

UCL research

Anti-liberal Muslims face discrimination

At the heart of the debate over Islamophobia, many claim the right to criticise fully the ideas and norms of other ethnic and religious groups (here Muslims) on the basis that it has no influence over respecting religious persons as individuals. Notwithstanding the distinction's theoretical relevance, Vassilis Saroglou and Jolanda van der Noll, researchers at UCL's Centre for Psychology of Religion, conducted two experimental studies to see whether it was so easy to make it in practice.

Firstly, they gauged the tendency of participants (**440 Belgian French-speaking or Dutch-speaking non-Muslims**) to help – by contributing a hypothetical sum of money – a fictional person bearing either a Christian (and traditionally 'Belgian') or Muslim first name. According to the terms of the experiment, this fictional person was going to use this money for either:

- **an ordinary, respectable objective:**
 - o making photocopies for classes (study 1);
 - o visiting a brother abroad (study 2); or
- **an activist cause that most Europeans, and Belgians in particular, consider anti-liberal (that is, against individual equality, according to gender or sexual orientation):**
 - o against the headscarf ban (study 1);
 - o against the rights of homosexuals (study 2).

The two studies showed that **participants were no less ready to help a Muslim than a non-Muslim when the objective was deemed respectable. This suggests that, overall**, participants did not discriminate against Muslims, except for ethnocentric persons, namely those identifying strongly with their Belgian region or Belgium itself and clearly discriminated by contributing less money to Muslims even for an ordinary objective.

However, participants were less ready to help a Muslim when he or she was going to protest against the headscarf ban (study 1) rather than an ordinary objective (making copies); and, more crucially, they gave even less money to Muslims than to non-Muslims when both were going to defend an anti-liberal cause by protesting homosexual rights (study 2). This last result shows a subtle discriminatory effect: for the same problematic activity, the Muslim was 'punished' more severely than the non-Muslim. This did not include atheists, who exercised 'non-discriminatory punishment': when the objective was anti-liberal, they gave equally less money to Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

This research suggests that we are partially capable of distinguishing between helping people and criticising solely their ideas and norms – or those that are perceived as 'theirs'. Moreover, depending on individual differences, ethnocentrists are not quick to make this distinction, whereas atheists make it consistently and without discrimination.

The study was recently [published in *Political Psychology*](#), the leading international journal of political psychology.

Note: This is not an exhaustive study of all the reasons for negative attitudes toward Muslims; neither does it examine the legitimate question of whether terrorist acts carried out by individuals identifying themselves as Muslims contribute to fuelling negative attitudes among non-Muslims.

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