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## The Relationship Between Religious Knowledge and Dogmatism in College Students

*The relationship between general knowledge of world religions and dogmatism was investigated in a group of college students in Tennessee. Knowledge of world religions was assessed with a written survey and the scores were compared to scores on the Rokeach Dogmatism Scale. Dogmatism is a reluctance to accept new ideas outside of one's own belief or disbeliefs. The results supported the hypothesis that individuals with high levels of dogmatism would also have low levels of knowledge about religious traditions other than their own. Additional analysis indicated that people who identify themselves as more spiritual than religious had lower dogmatism scores and higher religious knowledge scores than those identifying themselves as more religious than spiritual. In addition, self-described conservative individuals were more open-minded than self-described liberals. In addition, individuals with high levels of dogmatism tended to be members of the same religious tradition as their parents. There appears to be a correlation between dogmatism and liberal or conservative beliefs.*

Dogmatism is a reluctance to accept new ideas outside of one's own beliefs or disbeliefs. Three basic characteristics of dogmatism are absolutism, conditional acceptance, and a high degree of differentiation between belief and disbelief systems. In Absolutism one's own belief are absolute and those deviating from it are wrong. Absolutism requires that ones belief system is unquestioning in acceptance of a single authority. Conditional acceptance is the rejection of others based upon the degree to which their beliefs appear to differ from one's own. Differentiation refers to the relative ratio (belief/disbelief=dogmatism) of knowledge about one's own belief system to knowledge about other disbelief systems (Rokeach 1960). The more

dogmatic an individual is, the higher the belief/disbelief ratio. Studies find that dogmatic individuals prefer an anti-democratic, intolerant, authoritarian philosophy, which can define their perceptions and segregate them from the world around them (Vacchiano, Strauss & Hochman, 1969).

The Dogmatism Scale designed by Milton Rokeach (1960) differentiates between open and closed-minded individuals based upon the process of belief rather than the content of belief. Previous to 1960, the most widely used scale to measure authoritarianism was the California F-scale. Those who had higher scores typically would score higher on ethnocentrism scales and a variety of other scales that measure prejudice.

Research on authoritarianism typically found it to be a phenomenon primarily of the political right only (Rokeach 1960).

Altemeyer (1981, 1988) has done considerable work reconceptualizing authoritarianism and working with a more psychometrically sophisticated version of authoritarian measures. Authoritarianism is the adherence to authority. In addition there are three defining criteria of authoritarianism that can be reliably measured. They are authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression and conventionalism. Authoritarian submission is compliance to the ruling authority. Authoritarian aggression is aggression directed against those who do not submit to authority. Conventionalism is compliance with traditional values. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992) noted that there appeared to be an association between right-wing authoritarianism and fundamentalism. According to Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992), a stereotypical fundamentalist has the same traits as an authoritarian. Fundamentalists are aggressive toward those who do not adhere to their own traditional beliefs.

The stereotypical fundamentalist is also conventional in the sense of compliance and whose characteristics seem to match those of authoritarian. However, this does not mean that all fundamentalists are authoritarian. Altemeyer and Hunsberger's research seems to suggest that authoritarianism is a more determining factor for prejudice rather than fundamentalism. Thus, some fundamentalists are not authoritarian. Altemeyer and Hunsberger note that fundamentalism could be a religious form of right-wing authoritarianism (Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 1996). Rokeach (1960) noted the failure of the authoritarianism scales to measure general authoritarianism—that is the authoritarianism of the left as well as the right. Politically conservative subjects would score high while liberal subjects would score low, no matter how dogmatic subjects, which tended to confuse the content of belief. An individual who considers him or herself politically liberal in his or her beliefs could still strike out against the institutional framework of society. Authoritarianism and intolerance in beliefs and interpersonal relationships are not strictly associated with fascists or with conservatives. Rokeach (1960) designed his unbiased to measure

dogmatism within the context of belief or disbelief structure. Thus, Rokeach focuses upon the process of belief and disbelief not upon its context. Theoretically this scale should allow dogmatism to appear across the religious and political spectrum. Conversely, it also should allow for non-dogmatic adherence to traditional religious and political philosophy. Religious prejudice can occur when a highly religious dogmatic individual's negative attitude and reaction is directed specifically toward other belief differentials (Rokeach, 1960).

