# Praying for both teams: How religion both facilitates and dampens anti-immigration sentiment

The majority of the populations of many countries, the US included, identify with some kind of religion. At the same time, anti-immigrant sentiments are on the rise in many countries. Does religion foster intolerance towards migrants or encourage greater acceptance of them? In new research which uses experiments conducted with a variety of religious groups, **Pazit Ben-Nun Bloom**, **Gizem Arikan**, *and* **Marie Courtemanche** *find that when religious group identities are emphasized people become less tolerant of migrants, but when themes of religious compassion are brought to mind, they are more likely to be sympathetic. They caution, however, that such attempts at invoking compassion may be unlikely to convince the more conservative among the devout.*
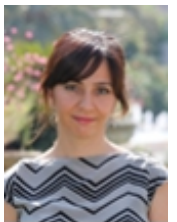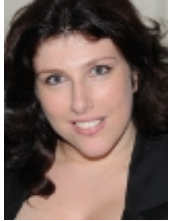
Scholars have long studied the effects of religion on tolerance, often coming to divergent conclusions: some find that it facilitates animosity, while others show that it fosters benevolence. These conflicting expectations, already indicated in Gordon Allport's 1954 observation that religion both makes and unmakes prejudice, are reflected in discussions and treatments of immigrants across the globe. On the one hand, social hostilities involving religion and conflicts involving immigrants have been on the rise all over the world, including in the United States. On the other hand, religious leaders have engaged in various forms of activism aimed at helping immigrants. Catholic religious leaders in the United States, for example, have been pressing for immigration reform, and other bishops and priests pressuring Congress for more liberal immigration policies. This begs the question: how can religion be both pro- and anti-immigration?

Our recent research takes on this question, asking whether religiosity fosters intolerance and support for restrictive immigration policies or whether it bolsters goodwill towards and greater social acceptance of immigrants. Findings from our experiments conducted among American Catholics, Turkish Muslims, and Israeli Jews unravel the complex relationship between the psychological factors underlying religiosity as well as among contextual elements—particularly the immigrants' ethnic and religious similarity to, or difference from, members of the host society. We find that it is the activation of certain elements in the religious experience that matters in making or unmaking intolerance towards immigrants, suggesting that religious and political leaders could play a crucial role in shaping the immigration debate.

Research in the psychology of religion suggests that individual religiosity cannot be reduced to a simple question of whether a person believes in a certain doctrine or prays—it is a rich social and personal experience involving multiple dimensions. Religiosity is not just a personal belief system and a set of values. It is also a source of social identity that allows people to derive a sense of self from being a member of a religious group or tradition. We show that these elements of the religious experience—religious beliefs and religious social identity—exert different and even contrasting effects on immigration attitudes, and that these effects depend on the types of immigrants being considered, especially whether they are perceived to be similar or different from host society members.

Even though religious identity provides people with greater self-worth and security, it may also make them more protective of their group's culture and values. This results from individuals striving to maintain a positive group identity that will boost their self-esteem by positively differentiating their group from others. Members of other groups may be seen as threatening to the extent that they appear to hurt the group's positive image and cohesion, which may bring about prejudiced reactions to them. Accordingly, we find that when religious group identities are emphasized, people generally become less tolerant towards immigrants and less supportive of liberal immigration policies. We find this to be the case only when immigrants are perceived to be dissimilar, however. Stressing social identity when migrants are similar to the host society does not lead to intolerance, but it does not foster more

accepting attitudes, either.

In contrast, religious beliefs are often associated with benevolence, compassion, and caring. Religious texts and leaders emphasize the responsibilities of the devout towards their fellow human beings, and all major religious doctrines espouse some version of the Golden Rule—treating others with respect, empathy and humility. Thus, when religious compassion is brought to mind, people are more likely to find immigrants socially acceptable and show more support for pro-immigration policies. Here as well, the type of immigrant matters. Immigrants have to be similar to host society members for compassion to arise—otherwise, religious compassion does not lead to positive attitudes towards migrant groups.

But there is a catch. The results show that attempts at invoking compassion may not be enough to convince the more conservative among the devout. This is most likely because conservatives tend to view social inequalities as legitimate. Liberals, who tend to exhibit a stronger tendency towards humanitarian and universalistic values, are more affected by appeals to religious compassion in showing more accepting attitudes towards immigrants, overall demonstrating that messages of compassion can only go so far.

These findings suggest that political and religious leadership has the capacity to profoundly influence the way the public thinks about immigration. While emphasizing religious identities may undermine the social acceptance of immigrants, stressing compassion and religious obligations to help the needy may help increase the social acceptance of immigrants. Relaying messages about solidarity, altruism, and charity by themselves is not enough, however. Leadership must also find a way to emphasize that immigrant communities are not so different from host society members, in race, religion, values, or otherwise, as people do not treat all immigrants in the same manner. In addition, our findings imply that attempts at invoking compassion may not be enough to convince more conservative believers, which may explain why, for example, despite religious leaders' backing for immigration reform in the United States, broad-based support among the ranks of the devout has not yet emerged.

This article is based on the paper 'Religious Social Identity, Religious Belief, and Anti-Immigration Sentiment' , in American Political Science Review.

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