MORALITY AS FUEL FOR VIOLENCE? DISENTANGLING THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN VIOLENT CONFLICT

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Past research finds contradictory evidence suggesting that religion both reduces and increases violent conflict. We argue that morality is an important hub mechanism that can help us understand this disputed relationship. Moreover, to reconcile this, as well as the factors underlying religion's impact on increased violence (i.e., belief versus practice), we draw on Virtuous Violence Theory and newly synthesize it with research on both moral cognition and social identity. We suggest that the combined effect of moral cognition and social identity may substantially increase violence beyond what either facilitates alone. We test our claims using multilevel analysis of data from the World Values Survey and find a nuanced effect of religion on people's beliefs about violence. Specifically, religious individuals were *less* likely to condone violence while religious countries were *more* likely to. This combination of theoretical and empirical work helps disentangle the interwoven nature of morality, religion, and violence.

Keywords: morality, religion, violence

It can sometimes feel like our world is plagued by irreconcilable conflicts involving religious elements. For instance, despite their complexity, the Bosnian genocide, the recent Sudanese civil war, and the ongoing violence between Israelis and Palestinians all tend to be perceived in religious terms. Numerous historical examples of violence are also characterized by religious influences (e.g., the Crusades). Empirical research provides support for these examples in which religion is linked to an *increase* in violence (Ginges, Hansen, & Norenzayan, 2009). Yet, contrasting empirical and theoretical research (e.g., Bremner, Koole, & Bushman, 2011; Shariff, 2015; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007) and accompanying real-world examples (e.g., interfaith anti-war rallies) also indicate that religion may instead *reduce* violence. Given the close connection between

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religion and what is "right," we argue that morality is an important hub mechanism that can help us understand this disputed relationship between religion and violence. Here, we attempt to disentangle this relationship by drawing on Virtuous Violence Theory (VVT; Fiske & Rai, 2014). Further, by integrating this theory with research on both moral cognition and social identity theory, we reconcile an ongoing debate concerning the factors underlying the effect of religion on violence (i.e., belief versus practice). In order to provide a novel contextualization of the literature on religion and violence, we not only bring together previously unlinked theories but also test our claims using data from the World Values Survey.

VIRTUOUS VIOLENCE THEORY
HELPS EXPLAIN VIOLENT CONFLICT

Over the last decade, we have witnessed an upwelling of theory and research in moral psychology arguing that the essential function of morality is to regulate social life (e.g., Curry, Mullins, & Whitehouse, 2019; DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013; Ellemers, 2017; Haidt, 2007; Tomasello, 2014). For example, morality is tuned to the type of group that it regulates (Carnes, Lickel, & Janoff-Bulman, 2015), is sensitive to relational violations (Tepe & Aydinli-Karakulak, 2019), and is perceived as especially relevant to different types of cooperation (Curry, Chesters, & Van Lissa, 2019). Guided by this theoretical lens, Fiske and Rai (2014) propose that any action—even a violent one—can be morally correct to the extent that it regulates the culturally defined social-relational context.

According to Relationship Regulation Theory, there are four basic types of social relationships which can be combined and expressed in a myriad of ways, and it is the affordances of these distinct relational models that determine what it means to be moral and how to redress moral violations (Fiske, 1991; Rai & Fiske, 2011). First, communal-sharing relationships emphasize equivalence amongst group members and are guided by a sense of collective responsibility for the ingroup (Unity motive). Second, authority-ranking relationships sort group members according to a hierarchy and maintain this ranking by motivating both deference toward superiors and responsibility toward subordinates (Hierarchy motive). Third, equality-matching relationships prioritize balance between group members and are guided by the need for equality and reciprocity (Equality motive). Finally, market-pricing relationships involve relative comparisons between members of the group and are guided by careful calibration of outputs according to inputs (Proportionality motive). It is important to recognize that adherence to these moral motives, and responses to their violation, can compel group members to engage in violence. This darker side of Relationship Regulation Theory is explored by Virtuous Violence Theory (Fiske & Rai, 2014).