Vacchiano, Strauss, and Hochman (1969) reviewed empirical studies that employed the Dogmatism scale. Of particular interest were studies that addressed issues in dogmatism's relationship to authoritarianism, group behavior, and parent-child association. Feather (1967, as cited in Vacchiano et al. 1969) found a relationship between membership in authoritarian religious groups and dogmatism. These religious groups were dependent on authority and did not tolerate any disagreement with their basic beliefs (Feather 1967, as cited in Vacchiano et al. 1969). Plant, Telford and Thomas (1965) compared high dogmatic (HD) groups and low dogmatic groups (LD) to different personality types. They found that many of the high dogmatic individuals were less psychologically mature than that of the low dogmatic group. The HD's were more impulsive and defensive. The LD's were more calm, mature and forceful in their beliefs. In addition, it appears those who were dogmatic typically were prejudicial towards other religions. (Plant et al 1965). Bolmeier (1966) examined dogmatism in relation to the Minnesota Counseling Inventory and compared it to the Rokeach Dogmatism Scale. He found a significant relationship between an individual's level of dogmatism and that of his or her parents. It appears that individuals express their dogmatic beliefs or disbeliefs to their offspring (Vacchiano 1969).

*"Intrinsic religiosity is related to dogmatism"* (Rokeach 1969). There is ample evidence that institutionalized religious prejudice is a factor in oppressive and sometimes violent intolerance against religious groups. The U.S. State Department indicates that religious intolerance is high around the world and that "much of the world's population lives in countries in which the right to religious freedom is restricted or prohibited" (U.S. State Department, 2000,

paragraph 4).

Western Allies such as Germany, France, Belgium, Czech Republic, and Austria have banned groups including the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Scientology from formally establishing institutions in their countries. China has banned new religious groups like Falun Gong and Chinese Christian Churches from meeting, claiming that they are cult groups with an agenda to destroy the government (Labot, 2000). Although these examples certainly have a political component, "ethnicity, or a perceived security threat, multi-causality does not diminish necessarily the significance of religion" (U.S. State Department, 2000, paragraph 5). One major contributor seems to be an individual's dogmatism within the majority belief system, regardless of the religious or secular nature of that belief system. Although this study looks at the sociological aspects of religious prejudice, dogmatic individuals in positions of power could fuel these attitudes.

Griffin, Gorsuch, and Davis (1987) conducted a study on the Caribbean island of Saint Croix to examine the relationship of dogmatism and prejudicial attitudes between Seventh Day Adventists and Rastafarians. The team expected to find a positive correlation between Seventh Day Adventists (who described themselves as very religious), Rastafarians and high levels of prejudice, even though both groups were culturally and racially similar. The study found that the Adventists were more likely to rate themselves as strongly religious and had a higher prejudice score. Both Adventists and Rastafarians rated Adventists as more prejudiced than the rest of the population of St Croix. In addition, the study indicated that individuals who participated in their religion because of deeply held beliefs were more likely to be prejudiced than were individuals who participated primarily because of cultural or societal reasons.

A more recent study by Jackson and Hunsburger (1999), found that college students who affiliate with a religious group are more likely to have favorable attitudes toward other believers than toward non-believers and atheists. This study also found that non-believers and atheists are more likely to have favorable attitudes toward those with similar views than toward individuals who affiliate with a religious group (Jackson and Hunsburger, 1999). In other words this study indicates a negative correlation between the

degree of self-described religiosity and favorable attitudes toward non-believers and atheists. The Jackson and Hunsburger study could confirm that self-reported dogmatic views have relationship to ones knowledge of other traditions.

