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Contrasting Effects of Church Involvement on the Dimensions of Ethnocentrism: An Empirical Study among Flemish Catholics

La relation entre appartenance religieuse et ethnocentrisme est complexe. Une première exploration des données d'une enquête (automne 1989) portant sur les attitudes des Flamands (Belgique) vis-à-vis des immigrés, ne permet pas d'exclure un effet négatif de l'appartenance religieuse. Celui-ci est d'autant plus probable que l'on a affaire à des personnes de plus de 45 ans, développant un sentiment d'impuissance sociale et s'avérant être des catholiques marginaux. Il en va de même des non-catholiques de faible niveau scolaire. Le présent papier se propose, à partir d'une perspective plus théorique, de limiter l'analyse de cette relation à la population catholique. Les données recueillies début 1991 montrent que la foi chrétienne ne donne pas une explication additionnelle. Des variables intermédiaires comme l'impuissance sociale et la localisation culturelle et sociale, l'appartenance religieuse et l'affiliation aux associations volontaires ont un effet modéré sur les différentes dimensions de l'ethnocentrisme. Il semble dès lors que cette influence puisse être attribuée aux valeurs humanistes du "Christianisme socio-culturel".

Introduction

According to Dutch scholars the relationship between church involvement and ethnocentrism is a complex one for it touches on religious and ethical traits of church involvement as well as on a variety of social aspects such as communal involvement, social interaction, social control, and cultural conservatism (Eisinga et al., 1988).

Using data from a random sample of 824 Flemings who were interviewed at the end of 1989,[1] we observed a curvilinear relation between church involvement and a negative attitude (in the sense of feelings of being threatened) towards foreigners (Billiet and Carton, 1991, 1992). Those with a pronounced negative attitude are most likely to be found among marginal Catholics (i.e. Catholic in name only) (37%) and least likely to be found among regular church-goers (core members) (16%). Non-Catholics and irregular church-goers (participating on Christian holy days) fall in the middle (about 23%) The non-Catholics are a heterogeneous group since their negative feelings are concentrated in the subgroups of those who have no philosophy of life, the negative attitudes being the least likely among non-Catholic believers with a mostly Christian religious conviction (such as Protestants and members of new religious movements).

This relationship is maintained when other factors like educational level, age, and feelings of powerlessness (Srole, 1956), which have a strong effect on the negative attitude towards immigrants (Billiet et al. 1990, 1991), are taken into account. The likelihood of having a strongly negative attitude increases sharply when the person feels powerless (anomie), is more than 45 years old, or is a marginal Catholic. Among the non-Catholics, those who are less educated, over 45 years old, and with strong anomie, the likelihood of a negative attitude is also significantly higher.

Thus, we may conclude that the relationship between church involvement and ethnocentrism is not spurious but real. However, one may well ask if there are other factors that are related to both church involvement and ethnocentrism and which can eliminate the effect of church involvement. In order to answer this question, we shall first consider the relationship from the point of view of a broader theoretical framework. Next, we shall test this explanatory model using additional panel data of 444 respondents polled in January 1991.[2]

Theoretical Framework: Identification and Contra-identification

In the introduction above, only one dimension of ethnocentrism is taken into consideration. Sumner (1906), Adorno et al. (1950) and others have already pointed out that a negative attitude to outgroups is often accompanied by a positive attitude towards the ingroup. This combination is expressed by the concept of ethnocentrism.