Virtuous Violence Theory (VVT) postulates that most people engage in violence because they feel morally obligated to do so, and that violence is oftentimes driven by these moral motives to foster, repair, end, or otherwise regulate their social relationships (Fiske & Rai, 2014). From this view, violence undertaken as a form of morally motivated relationship regulation should feel justified or like the "right thing to do." The notion that violence against another person could be justifiable, or even moral, is perhaps counterintuitive—reducing harm and suffering is fundamental to morality (Schein & Gray, 2015)—but many wars (and interpersonal conflicts) can be explained by a moral motivation to regulate social relations. People fight to unify a country split

by civil war (Unity), to establish who ought to be at the top versus at the bottom (Hierarchy), to retaliate for some past wrong (Equality) and to fairly exchange resources or commitments (Proportionality). Therefore, VVT is a controversial yet promising lens through which to investigate the role of morality in violent conflict and to help explain violence in the name of religion.

In many cultures, "morality is religion" (Rai & Fiske, 2011, p. 67; Gervais et al., 2017). Religion not only prescribes what is "good" or "bad," but provides a community organized around a supernatural being or a spiritual teacher (e.g., God, Allah, or Buddha) who gives meaning, guidance, order, and comfort. Social relations are thus fundamental to religion and instantiated in at least two different ways: 1) between the individual and the supernatural being or spiritual teacher, and 2) between the individuals composing the community organized around this supernatural being or spiritual teacher. Although VVT helps explain why morality may provide kindling for violence, we argue that each of these features (i.e., moral beliefs about what is "good" or "bad" and these two social relations that are fundamental to religion) contextualize the moral motives of religious individuals.

MORAL COGNITION AND SOCIAL IDENTITY INFORM VIRTUOUS VIOLENCE THEORY

Bringing together the literature on the characteristics of moral cognition and social identity can further clarify *why* violence does (or does not) emerge from morality and religion. Independently, these two literatures explain different aspects of the human experience. Yet, combined together and conceptualized as the underlying mechanisms that enable VVT, these theories become ingredients for disentangling when violence will or will not ensue.

The first ingredient in understanding the relationship between religion and violence is the underlying characteristics of moral cognition. Moral cognition is the way we process and make decisions about what people should or should not (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013) think, do, or cause (Cushman, 2015). Morality is not a single, dedicated cognitive process, but rather a suite of interlocking processes—including the machinery for theory of mind, emotion, learning, motivation, reasoning, and more—that is united by a common function (e.g., Greene, 2015). Nonetheless, many scholars have converged on a dual process model of moral judgment and action in which both cognition, or deliberative reasoning, and affect, or intuition, drive what we perceive as moral (Cushman, Young, & Greene, 2010; Greene & Haidt, 2002).

These two ways of approaching morality correspond with the philosophical concepts of utilitarianism and deontology respectively (Greene, Morelli, Lowenberg, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2008). According to utilitarian morality, the righteousness of something is determined by weighing the costs and benefits of the consequences (Mill, 1861,1998); weighing these requires reasoning. In contrast, according to deontological morality, the righteousness of something is determined by its intrinsic, universal nature regardless of the consequences (Kant, 1785, 1959); discerning this nature requires intuition. Researchers typically tease apart these forms of moral judgment using dilemmas that pit one against the other. For example, the runaway trolley dilemma asks people whether killing one person to save five people is acceptable (a utilitarian response) or unacceptable (a deontological response). Recent work using process dissociation has revealed

that utilitarian and deontological inclinations are independent (Conway & Gawronski, 2013) and represent authentic forms of moral concern (Conway, Goldstein-Greenwood, Polacek, & Greene, 2018).

Some research suggests that moral judgment is driven primarily by the intuition-based deontological system (e.g., Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Haidt, 2001) and that this system has adaptive benefits that explain why it is the default inclination (e.g., Bennis, Medin, & Bartels, 2010; Cushman, 2014). Moral convictions, particularly of this deontological type, are experienced as absolute truths (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005) with considerable motivational force (Skitka & Bauman, 2008) that should apply to everyone (Turiel, 1983) and be endorsed by everyone (Mullen & Skitka, 2006; Skitka, 2010). Thus, it appears that moral convictions are perceived as universal and oppositional in nature, with our own convictions being perceived as right and anything different being perceived as wrong. Given the characteristics of deontological morality, it is important to note that religiosity is associated with increased deontological and reduced utilitarian inclinations (Conway & Gawronski, 2013; McPhetres, Conway, Hughes, & Zuckerman, 2018; Szekely, Opre, & Miu, 2015); stated differently, moral judgments that include elements of religion are often driven by intuition. We will return to this ingredient for understanding religion and violence, but first we need to consider the role of social identity.