A second study conducted by Jackson and Hunsburger (1999) examined the roles of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for religious participation in reported levels of unfavorable attitudes toward non-believers and atheists. Intrinsic motivation is the internalization of religious teachings and application of those teachings to daily decision-making. Extrinsic motivation is cultural influences, such as a cultural expectation of church attendance and participation. The results suggest a positive correlation between those who define themselves as intrinsically religious and group affiliated and unfavorable attitudes toward unbelievers and atheists. This study indicated a similar correlation in non-believer and atheist group attitudes toward religious individuals and found that dogmatic individuals typically associate with those who share the same belief or disbelief. This association may act as a reinforcement to the ideology of the dogmatic individual. But what defines religiosity and spirituality?

The spiritual versus religious debate among people has changed over history. Some individuals now define themselves as spiritual but not religious. The terms spiritual and religious are hard to define. Zinnbauer, Pargament & authors (1997) looked at the self-definitions of what persons identify as spiritual, religious, both, or neither. The study consisted of 346 subjects composed of 11 groups drawn from different religious groups and backgrounds. The subjects filled out different religiosity and mysticism scales and compared the subject's self-rated religiousness and spirituality. These self-rated groups were defined as spiritual not religious (S), religious not spiritual (R), Spiritual and religious (S+R) and neither spiritual nor religious (SnR). From the data, the two largest groups that emerged were spiritual not religious and spiritual and religious. Zinnbauer notes "*Descriptively, definitions of spirituality most often included references to connection or relationship with a higher power of some kind and integrating one's own beliefs into everyday life*" But both groups diverge within the context of organizational beliefs and institutional authority. Religious and

spiritual (S+R) appears to be associated with authoritarianism, parental church attendance, subject church attendance, and other factors. Spiritual not religious (S) is associated with mystical experience and higher income.

(S) Group seems to prefer to actively seek mystical experience within a personal context (Zinnbauer et al 1997).

This study shows that many belief perspectives influence our society and that our society is now laden with diverse spiritual and religious practice. This study gives a better understanding to the terms "spiritual" and "religious."

These and similar studies seem to leave unanswered the question of whether the tendency toward viewing different beliefs systems unfavorably might be related to a lack of knowledge about these belief systems. Intuitively, there seems to be a relationship, but empirical data is required to define the relationship between dogmatism within a religious group and the amount and depth of knowledge within the group about other belief systems.

This study proposes to examine possible relationships between open-mindedness toward different religious groups, knowledge about belief systems other than one's own, and levels of dogmatism within one's own belief systems.

The hypothesis is that individuals with greater knowledge of other religious traditions will have lower levels of dogmatism within their own belief system and less prejudicial views toward members of other religious groups.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The subjects for this study were a convenience sample of 101 (82.1%) students from a state university in Tennessee (SU) and 21 (16.3%) students from a Adventist university (AU). Within gender, 57 subjects (46.3%) were male and 66 subjects (53.7%) were female.

Of the students' reported religious associations, 91% associated themselves with some form of Christianity and 9% were of a non-Christian tradition. Racially, 101 (82.1%) of the participants were white, 10 (8.1%) African-American, six (4.9%) Asian, three (2.4%) Hispanic and two (1.6%) claimed not to fall into any of the above categories. Six subjects did not complete the survey and were removed from the subject

pool. All subjects did not receive notice on the average completion time or length of the three-part survey.

### *Materials*

Testing materials consisted of a demographic profiling section, a multiple-choice general religious knowledge test and the Rokeach Dogmatism Scale.

### *Design and Procedure*

Part 1 of the questionnaire consists of demographic information such as gender, ethnicity, education level, and social-economic background. Part 2 consists of a multiple-choice test designed to determine how knowledgeable the subject is about the beliefs and practices of various religions. The questions were created with the assistance of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Religion Department Faculty. Part 3 is the religious prejudice measure and consists of the Rokeach Dogmatism Scale (Rokeach 1960).

## RESULTS

Each of the 123 subjects completed the three-part questionnaire in one session. The data collection occurred in classes and the student center at SU and in classes at AU.