In a review of the classic discussion of sociological versus psychological explanations of ethnocentrism, Scheepers et al. (1992) contend that a person's social environment can lead to anomie and that these feelings lead, via authoritarianism, to ethnocentrism. People who feel powerless, uncertain about the future, and socially isolated have a strong need for social identification, which can be satisfied both via identification with the ingroup and via contra-identification (i.e. setting oneself in opposition to foreigners). Social identification arises as a selective perception of predominantly positive characteristics of the ingroup, while contra-identification is concerned with the selective perception of negative characteristics of outgroups (Tajfel, 1981, 1982a, 1982b). The relationship between authoritarianism and these two aspects of ethnocentrism can be explained by the process of social identification and contra-identification since foreigners are considered to be a threat to conventional values and norms (Eisinga and Scheepers, 1989). Indeed, following the school of Adorno, we can distinguish three important aspects of authoritarianism: first, a strict adherence to conventional values and norms (conventionalism); second, an authoritarian submission to, and an uncritical attitude towards, moral authorities; and, finally, the tendency to condemn or punish people who violate conventional values and norms (authoritarian aggression). Authoritarian thinking thus constitutes part of a broader cluster of culturally conservative notions (Fromm, 1983; Middendorp, 1979; Meloen and Middendorp, 1985; Billiet and De Witte, 1991).

Important factors that are related to a person's social environment are social status (professional situation, level of prosperity) and educational level. In addition, psychological factors such as status anxiety (fear of losing status) and socio-economic frustration (loss of income) can give rise to feelings of anomie, and this, in turn, would favour adherence to authoritarian ideas and ethnocentrism. Because of the more favourable economic conditions associated with higher education, the more educated people are, the less likely they are to experience feelings of anomie. Moreover, education expands the cultural horizon and counters the reification that is associated with authoritarian thinking (Eisinga and Scheepers, 1989).

Religious affiliation is another factor that is associated with a person's social environment. Scheepers et al., following Adorno, state that "religion might also be one of the phenomena that explain authoritarianism because it implies submission to superhuman authorities which in turn might be generalized to submission to human authorities" (1990: 18). In this sense, two aspects of religion (traditional Christian belief and possibly church involvement) might be associated with ethnocentrism via authoritarianism.

In addition to the use of the concept of authoritarianism to explain the relationship between religious affiliation (church involvement) and ethnocentrism, reference is also made to the influence of localism (Roof, 1978) and conformist ideas. Church-goers are, in general, more strongly oriented to their local community and therefore more prone to conform to traditional values and norms. From this localistic orientation, one could easily become intolerant towards foreigners. Indeed, a localistic orientation would seem to favour the development of intolerant and authoritarian attitudes (Felling et al., 1986). Participation in church activities is also related to participation in social life. In Flanders, we know that church activity is associated with increased involvement in voluntary associations, through which social isolation is broken down. Consequently, one may expect a direct negative effect on anomie and an indirect negative effect on ethnocentrism.

Testing Against Empirical Data

The model

With this brief theoretical review in mind, we can now turn back to the empirical data assembled at the beginning of 1991. We focus here primarily on the relationship between church involvement and ethnocentrism.

According to our measurement models, four dimensions of ethnocentrism can be empirically distinguished.[3] The first scale is concerned with negatively biased stereotypes about Moroccans, Turks and Jews (OUTGROUP). Then, from the earlier scale of negative attitude towards foreigners (see p. 97), those items that express "feeling threatened" (THREAT) are abstracted. In addition to these two scales, which are related to contra-identification, there are two scales related to identification with the respondent's own people and race. The INGROUP scale indicates a positive orientation toward one's own people, and the items of the fourth scale (SUPRACE) are associated with feelings of the superiority of one's own race over other races.

TABLE 1

Predictors of the four dimensions of ethnocentrism in the Flemish population aged 18–74 (excluding Humanists, unbelievers, and non-Christian religions). Standardized regression coefficients estimated with LISREL VII*

	Total direct and indirect** effects on:							
	ANOMIE	AUTHORIT	SOCLOC	CULTLOC	THREAT	OUTGROUP	INGROUP	SUPRACE
AGE	—	.28	—	—	.06	(−.04)	.27	.21
EDUCATION	−.44	—	−.29	−.46	−.21	−.21	−.16	−.19
WORKSIT	−.19	−.05	—	—	−.08	−.06	(−.02)	−.06
WELFARE	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	−.10
NEIGHBOR	.09	.05	—	.12	(.04)	(.04)	(.03)	(.04)
CHURCH	−.12	(.01)	.14	.16	(−.04)	(−.01)	(.04)	(−.03)
MEMBER	−.16	−.11	—	—	−.09	−.07	−.05	−.09
ANOMIE	—	.29	—	*	.42	.30	.08	.33
AUTHORIT	—	—	—	—	.19	.21	.28	.33
SOCLOC	—	.09	—	*	(−.02)	(−.02)	.15	−.03
CULTLOC	*	.21	*	—	(.04)	.16	.17	−.07
R^2	.33	.38	.09	.21	.24	.18	.25	.35