The second ingredient in understanding the relationship between religion, morality, and violence is our social identities. Social Identity Theory explains that how we think about ourselves depends on the self-relevant groups to which we belong (Tajfel, 1978). Indeed, people especially want to belong to moral groups (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007) and derive pride (Ellemers, Kingma, van de Burgt, & Barreto, 2011) from belonging to such groups. Social Identity Theory also explains that self-relevant groups provide guidelines for how we ought to behave (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), and moral norms are especially effective guides for behavior (Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, & Leach, 2008) from which group members derive a sense of ingroup respect (Ellemers, Pagliaro, & Barreto, 2013; Pagliaro, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2011).

Past research indicates that the process of conceptualizing groups in terms of "us" versus "them" can lead individuals to favor their ingroup over the outgroup (e.g., Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971), but this effect appears to be driven primarily by ingroup love rather than outgroup hate (e.g., Brewer, 1999; Halevy, Bornstein, & Sagiv, 2008; Thielmann & Böhm, 2016). However, ingroup preference can translate into violence between groups. The desire to protect the ingroup can provoke outgroup hate (Böhm, Rusch, & Gürerk, 2016), and there is a tendency to assume that outgroups are more motivated by hate than one's own ingroup (Waytz, Young, & Ginges, 2014). Further, conflict of interest between groups (Struch & Schwartz, 1989) and ingroup glorification (Leidner, Castano, Zaiser, & Giner-Sorolla, 2010) can lead to dehumanization and support for intergroup violence. However, the dynamics of intergroup conflict change in potentially destructive ways when morality is implicated in social identity processes.

When combined, the effect of these two ingredients—moral cognition and social identity—may substantially increase violence beyond what either facilitates alone. A striking example of this destructive change is that dehumanization allows people to condone violence against outgroup victims for instrumentally beneficial, but perhaps

immoral reasons, and yet does not seem to be necessary for violence committed for moral reasons (Rai, Valdesolo, & Graham, 2017). Concomitantly, a growing body of literature suggests that parochial altruism and war may have coevolved (e.g., Choi & Bowles, 2007; Ginges & Atran, 2011). Indeed, a recent meta-analysis of 16 studies suggests that exposure to war produces lasting increases in prosocial behavior toward ingroup but not outgroup members (Bauer et al., 2016). Still other work suggests that group morality—defined here as an ingroup loyalty—encourages violent, competitive behavior toward outgroups (Cohen, Montoya, & Insko, 2006).

Parker and Janoff-Bulman (2013) provide a coherent explanation for this pattern, which is that morality-based groups (e.g., pro-life/pro-choice) are united by a shared moral conviction that is experienced as absolute, universal, and defined in dichoto-mous opposition to any groups with different moral imperatives. Given the unique characteristics of moral cognition, these morality-based groups are defined as much by outgroup hate as ingroup love, relative to other rivalry groups (e.g., Red Sox/Yankees fans) which are largely defined by ingroup love alone. More recently, Weisel and Böhm (2015) found that members of morality-based groups, but not rivalry-based groups, will go out of their way to harm the outgroup even though they can help the ingroup without doing so. Considering that people are motivated to create and sustain a sense of positive distinctiveness concerning their group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and how readily morality defines what it means to be a "good" group member (Elle-mers & van den Bos, 2012), it is likely that many groups come to see their particular moral convictions as uniquely righteous. We suggest that the key to understanding *why* violence emerges from morality (as proposed by VVT) is that it embeds morality in groups. As religious groups are, in fact, morality-based groups, this insight makes sense of the disputed effects of religion on violence.

DISENTANGLING RELIGION AND VIOLENT CONFLICT

Within the extant research on the relationship between religion and violence, there are conflictual positions concerning whether religion increases or decreases violence (see Xygalatas & Lang, 2016). For example, research on religious prosociality—the idea that religion promotes acts that benefit others but are personally costly—suggests that reli-gion can mitigate violence by promoting the perception that God is watching us and judging our actions (e.g., Norenzayan et al., 2016). In contrast, other research suggests that religion can increase violence by way of general beliefs and observant practice (e.g., Ginges et al., 2009; Shaw, Quezada, & Zárate, 2011). We argue that the combination of moral cognition and social identity underlying VVT can integrate and contextualize these seemingly entangled theories on religion and violence to explain *when* religion can either increase or decrease violence.

