZB

Extremist perpetrators of violence often quote verses from their religion's holy scriptures that authorize, or even prescribe, attacks on enemies of the faith. Abdullah H., the Syrian now on trial for stabbing a homosexual couple with a knife and killing a man in Dresden in October 2020, also testified that he had been inspired to commit the crime by a Quranic sura. However, whether the religious motivation that extremist perpetrators of violence emphasize is causally related to their actions is often doubted. Now, WZB researchers Ruud Koopmans and Eylem Kanol can prove for the first time that verses in religious scriptures that legitimize violence can increase support for killing enemies of the faith.

Together with Dietlind Stolle, a German-Canadian political scientist, they designed an experimental study in which they asked 8,000 Christians, Muslims, and Jews in seven countries (Germany, the United States, Cyprus, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian territories, and Kenya) whether or not they thought lethal violence against enemies of the faith was justified. Half of the respondents were asked the question without any introduction, while the other half were first presented with a quote from the Bible, Koran, or Torah that endorsed violence against alleged enemies of the faith.

The results show that reference to scriptural passages legitimizing violence significantly increased support for lethal violence in all three religions and in all seven countries (see graph). However, this effect was weaker among Jews and Christians than among Muslims. Across all seven countries, 9% of Christian believers supported violence without receiving a scriptural quote beforehand, against 12% among those who were given such a quote. Among Jewish believers, the figures were 3 and 7%, respectively. Among Muslims, 29% supported violence against enemies of the faith without and 47% with prior reference to a Quranic quote. In Germany, however, these figures were considerably lower: among German Christians, support for violence was 2 without and 3% with a biblical quotation; among German Muslims, 5 without and 16%

with a Koran quotation (see graph).

The most important reason for the differences between the three religions, the researchers show, is the larger proportion of Muslim believers who adhere to a fundamentalist interpretation of their faith. Fundamentalist believers are characterized by the fact that they take the holy scriptures of their religion literally and consider them to be unambiguously valid in the present. Therefore, they are comparatively more susceptible to attempts to legitimize violence by referring to religious scriptural sources.

The findings have significance for countering religious extremism. "Religious causes and motivations must be taken seriously. Violence should not be reduced to socio-economic and psychological causes alone," says Ruud Koopmans, director at the WZB. The task of religious leaders and associations, he says, must be to actively counter fundamentalist interpretations of faith and to promote interpretations that take the historical and social context into consideration.

**More information:** Ruud Koopmans et al, Scriptural legitimation and the mobilization of support for religious violence: experimental evidence across three religions and seven countries, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2020). DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2020.1822158

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