$x^2 = 46.98$; df $= 47$; $p = 0.473$; $N = 360$

* Correlations between the unexplained variances. All remaining empty cells are fixed at zero. The error terms of the four dimensions of ethnocentrism are intercorrelated.

** The direct effects are all significant $(p < .05)$. The non-significant $(p > .05)$ indirect effects are between parentheses.

From the theory described above, many factors can be derived that have to be included in the model in a specific causal order. First, it is assumed that the stable social characteristics which are linked to the social environment have an effect on the attitudes, rather than vice versa: all these characteristics are treated as exogenous variables in the model. In other words, we shall not comment on factors that influence these variables or on possible mutual interrelations. The factors used to measure social environment are education (EDUCATION),[4] the degree of prosperity (WELFARE, income classes),[5] the degree of uncertainty or dissatisfaction regarding one's job situation (WORKSIT),[6] age (AGE), the presence of immigrants in the neighbourhood (NEIGHBOR), being a member of voluntary associations (MEMBER), and church involvement (CHURCH). We have already mentioned that church involvement is not related linearly with a negative attitude towards immigrants. As regards negative attitudes, the non-Catholics and Humanists resemble most the regular and irregular church-goers, and they differ most from the marginal Catholics and the people without religion. Consequently, it seems to be justifiable to confine our analysis to the Catholic part of the population. The scale CHURCH ranges from second-generation non-church-goers (Score 1) to core members (Score 5).

Among the attitude variables, we distinguish five different attitudes. The anomie scale (ANOMIE) reflects feelings of uncertainty, distrust and isolation. The authoritarian attitude (AUTHORIT) is measured according to statements about acceptance of authority, conformist ideas and authoritarian repression. As regards the orientation to the local community, we distinguish, as Lehman (1986) and Eisinga et al. (1991b) do, between cultural and social localism. The first scale (CULTLOC) represents the value that individuals attach to local community life in general. The attachments to a geographically bounded social locale (social localism) is measured by SOCLOC. The Christian faith orientation (BELIEF) is operationalized by means of statements that place all the meaning of life and death in the hands of God.

Before this model could be tested with LISREL VII (Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1989), another decision was necessary regarding the direction of influence of the intervening attitude variables. On the basis of the theoretical background sketched above, we have made the assumption that anomie and cultural and social localism affect authoritarianism.

Findings

Table 1 presents the standardized regression coefficients and the total effects. The explanation for the four components has varying degrees of success. The best explanation is found for a feeling of superiority of one's own race over other races, then for a positive orientation to the ingroup and for the feeling of being threatened. The dimension of negative images is not very well explained.

In the context of this paper, our attention is focused primarily on the effects of church involvement and traditional Christian belief on ethnocentrism. Membership of voluntary organizations also needs special attention

since it measures to a certain extent the communal or associational dimension of religion (Billiet, 1975; Lenski, 1963). Indeed, about 73 percent of the regular church-goers and 45 percent of the irregular church-goers are in voluntary associations that belong to the Catholic pillar. To what degree do these factors still have an effect on each of the four dimensions of ethnocentrism after controlling for all other relevant variables that we have measured?

The factor Christian belief (BELIEF) needs no further consideration. In the initial steps of model testing, we were able to omit this factor from the model since it had neither a direct nor an indirect effect on the dimensions of ethnocentrism. This finding is contrary to our expectation, since it was assumed that Christian belief and submission to a divine authority would increase susceptibility to authoritarian ideas such as respect for authorities in general and respect for law and order. A possible explanation for this finding is that our analysis is restricted to Catholics.