Some research focuses on how religion, by fostering trust, honesty, and generos-ity, can subsequently decrease violence. Norenzayan and colleagues (2016) developed a cultural evolutionary theory of prosocial religion and the influence of "God" to explain large-scale cooperation among unfamiliar co-religionists, as well as to explain the survival and spread of prosocial religions across the preceding 10–12 millennia. Importantly, cross-cultural research utilizing economic games finds that the more one perceives that one's shared God is omniscient and punitive, the more one is likely to be impartial and generous with distant and unfamiliar co-religionists (Lang et al., 2019;

Purzycki et al., 2016; Shariff, Willard, Andersen, & Norenzayan, 2016). Thus, this body of research suggests that religion, and the view that there is in an omniscient and punitive God, can motivate prosociality and reduce violence—at least between ingroup members.

By contrast, research also suggests that religion can decrease prosociality and increase violence through the practiced-based and belief-based mechanisms of religion. More specifically, the Coalitional Commitment Hypothesis proposes that violence occurs because religious groups enhance commitment to the ingroup through group-based rituals. To support this hypothesis, Ginges and colleagues (2009) surveyed Palestinians, Israeli settlers (i.e. Jews living in the occupied Palestinian territories), and participants from other religions and nations. They found an association between religious service attendance and support for violent attacks. In this same series of studies, the researchers also replicated this effect experimentally with a sample of Israeli settlers, finding that a synagogue attendance prime increased support for suicide attacks. Similarly, the Religious Belief Hypothesis proposes that moral certainty about one's religious beliefs, or the idea that religion prescribes specific and inflexible morals values, motivates violence (Shaw et al., 2011; Skali, 2017). Indeed, one study asked participants to read a little-known passage from the Book of Judges about a violent battle and found that those who were told this story was from the Bible (vs. from an ancient scroll) were more likely to blast their opponents with a higher decibel noise (Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, & Busath, 2007). Results in this study illustrate the power of religion to motivate violence. Although the Religious Belief Hypothesis and the Coalitional Commitment Hypothesis are thought to conflict with one another, both predict increased violence and both map onto the social identity and moral cognitive mechanisms underlying VVT, respectively. Thus, we suggest that both are valid mechanisms to explain the relationship between religion and increased violence.

To reconcile the competing hypotheses on the relationship between religion and increased or decreased violence, we propose that VVT, and its unique blend of moral and social ingredients, can specifically explain *when* religion should promote or prevent violence. Simply put, religion should prevent violence when it is primarily a system of moral prescriptions and proscriptions for individual behavior, but religion should promote violence as this moral system becomes increasingly contextualized by relational motivations that serve to regulate the group writ large (at times with violence that is perceived as necessary and just).

It therefore bears recognition that individuals have competing motivations for their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors—the self as an individual and as a member of different, interlocking social identities—and so at an individual level, the justifiability of violence is a product of many components. As one of these many components, individual differences in religious belief should motivate moral behavior and reduce the perceived justifiability of violence. However, when we aggregate individuals into groups (for example, according to their nationality), the components that differ across individuals ought to be washed out, leaving the shared components as the primary motivation for their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. We propose that a common and valued social identity (such as one's nationality or religion) is an important shared component that is brought to the fore by aggregation; as such, religion should motivate violence to a greater extent at the group level because aggregation has distilled people's motivations down to this shared, social component that serves to regulate the group.

Following from these propositions, we predict that hypotheses about religious pro-sociality and perceiving an omniscient God instantiates the effect of religion at the individual level of analysis, whereas the hypotheses about both belief-based and practice-based religion instantiates the effect of religion at the group level. We test these predictions to disentangle the effects of religion on the justifiability of violence for individuals versus nations (by aggregating individuals together) in a large cross-cultural dataset.

DATA FROM 60 NATIONS ON THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN JUSTIFYING VIOLENCE

We examined data on religion and violence from the World Values Survey (WVS). By leveraging multilevel modeling, we were then able to address how religious individuals versus religious nations feel about violence. We investigated two basic components of religion—importance of God and religious practice—to understand the psychological mechanisms underlying the competing effects of religion. Consistent with work on the prosocial influence of religion, we predicted that individuals should perceive violence as less justifiable as the importance of God in one's life becomes greater. In contrast, but consistent with the Coalitional Commitment Hypothesis and the Religious Belief Hypothesis, we predicted that nations should perceive violence as more justifiable as the practice of religion (i.e., prayer and attendance) becomes more frequent. We also controlled for a diverse array of relevant characteristics at both the individual and national levels of analysis to rule out alternative explanations.