The total scores compiled from Part II were compared to the total score for Part III resulting in a reliability score of (Alpha = .7460) for Part II and a reliability score of (Alpha = .7335) for Part III.

Both Parts II and III tested within acceptable limits for validity. These scores are included in comparisons to SU scores for exploration purposes.

Please note that because of data coding glitch, the dogmatism scores were entered with inverse values, with the counter-intuitive result that higher scores indicate lower levels of dogmatism and vice versa.

**TABLE ONE**  
**Dogmatism Score and Religious Knowledge**

	SU	AU
<b>Dogmatism Score</b>		
Mean	78.36	91.4
Standard Deviation	21.36	20.07
T Test	T= -2.55	P < .012
<b>Religious Knowledge</b>		
Mean	23.94	25.85
Standard Deviation	6.70	6.60
T Test	T = -1.17	No Significance

As noted in Table 1, The Adventist university subjects produced a higher mean score X(91.4) on dogmatism with SD=20.07. AU subjects also produced a raw mean score of 25.85 in religious knowledge with SD=6.60, so out of the 45 total questions, AU had a mean score of 57% of the correct answers. On the dogmatism scale, SU had a mean score of 78.36 and SD=21.36 indicating that SU subjects tended to be more dogmatic than did subjects from AU. SU subjects also scored lower on the knowledge scale with a raw mean score of 23.94 and SD=6.7. (p < .012) SU students had a mean score of 51% in the knowledge scale. While both groups had at least a basic knowledge of world religions, there was not a significant difference in knowledge scores between subject

scores from the two schools. It appears that even though The Adventist university has a religious association, AU students are less dogmatic than the SU students. Correlations between the dogmatism scale and knowledge test are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 indicates that there is a significant correlation (.298) (P>.001) between knowledge of other religions and dogmatism. Higher scores in knowledge of other religions are negatively related to dogmatism scores.

By comparing these results to the scores for ten single questions in Part I, I sought to understand various factors influencing individual responses. Regrouping the subjects based on Question 12, a self-report on liberal or

**TABLE TWO**  
**Correlations**

		Overall Religious Knowledge	Overall Dogmatism Score (Inversely Scored)
Overall Religious Knowledge	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.298***
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	123	123
Overall Dogmatism Score	Pearson Correlation	.298***	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	123	123

conservative beliefs resulted in 61 liberal subjects and 60 conservative subjects.

The liberal subjects had a dogmatism mean score of 73.93 with a standard deviation SD=22.34 and a raw mean score of 23.28 (57% correct) on the religious knowledge with a SD=6.32. The conservative group had a dogmatism mean score of 87.48 with a SD=18.01 and a raw mean score

between religious knowledge and liberal/conservative self report.

Table 5 shows the correlation ( $P > .001$ ) between self-reported liberal or conservative beliefs and dogmatism scores. It appears dogmatism levels are strongly related to self-reports of conservative or liberal belief systems.

**TABLE THREE**

Question 12	Liberal	Conservative
Reported Number	61	60
Dogmatism		
Mean	73.93	87.48
Standard Deviation	22.34	18.01
T Test	t= -3.68	P<.001
Religious Knowledge		
Mean	23.28	25.28
Standard Deviation	6.32	6.9
T Test	t= -1.55	Not Significant

25.28 (56% correct) on the religious knowledge section with a SD=6.90. These results indicate that the conservative group is less dogmatic than the liberal group. According to the T-test, there is a significant relationship ( $P < .001$ ) between the dogmatism score and the liberal/conservative self-report. There is no significant relationship between religious knowledge and the liberal/conservative self report. Table 4 shows the lack of correlation

Table 6 shows comparisons between answers to several self-report questions and either dogmatism scores or religious knowledge scores. In table 6, the relationships are indicated between subjects' self-assessment of their knowledge of other religions. In addition, a significant correlation was found between the subject's dogmatism scores and the subjects

