Factors influencing tolerance to new religious movements

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Religious minorities are often perceived as a controversial phenomenon and a social problem. Some of their activities are seen as problematic, as in the case of two movements which are the object of this study: Jehovah's Witnesses and Scientologists, the former often involved in court cases related to their attitude to blood transfusion, the latter charging high fees for their courses promising extraordinary results in optimizing psychological functioning (Scientologists). Very often, this leads to negative stereotyping, prejudice and discriminatory attitudes, of a kind which may be frequently observed in the history of religion. Theoretical interpretations of this occurrence, which is a specific form of the more widespread phenomenon of prejudice, stress various psychological and social factors: from general cognitive and emotional mechanisms in its formation (frustration-aggression, social identification, ultimate attribution error, illusory correlation, cognitive availability) to more specific mechanisms regulating their transmission and activation in a particular sociocultural and psychological context (pressures of conformity, social conflicts, personality traits). These factors may also interact in various ways in emergence and activation of prejudice and discrimination.

Some of these factors, especially those with processual and situational elements, are most often studied experimentally: ultimate attribution error manifesting itself in interpreting negative actions of 'outgroup' members as the consequence of their dispositions and positive actions as the consequence of the situation; illusory correlation appearing in overvaluation of correlation with extreme phenomena; the effect of cognitive availability emerging in the overvaluation of exceptional rather than ordinary factors in the interpretation of a given phenomenon; and social identification, which involves subordination of information processing about other groups to tendencies maintaining the positive image of one's own social identity (Tajfel 1981).

Among correlational studies of prejudice and discriminatory attitudes, the most common are those which look for features related to these phenomena, such as personality traits, especially authoritarianism, dogmatism and moral development prejudice. Authoritarianism or authoritarian-conservatism is a personality trait conceptualized originally by Adorno et al. (1950) in psychoanalytical terms. The concept is meant to capture uncritical submission to authority, strict adherence to conventional norms, and ethnocentrism.

Milton Rokeach (1954;1960) has modified the theory of authoritarianism by introducing the concept of dogmatism or closed-mindedness, for which general cognitive factors were more central, although these were treated as a reaction to anxiety. The new cognitive approach was intended to be more 'culture free' and independent of ideological content, stressing less the content of beliefs and more the general
style or manner in which these beliefs are held, according to three basic dimensions: belief-disbelief, central-peripheral and the time perspective. Dogmatism in his view is related to: 1) relatively closed cognitive organizations of beliefs and disbeliefs about reality, 2) organized around a central set of beliefs about absolute authority, 3) which provides a framework for intolerance toward others (Rokeach 1954:195).

Lee A. Kirkpatrick, Ralph W. Hood, Jr., And Gary Hartz (1991) interpret fundamentalism in terms of Rokeach’s theory, stressing mainly the central-peripheral dimensions of the belief system. ‘Given the attributes of centralized or dogmatic belief systems as articulated in Rokeach’s theory, it is not difficult to see some conceptual overlaps with religious fundamentalism. Indeed, fundamentalist religion seems to be essentially prototypical of the centralized belief system as conceptualized here. Theologically, fundamentalists tend to oppose “modernist” interpretation of scripture in favor of some variety of literalism, inerrancy, infallibility or authoritativeness of scripture. From a purely psychological perspective, using Rokeach’s theory, such a belief system entails a strong commitment to authoritative sources and, as such, is “centralized.” The “authority beliefs” around which the centralized system is organized represent belief in the ultimate authoritativeness of Scripture, and the peripheral beliefs concern specific tenets of the belief system that “emanate from” (Rokeach’s term) or derive from this belief’ (Kirkpatrick et al. 1991:170).

Fundamentalism has been shown to correlate with right-wing authoritarianism (Altemeyer 1988; Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1992), intolerance, prejudice and discriminatory attitudes (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1992; Hunsberger 1995, 1996). In the case of controversial religious groups, fundamentalism is also a significant predictor of discriminatory attitudes, although weaker than education (O’Donnell 1993).

Cognitive aspects are also stressed in the theory of moral development formulated by Lawrence Kohlberg (1984). According to this author, higher levels of moral development are related to evaluation of moral conflicts, not from the conventional and particularistic perspective of one’s own social group, but from the ability to imagine which ethical principles make social life possible and to evaluate them from a more universalistic perspective. Moral development could be also seen as a necessary condition for the communicative competence leading to a rational political discourse (Habermas 1976, 1984), empirically confirmed by van Ijzendoorn (1989) in relation to antidemocratic attitudes toward minority groups. Therefore we could expect its influence also in the case of discriminatory attitudes toward controversial religious groups.

The strength of state regulation of religion is an important factor influencing religious activity according to the market model of religion (Chaves and Cann 1992). A lower level of regulation is conducive to a higher level of religious vitality by stimulating greater mobilization similar to its influence in the economy. It may also be conducive to seeing other religious groups as a positive challenge to one’s own religious identity, instead of seeing them as possible objects for elimination by the regulatory function of the state.

On the basis of social categorization, authoritarianism and dogmatism theory, we could predict that when religion is the main factor contributing to differentiation