METHOD

We investigated our research questions using the sixth wave of the World Values Survey (WVS) database (see Inglehart et al., 2014). This dataset, collected between 2010 and 2016, has information about 89,565 participants distributed across 60 countries. We used WVS database variables 2, 9, 141, 145, 146, 152, 210, 211, 239, 240, 242, and 248 in our analyses. In addition, we integrated the World Bank estimate of gross domestic product (GDP) into this dataset. A table depicting descriptive statistics for our primary variables by country is provided in supplemental material (https://osf.io/ah6sk/).

Religion. Participants were asked to "indicate how important religion is in your life" on a rating scale anchored from 1 (very important) to 4 (not at all important). We reverse scored this variable to aid interpretation ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.05$, $ICC = .43$).

Belief. Participants were asked "how important is God in your life" on a rating scale anchored from 1 (not at all important) to 10 (very important) ($M = 7.75$, $SD = 2.96$, $ICC = .43$).

Practice. Participants were asked "how often do you pray" on a rating scale anchored from 1 (several times a day) to 8 (never, practically never). Participants were also asked "how often do you attend religious services these days" on a rating scale anchored from 1 (more than once a week) to 7 (never, practically never). We reverse scored these variables to aid interpretation, standardized them to put them in the same metric, and

created a composite variable because they were highly correlated ($r = .65$, $p < .001$) ($M = .00$, $SD = .91$, $ICC = .34$).

Violence. Participants were asked whether "violence against other people" can be justified on a rating scale anchored from 1 (never justifiable) to 10 (always justifiable) ($M = 1.74$, $SD = 2.85$, $ICC = .11$). We transformed this variable using the base 10 log to attenuate skew and kurtosis, and then multiplying it by 10 to avoid creating an ill-scaled covariance matrix.

Individual Covariates. Participants indicated their gender (52.20% female) and age ($M = 41.94$, $SD = 16.55$); gender was dummy coded and age was divided by 10 to avoid creating an ill-scaled covariance matrix. In addition, participants were asked to rate their perceived income on a rating scale anchored from 1 (lower step) to 10 (tenth step) ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 2.11$), and to rate their education level on a rating scale anchored from 1 (no formal education) to 9 (university level education with degree) ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 2.42$). These variables were specified at level 1.

National Covariates. Participants were asked "how democratically is this country being governed today" on a rating scale anchored from 1 (not at all democratic) to 10 (completely democratic); we mean-aggregated these responses by nation ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 1.08$). World Bank estimates of GDP for each nation were in trillions of current US dollars and were matched to the appropriate WVS year for each nation ($M = .94$, $SD = 2.44$). We transformed this variable by adding a constant (1), using the inverse to attenuate skew and kurtosis, and then multiplying it by 10 to avoid creating an ill-scaled covariance matrix. These variables were specified at level 2.

Mixed Covariates. Participants were asked "how proud are you of your nationality" on a rating scale anchored from 1 (very proud) to 4 (not at all proud). Participants also rated the statement, "I see myself as part of the [country] nation," on a scale anchored from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). We reverse scored these variables to aid interpretation, standardized them to put them in the same metric, and created a composite variable because they were highly correlated ($r = .66$, $p < .001$) ($M = -.01$, $SD = .84$, $ICC = .16$).

RESULTS

We tested a multilevel structural equation model in Mplus version 8.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). The level-1 units were the individuals making the ratings and the level-2 units were the nations in which these individuals were nested. Level-1 variables were within-mean centered, whereas both level-2 and mixed variables were grand-mean centered. We specified the model shown in Figure 1, which had 57 estimated parameters (variances, covariances, regression paths, and means), and the model converged on an admissible solution. The null hypothesis of perfect fit was rejected ($\chi^2_{Norm}(27) = 11.98$, $p < .001$), but the model was otherwise an excellent fit to the observed data ($RMSEA = .011$, $CFI = .95$, $SRMR_1 = .022$, $SRMR_2 = .039$).