**TABLE FOUR**  
Correlations

		Would you consider yourself a liberal or a conservative in your belief system?	Overall Religious Knowledge
Would you consider yourself to be a liberal or a conservative in your belief system?	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.118
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.194
	N	122	122
Overall Religious Knowledge	Pearson	.118	1.00
	Sig, (2-tailed)	.194	
	N	122	123

**TABLE FIVE**  
Correlations

		Would you consider yourself a liberal or a conservative in your belief system?	Overall Religious Knowledge
Would you consider yourself to be a liberal or a conservative in your belief system?	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.270**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.003
	N	122	122
Overall Religious Knowledge (inversely scored)	Pearson	.270**	1.00
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	
	N	122	123

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

shared religious views with their parents. This confirms the Feather (1967, as cited in Vachiano et al. 1969) study that there is a relationship between dogmatism and parent-child relationship.

In Table 7, we divided both groups' self-report answers into four categories based on the Zinnbauer et al (1999) study: spiritual not religious (S), religious not spiritual (R), spiritual and religious (S&R), and neither spiritual nor religious (SnR). Each subject chose which category they felt best represented their views.

The results were compared to the subjects' responses to selected questions, revealing that

69%(22 of the 32) of the S group considered themselves liberal and 97% (31/32) of the S considered themselves open-minded. Within the S group, 72% (23/32) of the subjects indicated contentment with their current faith and 88% (28/32) reported that their religious doctrine was not the only true doctrine.

Within the S&R group, 61% (43 of the 71) selected conservative, 93% (66/71) rated themselves as open minded, 93% (66/71) indicated that they have a good knowledge of their own religion and are content with their present religion, and 75% (53/71) believed that they share the same views as their parents.

**TABLE SIX**

	Dogmatism	Knowledge	Significance	Level
Question 12 Liberal or Conservative	.27		.003	P=.001
Question 17 Open or Closed Mind	-0.103		.256	Not Sig.
Question 13 Knowledge of Other		-.478	0	P=.001
Question 14 Knowledge of Own		-.174	.054	Not Sig.
Question 15 Content with Present	.098		.279	Not Sig.
Question 16 Doctrine only True	.166		.066	Not Sig.
Question 24 Share View Parents	.44		0	P=.001
Question 35 Friends in other Faith	-.046		.617	Not Sig.



The R group results showed that 83% (10/12) believed they share the same view as their parents and have a strong knowledge of their own tradition.

The Neither group self-reported that 50% of the group was closed and 50% open-minded.

Confirming the Zinnbauer et al(1999) study the majority of the subjects separated themselves into two primary groups within the self-report S and S&R. In Table 8, we further analyzed the results from the S and S&R groups by comparing their religious knowledge scores and dog-

TABLE 7

NUMBER	Spiritual Not Religious 32		Religious Not Spiritual 12		Spiritual and Religious 71		Neither Spiritual 8	
	Liberal	Cons.	Liberal	Cons.	Liberal	Cons.	Liberal	Cons.
Association								
Q12 Liberal or Cons.?	22	10	7	4	27	43	5	3
Open or Closed	open	closed	open	closed	open	closed	open	closed
Q17 Open or Closed Minded?	31	1	10	2	66	5	4	4
Yes or No response	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no
Q13 Have knowledge of other traditions?	15	17	5	7	39	32	4	4
Q14 Have knowledge of own traditions?	19	13	10	2	66	5	5	3
Q15 Content with present belief system?	23	9	9	3	66	5	4	4
Q16 Your doctrine only true doctrine?	4	28	6	6	33	38	3	5
Q24 Share view with parents?	13	19	10	2	53	17	3	5
Q25 Have friends of other faiths?	31	1	11	1	71	0	5	3

