

Are belief systems a probable cause for inequality and violence around the globe?

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1. Introduction

The term "belief systems" encompasses ideologies and ways of thinking that help us interpret our everyday reality, enabling us to comprehend the world and its deeper meaning.^[1] What am I referring to when I mention the term belief systems?

I am referring to the ideology and belief that allows us to give meaning to life and to determine where everything originated from- religious beliefs. Around the globe, we can observe instances where these beliefs are not only causing inequality but also resulting in war. Hence, in this report, I will investigate how seemingly innocuous belief systems are gradually transformed into the causes of social inequality and conflict by including various viewpoints and perspectives based on history and studies which will be concluded with my perspective and the possible courses of action.

2. Causes:

Our perception of the world in which we live, is strongly influenced by the environment we grow up in, the people in it, as well as the communities we are surrounded by, according to a major 1999 study in Twin Research.^[3] In early childhood, we tend to idolize the adults around us and carry forth their values, beliefs, and perceptions. Beliefs promoting or justifying inequality may cause us to internalize and perpetuate the same unequal structures.

Another eminent influence on one's beliefs is that of the media. Media provides new information persuading individuals to accept it, but also, informs listeners about what others learn, thus facilitating coordination.^[4] In the modern world, everyone is actively participating in sharing their views and opinions on the internet. Thus, it can be concluded that exposure to the media has tendencies to influence one's thinking, opinions, or beliefs.

3. Why is this an important issue? (Consequences):

An esteemed, Professor Diana Eck, at Harvard University suggests, "Race and religion still have the capacity to ignite fear and deep-seated prejudices"^[5].

Joining a religious community is linked to many facets of human flourishing, including harmony.^{[6][23]} But rather than that- we are observing interreligious conflicts; wars; people being denied rights because of religious practices; and discrimination.^[7]

Globally, 83.4% of women identify as belonging to a religious group.^{[8][24]} Nevertheless, many are still discriminated against in the form of religious practice or based on which religion they identify with.

Certain harmful practices within religious communities also spark inequality toward others. These practices include female genital mutilation, son preference, forced or arranged marriages, child marriages, crimes involving dowries, and crimes that are often justified by "honor" in many communities.^[2]

4. Global Perspective:

We have witnessed several incidents resulting in war and discrimination because of religious disparities in the past years. An instance includes the anti-hijab movement in September 2022 after the death of Mahsa Amini by the "Morality police".^[9] From this, we note how the hijab was first adopted by Islam as a symbol of modesty and decency in interactions between people of the opposite sex.^{[10][25]} But the set-up of the "morality police" ensures that not even a strand of hair is visible when a woman is wearing her hijab. A practice that was supposed to protect and ensure women's safety has resulted in them getting a criminal record for inappropriate clothing and even killing them^[9]. There are religious norms that support patriarchy, oppressing women and not treating them as equals but taking their right to life has no justification! This incident caused an uproar around the globe, resulting in the anti-hijab movement.

According to recent studies on the socioeconomic correlation between religion and religiosity, nations that practice higher levels of religiosity also tend to have higher levels of income inequality.^{[11][26]}

Multiple Middle Eastern religious conflicts have resulted in wars and the deaths of innocents. Including the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran^[12] and the tensions between Israel and Palestine, which have been continuing since 1948 till date^[13]. At least 1,400 Israelis have died in the Israel-Gaza conflict, and according to the Israeli military, 203 soldiers and civilians—including women and children—have been seized and taken to Gaza as hostages.^[14]

More than 4,000 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed in air and artillery as well.^[14]

Not to forget the infamous 9/11 attacks; The Syrian Civil War and The Sudan Genocide. This not only creates a wide impact on today's world, but we also learn how pluralism is far from achievable at this moment.

5. National and Local Perspective:

"India is now among the most unequal countries in the world." -The World Inequality Report of 2022^[27]

The largest religious divide in India was initiated in August 1947, when Britain granted India independence, and partitioned it into India (mainly consisting of Hindus) and the new state of Pakistan (consisting of the Muslim population).^[16] This led to a spike in violence, which resulted in the displacement of about 15 million people and the estimated death of one million.^{[16][28]} Ever since- religious disparities have been observed like dominoes cascading in a line, including the Khalistan Movement, the 2002 Massacres in Gujrat,^[17] and the burning of the Babri Masjid Mosque in Ayodhya (1992).^{[18][29]} In India, the most significant social divisions are constantly obscured by the combination of nationalism, religion, and politics.^{[19][27]} Corporate behavior has frequently supported long-standing norms, such as discrimination against women in the ownership and management of real estate.^{[20][30]} One instance of such corporate conduct is the application of legal strategies (like the Hindu undivided family form of ownership) that exclude women from positions of authority.^{[20][30]} A Hindu nationalism that upholds the ideal of samajik samrasta (social harmony) cannot talk about the eradication of caste; this is particularly important since caste is a fundamental factor in the formation of class disparities.^[27] Adivasis, Dalits, and the majority of backward castes experience extreme rates of displacement and bear the brunt of economic downturns.^[27]