An investigation of the parameter estimates at level 1 revealed that religious individuals thought God was more important in their lives ($b = 1.25$, $SE = .12$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .44$,
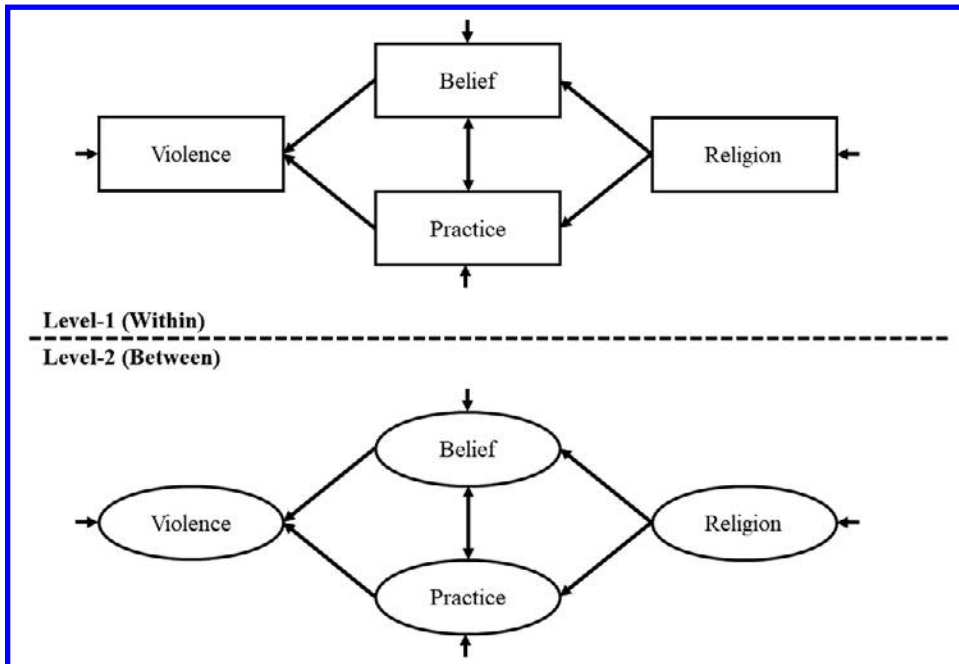
FIGURE 1. Conceptual path diagram depicting the effect of religion on violence through belief and practice. Covariates not shown for clarity. All level-1 covariates (individual characteristics: gender, age, income, education, and nationalism) were independent predictors of religion and violence but were free to correlate in a pairwise manner with one another. All level-2 covariates (national characteristics: democracy, GDP, and nationalism) were independent predictors of religion and violence but were free to correlate in a pairwise manner with one another.

$R^2 = .19$) and were more observant practitioners of their religion ($b = .38$, $SE = .028$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .41$, $R^2 = .17$). There was a significant, positive association between religious belief and practice ($b = .38$, $SE = .039$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .28$). The importance of God in people's lives was associated with less justification for violence ($b = -.076$, $SE = .021$, $p < .001$, $\beta = -.065$), whereas observant practice did not have a significant effect on the justifiability of violence ($b = .002$, $SE = .041$, $p = .964$, $\beta = .001$) controlling for all individual covariates. As such, we find a small ($\Delta R^2 = .004$) but significant indirect effect of religion on violence through the importance of God ($b = -.094$, $SE = .024$, $p < .001$, $\beta = -.028$, 95% $CI = [-.047, -.14]$) but not observant practice ($b = .001$, $SE = .016$, $p = .964$, $\beta = .001$, 95% $CI = [-.030, .032]$). In sum, religion appears to decrease violence for individuals by increasing the importance of belief in God.

An investigation of the parameter estimates at level 2 revealed that religious nations also thought God was more important ($b = 2.53$, $SE = .11$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .89$, $R^2 = .80$) and were more observant practitioners ($b = .67$, $SE = .047$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .88$, $R^2 = .77$). Religious belief and practice were not significantly associated ($b = .003$, $SE = .036$, $p = .930$, $\beta = .014$). This time, it was beliefs about God that did not have a significant effect on the justifiability of violence ($b = -.12$, $SE = .10$, $p = .231$, $\beta = -.26$), whereas nations that were more observant practicing their religion thought violence was more justifiable ($b = .89$, $SE = .33$, $p = .007$, $\beta = .51$) controlling for all national covariates. As such, we

find a larger (ΔR^2 = .098) and significant indirect effect of religion on violence through observant practice (*b* = .60, *SE* = .23, *p* = .009, *β* = .45, *95% CI* = [.15, 1.04]) but not beliefs about God (*b* = −.31, *SE* = .26, *p* = .234, *β* = −.23, *95% CI* = [−.81, .20]). In sum, religion appears to increase violence for nations by increasing observant practice.