In line with our expectations, authoritarianism (AUTHORIT) has a substantial impact on each dimension of ethnocentrism. The strongest impact is on the two aspects of social identification (INGROUP and SUPRACE). However, anomie has no direct effect on positive feelings towards the ingroup, but it does have strong direct and total effects on the two aspects of contra-identification (THREAT and OUTGROUP) and on racist views (SUPRACE).

The other two attitudes have a direct impact only on the positive attitude towards the ingroup. Both social localism (SOCLOC) and, particularly, cultural localism (CULTLOC) have a positive effect on authoritarianism. Through this path, social localism seems to have an impact on negative stereotypes about immigrants (OUTGROUP). In general, direct and indirect effects of the social environment variables are in tune with our expectations. The degree of education (EDUCAT) has a moderate-to-strong negative impact on each of the intermediate attitudes. For that reason, education turns out to be the most important factor in reducing all four dimensions of ethnocentrism. The older people (AGE) are, the more likely they are to support authoritarian ideas and, consequently, to score higher on the two aspects of social identification (INGROUP and SUPRACE).

The rather weak indirect impact from a defective work situation (WORK-SIT) on three of the dimensions of ethnocentrism can be ascribed almost totally to the impact of bad experiences with the work situation giving rise to anomie. WELFARE has only a weak negative effect on racism.

In general, a positive attitude towards the ingroup is not affected by a defective socio-economic situation, but depends mainly on cultural conservatism, here measured by an authoritarian attitude and the two aspects of localism. The negative attitude towards outgroups, the feeling of being threatened, and racism apparently emerge in varying degrees of intensity via socio-economic determinants.

What about church involvement and membership of voluntary associations? At first glance, church involvement (CHURCH) has no significant effect among Catholics on the dimensions of ethnocentrism. This finding is contrary to the results mentioned in the first part of the paper. To a certain

extent, the negligible effect of church involvement may be attributed to complex influences cancelling each other out. On the one hand, church involvement may have a negative impact on ethnocentrism via anomie. Catholics who are more involved in the Church are less likely to feel powerless. Consequently, they are less likely to feel threatened by immigrants or to support negative stereotypes or racist ideas. On the other hand, those who are more involved in the Church are also more oriented to the local community. Social and cultural localism has, in its turn, a positive effect on an affirmative attitude towards the ingroup, and cultural localism also leads (via authoritarianism) to a negative stereotyping of foreigners.

This apparently contradictory effect might explain a weak effect of church involvement on the dimensions of ethnocentrism but not the absence of any effect. The real reason is that the factor, membership of voluntary associations (MEMBER), which is related to church involvement, draws to itself nearly all the variance in ethnocentrism that church involvement might explain. In small samples, the estimation of the effect-parameters in structural-equation modelling is very sensitive to small changes in the data matrix. This is because, in the case of closely related variables (such as membership and church involvement) that have the same pattern of effects on the variables that are to be explained, a particular effect can easily shift from one variable to another. There are two reasons to support this hypothesis.

First, in a model in which the membership variable is excluded, all the effect-parameters stay unchanged except for the parameters of church involvement. The negative effect of church involvement on anomie increases from $-.12$ to $-.17$, and the weak negative total effects of membership on the feeling of threat and on racism are taken over by church involvement ($-.08$ and $-.07$).

Secondly, in a much larger study conducted after the 1991 general elections, we found that, among the Catholics ($N = 1650$), church involvement had a substantial effect ($-.11$) on a negative attitude towards outgroups (closely related to the THREAT variable) while, in that sample, membership of voluntary organizations had virtually no effect ($-.02$) (Billiet, 1993).

