

Homicide and the World Religions

Ph.D. Dissertation

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Abstract

Cross-national studies seeking to explain the variation in rates of homicide have examined a multitude of factors including religion, but fewer studies have examined how religion may influence homicide through a society's institutional structure. Social institutions include entities such as the economy, the family, the political structure, and educational system; and these institutions serve as guides for human action and behavior. Through its emphasis on values, religion may influence the interests and legitimize the functioning within societal institutions. In the present study, I examine how the major world religions of Protestantism, Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism may be associated with homicide through various cultural and institutional mechanisms. These mechanisms include individualism, secularization, religious pluralism, economic dominance, and social welfare. Higher levels of individualism may contribute to higher rates of homicide by reducing societal bonds and spurring secularization which results in the attenuated ability of religion to promote pro-social behavior. Higher rates of homicide may also occur as the competing value structures associated with religious pluralism legitimize a differentiated institutional structure whereby economic conditions dominate and weaken the socialization capacities of non-economic institutions. Non-economic institutions may be strengthened through an increase in social welfare which may also curb the deleterious effects of the individualism emanating from religion. While all of the major world religions are assessed in terms of their relationship with these mechanisms, particular attention is given to Protestantism due to its individualistic focus and pluralistic religious landscape. A measure of atheism is included in the present study along with a global measure of religious pluralism to assess whether it is the major world religions or some other entity related to religion that may be linked to homicide. Results from this study suggest that neither the major world religions nor atheism or religious pluralism is significantly associated with cross-national rates of homicide directly or through any of the proposed mechanisms. These findings suggest that future studies attempting to explain the variation in cross-national homicide rates should consider alternative institutional mechanisms as well as the growth of secularization across societies.