The parameter estimates associated with the covariates, while not the focus of the present research, are shown at the individual level in Table 1 and at the national level in Table 2. The importance of religion for individuals is associated with being female, older, lower income, less educated, and more nationalistic. In turn, the justifiability of violence is associated with being male, younger, higher income, less educated, and less nationalistic. The importance of religion for nations is associated with being more nationalistic and less democratic, but no covariate was significantly associated with the justifiability of violence.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Using a multilevel analysis of a large cross-cultural dataset, we find a nuanced effect of religion on people's beliefs about violence. Consistent with work on prosocial religions (e.g., Norenzayan et al., 2016), we find that the importance of God in one's life is associated with believing violence is less justifiable for religious individuals, but not religious countries. Simultaneously, and consistent with work on coalitional commitment and religious belief (e.g., Ginges et al., 2009; Shaw et al., 2011), we find practicing religion (i.e., prayer and attendance) is associated with believing that violence is more justifiable for religious countries, but not religious individuals. We argue that this multilevel analysis of the data brings to light an important underlying point. We found no effect of religion on the justifiability of violence when examining individuals without respect to their nesting, yet when aggregating these thousands of individuals according to the country they were sampled from, we instead find two distinct and opposing effects of religion on the justifiability of violence, and we find that these opposing effects likely operate via different psychological mechanisms.

Specifically, the underlying mechanism for the effect of religion on individuals can perhaps be explained by previous work on how belief in an omnipotent and punitive God fosters increased prosociality (e.g., Norenzayan et al., 2016). This is a relative effect, such that individuals for whom belief in God is more important are less violent in comparison with other people nested within the same set of social structures, institutions, and systems. In contrast, the underlying mechanism for the effect of religion on countries can perhaps be explained by past research on social dominance orientation (Henry, Sidanius, Levin, & Pratto, 2005), tight norms (Yustisia, Putra, Kavanagh, Whitehouse, & Rufaedah, 2020), and rituals (Whitehouse & McQuinn, 2012). It appears that the typicality of religious practice in a society is associated with an increased absolute baseline level of violence in comparison with people nested in other societies with differing sets of social structures, institutions, and systems. We suspect that as religion increasingly permeates every aspect of these aforementioned social structures, they will become increasingly moralized. Thus, the preservation of existing hierarchies, norms, and ways of living becomes an absolute necessity and a justifiable cause for violence. However, it is important to note that these are hypothesized underlying mechanisms since we were unable to test these given the nature of data. Future research should empirically examine these hypothesized mechanisms.

TABLE 1. Relationships Between Individual Covariates and Their Effect on Religion and Violence

	Gender	Age	Income	Education	Nationalism
Age	−.008				
	(.006)				
	−.010				
Income	.031**	−.34**			
	(.007)	(.043)			
	.031	−.11			
Education	.077**	−1.01**	1.16**		
	(.016)	(.076)	(.062)		
	.071	−.30	.27		
Nationalism	.001	.088**	.036**	−.024	
	(.002)	(.015)	(.011)	(.021)	
	.004	.074	.024	−.014	
Religion	−.14**	.050**	−.008*	−.010*	.11**
	(.017)	(.006)	(.003)	(.004)	(.012)
	−.090	.098	−.020	−.027	.11
Violence	.27**	−.11**	.082**	−.037**	−.34**
	(.046)	(.015)	(.018)	(.010)	(.049)
	.051	−.062	.062	−.030	−.097

Note. Bottom diagonal represents unstandardized associations with standard errors and standardized estimates. The religion and violence rows represent unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors and standardized estimates. *$p < .01$, **$p < .001$.

Our results affirm that morality is indeed a hub mechanism to facilitate better understanding of the disputed relationship between religion and violence. In the literature, the relationship between religion and violence was fragmented, with some scholars arguing that religion decreases violence, while others arguing that it increases violence. However, our synthesis, specifically accounting for the influence of morality inherent in religion, disentangles this dispute by explaining *when* both are accurate. Specifically, religion decreases violence among individuals believing in a set of shared moral imperatives (e.g., importance of God), but increases violence among religious nations in which the social components of religious belief and practice are important. Intuitively, these findings are in line with existing literature, but are only understandable when accounting for this nested structure. Further, our novel synthesis of existing literature on moral cognition and social identity help to clarify the key mechanisms that enable religion to motivate violence. Without the combination of these important ingredients, neither alone could achieve what they do together; religious violence likely would not feel virtuous. By focusing on morality as a hub, we have disentangled disputed theories on religion and violence, while also clarifying the underlying mechanisms that make the darker side of religion possible.