Apart from these arguments about sample size and estimations, it does not matter that much whether the negative effects on anomie and on some aspects of ethnocentrism are assigned to church involvement, to membership of voluntary organizations, or to both. Indeed, for the more involved Catholics, the variable "membership" means in fact participation in Christian socio-cultural associations that belong to the Catholic pillar. Therefore, we may conclude that participation in the activities of the Church and/or in the socio-cultural programmes of Catholic pillar organizations has a moderating net effect on different aspects of ethnocentrism. That traditional Christian belief has no effect at all leads us to the conclusion that the moderation effects came not from the religious belief-system but from other aspects of church involvement and, most of all, from the social integrating quality of participating in collective activities and in associations. The social integration counters the feeling of powerlessness (anomie). Furthermore, there is socialization into the humanistic values of socio-cultural Christianity

(solidarity and justice) that have been transmitted by the Catholic education system, the socio-cultural associations, and weekly sermons in church (Billiet and Dobbelaere, 1985).

Conclusion

In our initial exploration of the relationship between church involvement and a negative attitude towards immigrants, we found that church involvement still had a net effect when factors such as educational level, age, and feelings of powerlessness were taken into account. In the second part of the analysis, we limited ourselves to the Catholic population and we considered this same relationship from the perspective of a broader theoretical framework. In addition, four different dimensions of ethnocentrism were distinguished. We observed that Christian belief per se has no additional explanatory power. Church involvement and membership of voluntary associations have a moderating effect on ethnocentrism via intervening attitude variables such as anomie and cultural and social localism.

Eisinga et al. (1990a, 1990b, 1991a) propose a number of explanations that could account for these results. The first explanation is concerned with the influence of preaching which calls for tolerance on the basis of Christian principles. Another explanation is related to the multiple meanings that religion can have for different groups of Catholics. According to them, it might be that marginal and modal church members have a tendency to affirm and see themselves committed to an authoritarian religion as well as to the national ingroup. The religious themes of justice, equality, and social comparison are probably peripheral to their lives and behaviours. Core church members, on the contrary, are less inclined to submit themselves to external authorities. They are more concerned with the social and humanistic aspects of their religion (Eisinga et al., 1990a). Previously, in a 1974 study, we had proposed an analogous explanation for the finding that core members hold more "modern" conceptions of the faith than do marginal Catholics (Billiet, 1977). We accept the interpretation that the moderating effect of church involvement and membership of voluntary associations can be ascribed to the humanistic values of "socio-cultural Christianity" (see Billiet and Dobbelaere, 1985). Moreover, the anomie-preserving effect of social integration into the community is held responsible for this moderating effect. Finally, we know from the data collected after the 1991 general elections that the effect of church (and pillar) involvement is more than attitudinal. Core church members are less likely to vote for a right-wing party that is in favour of the expulsion of immigrants.

NOTES

1. A two-stage cluster sample with equal probabilities of selection of the elementary sampling units. The elementary units were drawn from the official registers of the European elections in June 1989. The respondents were interviewed at home by

specially trained interviewers of the interviewer network of the Institute for Sociological Research (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven). Apart from the general Flanders sample (664 units), two specific samples were drawn from two communities with large concentrations of immigrants. Both communities differ strongly in degree of tensions between immigrants and native people (140 units from Genk and 130 units from Borgerhout). About 70 Flemings were in the Brussels sample. The sample used here (832 units) is a weighted combination of the four samples mentioned. That sample is a good representation of the Flemish population (in the Flemish region and in Brussels).

2. Mail questionnaires were sent to the 600 respondents (of the general Flemish sample) who had said they would cooperate in a subsequent interview.

3. More detailed information about the reliability and validity of the scales and about all the items can be obtained from the authors.

4. Four classes: from low to high.

5. Five classes: from low to high with account taken of family composition.

6. This is a dichotomous variable related to both objective and subjective deprivation. In the one category are those who have a paid job and are more or less satisfied and those who are compelled to have a paid job (housewives, retired people) without further indications of dissatisfaction. In the other are those who are necessarily without work (unemployed, disabled) or who are clearly dissatisfied or uncertain about their work situation.

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