In a different study conducted between 2015 and 2017, 24% of Hindu Dalits and Adivasis held only 11% of the total assets, compared to 22% of Hindu upper castes who owned 41%.^{[19][27]}

6. Course of Action:

Religious inequality and violence have existed for decades with few effective efforts to counteract it. We face several significant impediments, most prominent among them is the fact that some religious communities avoid interfaith dialogue because they feel their religion forbids it or because they harbor strong animosity toward other faith communities; secular and Western governments may also be wary of interacting with religious organizations; etc.^[21] To tackle such challenges it is important to encourage all states to follow the resolution 77/225 of 15 December 2022 for Combating intolerance against people based on religion or belief adopted by the General Assembly and The Human Rights Council.^[22] To address the global increase in religious violence, peace agreements must be formed via dialogue and peace-building initiatives. Lastly, it would be beneficial for religious organizations, leaders, and interfaith communities to take a more proactive approach by spreading positive values both online and offline.^{[31][32]} Effective interfaith collaborations also require more promotion because, in our erratic and divided world, the need for emblems of joint action across religious boundaries is greater than ever.^{[31][32]}

7. Source Evaluation:

To make my report as informative as possible and to explore as many perspectives as possible; I have used a wide range of sources, with consideration of various forms of merit like- relevance, evidence used, bias, and recency. As this topic is not considered a popular subject of discussion, my report consists of a few unrecognized research papers and reports.

The articles and reports I have referred to from APA, Science Direct, HRW, and USIP are not recently written or updated, thus, do not contain relevance to many recent issues and as a result, reduce their reliability.

To ensure that this report constitutes and evaluates the issues as well as perspectives of the modern world, I have included sources like- Cambridge University Press, BBC News, CFR, etc. which also include issues from recent months and years.

Some sources like- The Wire may include a potential bias that supports a particular perspective. The Pew Research Centre and IDR lack authenticity either by not disclosing data sources, or not having expert verification, limiting their reliability. As most of my sources are government or international Organisations without dates and/or authors, the bulk of my sources don't have a publication date and/or author.

Considering the given factors, analysis, and evaluation, I have included sources like- BBC News, UNESCO, OHCHR, HRW, CFR, The World Bank, and COE that are authorized and considered to be reliable.

8. Personal Perspective:

I conducted interviews and questionnaires with various university professors regarding this issue to educate myself on this topic. Prof. Graham M. Jones from MIT says, "The "idealists" like Max Weber believed that systems of beliefs could shape how people behave, and if people believe they are superior, they will act like they are, hence, subordinating others. The "materialists" like Karl Marx believed that if people got more power than others, they would create systems of belief so that everyone believed them." After being exposed to a new perspective, I realized how we as humans created a hierarchy based on

beliefs and how this led to conflicts as one strives to prove themselves to be of a higher status than the other.

Prof. Kenneth Garden from Tufts University says, “The role of “belief systems” in inequality can be difficult to pin down. Was Christianity a factor? Centuries before that, Christian European societies were among the poorest and least scientifically advanced. Still today there are both rich and poor majority Christian countries. So, at a minimum, we would have to conclude that Christianity cannot be the sole factor.” This allowed me to widen my scope of thinking and consider more aspects of the world in my report. Many professors from Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Cambridge University, etc. have also recommended the works of Prof. Diana Eck, through which I explored the topic of “Religious Pluralism”; as well as a wide range of literature on the topic which has also made its way into my report.

Before writing this report and divulgence to such information my views on the topic were biased and obscure, but by researching, interviewing, and studying on the topic, I have come to understand that neither side of the argument is conventionally right or wrong. We, as humans, need a belief or a belief system to understand the meaning of life and simply doing that cannot be wrong. I simply presumed that religion and beliefs were the sole contributors to the violence occurring, but considering how humanity has influenced such beliefs has altered my thinking. Now I truly understand the extent of this issue and how it affects not only people but multiple nations. It is devastating for me as a teenager to comprehend how adults who are responsible for guiding and supporting one’s country are endangering the lives of their people based on the beliefs and opinions of others.

9. Conclusion:

Through the course of my report, I have successfully, analyzed, and evaluated studies, and achieved the preset objectives of this paper by examining the Global, National/Local, and personal perspectives on how seemingly innocuous belief systems that aim to bring people together are gradually transformed into the causes of social inequality and conflict.

We still observe nations and communities turning to inhumane measures because of one’s beliefs. Even though religious inequality cannot be the only factor contributing to conflict in these situations, we cannot deny that some groups were targeted because of their religious affiliation.^[15] I truly believe that our world can achieve peace by co-existing and respecting others without any regard for their beliefs. It is imperative to take action on this issue of utmost importance before we lose or endanger any more innocent lives.

As Montesquieu once said,

“Religious wars are not caused by the fact that there is more than one religion, but by the spirit of intolerance... the spread of which can only be regarded as the total eclipse of human reason.”^[33]