Accounting for morality in the relationship between religion and violence not only impacts theory but also practice. Going forward, we suggest that accounting for morality in interventions could produce better outcomes in the reduction of violent intergroup

TABLE 2. Relationships Between National Covariates and Their Effect on Religion and Violence

	Nationalism	GDP	Democracy
GDP	−.35**		
	(.11)		
	−.41		
Democracy	.020	.84**	
	(.046)	(.30)	
	.054	.31	
Religion	1.22**	−.032	−.18*
	(.20)	(.032)	(.065)
	.60	−.12	−.27
Violence	−.60	−.041	.055
	(.36)	(.046)	(.16)
	−.22	−.11	.064

Note. Bottom diagonal represents unstandardized associations with standard errors and standardized estimates. The religion and violence rows represent unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors and standardized estimates. *$p < .01$, **$p < .001$.

conflict. For instance, one such method is emphasizing shared religious or moral foundations between two groups that are in conflict due to their opposing views about what is right and wrong. Indeed, previous research provides support for this idea. In one line of work, either delineating or just acknowledging the shared lineages and religious beliefs of Abrahamic religious groups (i.e., Muslims, Christians, and Jews) was found to be effective for reducing negative outgroup bias (Kunst & Thomsen, 2015; Kunst, Thomsen, & Sam, 2014), even in the context of actual ongoing violent conflict (e.g., Israel-Palestine; Kunst, Kimel, Shani, Alayan, & Thomsen, 2018). Alternatively, accounting for the impact of morality on violence could be useful for developing "conflict escalation" predictors. For example, our results emphasized how observant practice of religion at a country level predicted justifiability of violence, far more than individual-level observant practice. From this, research could look further into how national religiosity or national adherence to any concomitant moral imperatives could predict the inception or exacerbation of violent conflict. Focusing on this national level, in accordance with its relationship to the individual level, could prove more valuable than investigating either independently. Additionally, since recent research suggests that dehumanization of victims is associated with increased instrumental violence, but not moral violence (Rai et al., 2017), it is important to keep in mind that humanization interventions, such as emphasizing the emotions of outgroups (McDonald et al., 2017), might prove to be less effective for mitigating violent conflicts that are morally motivated.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although providing evidence to support our claims, a few limitations should be noted. For instance, it is important to note that our analyses of the World Values Survey data is based on a logical mathematical assumption of the principle of

aggregation. We assume that as individual-level differences are aggregated from the individual to group level, the importance of the individual differences will wash out, leaving the shared components (i.e., religion) as the common driving force behind justifiability of violence. Although supported by our data, this is still an assumption, none the less. Future attempts to replicate this pattern using this same multilevel approach on other large, cross-cultural datasets are encouraged.

Additionally, our dependent measure of interest was a self-reported variable assessing "justifiability for violence." Thus, we do not know whether this necessarily translates into support for or engagement in actual violent behavior. However, this limitation is an artifact of archival research, and utilizing this variable provides us with more diverse evidence than would have been attainable via more traditional psychological research measures (e.g., surveys of college students). Future research could build on these findings by including both self-report measures of personal engagement in violence and behavioral measures (e.g., noise blast task, voodoo doll task, and economic game paradigms). Together, these suggested future directions could help provide a more complete picture of the relationship between religion and violence.

CONCLUSION

Past research on the relationship between religion and violence finds contradictory evidence suggesting that religion both reduces and increases violent conflict. However, here we explain how morality is an important hub mechanism that, when considered, clarifies the complicated relationship between morality, religion, and violence. Specifically, we have brought together independent theories on moral cognition and social identity that together provide the mechanisms that enable Virtuous Violence Theory to explain why morality motivates violence. Further, we take empirical data from the World Values Survey to further support our understanding of this relationship. More specifically, our analysis finds a nuanced effect of religion on people's beliefs about violence, with an opposite pattern of results for both individuals and countries. In general, individuals were less likely to condone violence, which aligns with previous research on prosocial influence of religion (e.g., views about the importance of God), while countries were more likely to condone violence, which aligns with research on social components of religion (e.g., observant practice of attendance and prayer). This work emphasizes the importance of considering the influence of morality as a linchpin in intergroup relations, especially during relationships marked by violent conflict.

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