**TABLE 8**  
Chi Square<sup>3</sup> for S and S&R Groups

Number Association	Spiritual Not Religious		Spiritual and Religious		Chi-Square	
	32 Liberal	32 Conserv.	71 Liberal	71 Conserv.		Significance
Q 12 Liberal or Conservative?	69%	31%	38%	61%	8.013	0.004*
Q 17 Open or Closed Minded?	97%	3%	93%	7%	0.617	0.392
Q 13 Knowledge of other traditions?	47%	53%	55%	43%	0.574	0.293
Q 14 Knowledge of own traditions?	59%	41%	93%	7%	17.25	.000**
Q 15 Content with present belief system?	72%	28%	93%	7%	8.348	0.006*
Q 16 Your doctrine only true doctrine?	13%	88%	46%	54%	11.064	0.001**
Q 24 Share view with parents?	41%	59%	75%	24%	11.84	0.001**
Q 25 Have friends of other faiths?	97%	3%	99%	0%	2.241	0.311

\*Note P>.05, \*\*Note P>.001

<sup>3</sup> Chi Square tests data that are at the nominal level, it allows one to determine whether groups are independent or related. Chi Square analysis can be used to calculate the differences between groups in a research study.

matism scale scores. These two groups combined account for the majority of the total scores on the survey. The S group had a lower dogmatism score (88) with a SD=17.75. The S&R group had a raw mean score 26.22 (58%) with a SD=5.90, a dogmatism mean score of 77.38 with a SD=22.7, and scored 23.48 (52%) in religious knowledge with a SD=6.46. The S group scored slightly higher on religious knowledge and was less dogmatic than the spiritual and religious group. Using the survey questions, we compared S and S&R groups to certain self-report questions.

The following questions are those that we found most significant. Question 12 (table 8,) self-report liberal or conservative had  $\chi^2(1, N=103)=8.013, P>004$ . Question 14 self-report of the subjects knowledge of their own tradition had  $\chi^2(1, N=103)=17.25, P>000$ . Question 15, are you content with your present religion had  $\chi^2(1, N=103)=8.348, P>006$ .

Question 16 does the subject feel that their doctrine is the only true doctrine  $\chi^2(1, N=103)=11.064, P>001$ . Question 24 does the subject share the same view as their parents  $\chi^2(1, N=103)=11.84, P>001$ .

## DISCUSSION

The data appears to support our hypothesis in that there seems to be a strong negative relationship between the knowledge that one has about other religions and dogmatism within the subject groups (Table 2). In light of the Griffin, Gorsuch, and Davis (1987) study, it was surprising to find that the participating SAU students had a lower overall dogmatism score than did the UTC subjects (Table 1). Two unexpected profiles emerged from this study, including the self-described conservative student with a strong knowledge of other religions and low dogmatism scores and self-described liberal student who scored lower on

knowledge and were more dogmatic. Further analysis revealed that dogmatism has a stronger relationship with liberal or conservative self-report than to religious knowledge scores in the subject groups. Dogmatic individuals also appear to be in accordance with the attitudes of their parents (Tables 1 and 6), confirming Bolmeier's 1966 study.

The majority of student subjects fell into the spiritual but not religious group (S) and defined themselves as liberal, open-minded and non-dogmatic. These individuals had a higher knowledge score and lower dogmatism compared to the spiritual and religious (S&R) group. The majority of the S&R group indicated a strong knowledge of their own tradition, contentment with their present religion, and that they share the same view with their parents. As noted by Hood (2001) there are marked differences between spiritual not religious and spiritual and religious. The S individuals see themselves outside of the context of an organized religion, but do not deny their own spiritual experiences. The S group may find organized religion lacking and therefore be more open to ideas of all traditions. The S&R group found religion to be a vehicle for their spiritual experience that satisfies a desire to define and share those experiences through organized religion (Hood 2001). The majority of the SAU subjects were in the S group as compared with only half of the UTC subjects.

Many interpretations of the results of this study are possible. For example, dogmatic individuals may have had lower religious knowledge scores because they feel no need to expand their knowledge of other traditions, because their belief system discourages investigation of other faiths, or simply due to cultural homogeneity and limited exposure. It would be interesting to investigate causal factors and to look deeper into how the various factors influence self-description.

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