

**Shame and punishment:
An international comparative study on the effects of religious affiliation
and religiosity on attitudes to offending¹**

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effects of having a religious affiliation and of an individual's level of religiosity on social norms about victimless crimes. Two mechanisms are hypothesized to influence these norms: having a religious affiliation, via external sanctioning by others and religiosity via internal sanctioning. In addition, it was predicted that the effects of internal sanctioning would be stronger than the effects of external sanctioning. To test these hypotheses, we used the data from the *World Values Survey* (WVS) 1981-2004. The final dataset contains information on 128,243 respondents residing in 70 countries. The results of the multivariate analyses show that having a religious affiliation, as well as a higher level of religiosity result in a stronger condemnation of victimless crimes and that the effects of religiosity are stronger than the effects of belonging to a religious group.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of religion for the development and maintenance of the social order within societies has long been recognized (Durkheim, 1912 [1995]), based on the argument that religion contributes to the integration of individual actors into society. According to some, societies without religion would be characterized by anti-social behaviour and ultimately run the danger of disintegrating (Olson, 1990). Over the years, the contribution of religion to the functioning of society has been empirically investigated by concentrating on its relation with crime. Previous studies in the field focused on the behaviour of citizens. Debates about whether, to what extent, and in what manner religion influences behaviour are far from resolved (Hirschi & Stark, 1969; Burkett & White, 1974; Elifson, Petersen & Hadaway, 1983; Sloan & Potvin, 1986; Pettersson, 1991; Cochran, Wood & Arneklev, 1994).

In the study reported in this article, we contribute to the literature by focusing on another effect that religion may have and which has received less attention from researchers, namely the extent to which it is related to citizens' attitudes toward committing crime. We restrict the analysis to victimless crimes such as tax evasion and fare-dodging in the public transportation system. These kinds of behaviour are prohibited by law, but people may hold divergent opinions on the extent to which such conduct is justifiable or worthy of condemnation. Besides the formal *legal norm* that certain types of behaviour are against the law, informal *social norms* exist that play a role in everyday life. People generally comply with legal norms because non-compliance can lead to punishment. The attitude that people have toward various crimes reflects their social norms. A process of sanctioning underlies the origin and maintenance of these social norms. This sanctioning can be positive, when people follow the social norms, as well as negative, when they violate social norms (Coleman, 1990).

Furthermore, this study on the relationship between religion and norms toward victimless crimes distinguishes between two aspects of religion that might affect social

norms, namely *belonging to a certain religious organization* and someone's *religiosity* (Robertson, 1970; Campbell & Coles, 1973). Even though researchers have made a distinction between them before, their differences have received little systematic attention in empirical studies on the effects of religion. The distinction is relevant, however, as it is possible that both aspects of religion independently influence social norms by different mechanisms. The first mechanism might be termed *external sanctioning*. This is the case when an individual is punished for deviating from the social norm that exists within a group and rewarded for following the social norm. This mechanism exists if people are part of a social group and a religion is an example of such a micro-society. The second mechanism is *internal sanctioning*. In this case, positive and negative sanctioning is not the consequence of belonging to a certain social group, but rather of someone's own conviction that certain conduct is appropriate or not. This mechanism operates when a person has internalized certain norms. It is expected that citizens' religiosity influences their norms, independent of whether they belong to a specific religious group or not. The extent to which external sanctioning as a result of belonging to a religious affiliation and internal sanctions as a result of religiosity affect citizens' social norms, and thus their attitudes toward victimless crimes, is explored in this study.

Previous studies on the relationship between religion and social norms have predominantly been based on data from different religious groups within the same country. These studies increase insight in the effects of religion, but they do not take account of the national context in which these effects are studied - for example the number of people that belong to a certain religion or the manner in which formal law enforcement is organized. By comparing the effects of religion *across* countries it is possible to control for the effects of these national contexts. The present study does so by using data from the *World Values Survey (WVS)* which contains information about individuals in many countries collected

between 1981 and 2004. In this manner, we are able to use data on 128,243 respondents across 70 countries.

The article is organized as follows. In the next section, we expand upon what we mean by victimless crimes and social norms. After that, specific hypotheses are formulated regarding the relationship between religion and attitudes toward offences. These will be tested in the analyses to follow. In the final section, we conclude with a discussion of our research findings.

ATTITUDES ABOUT VICTIMLESS CRIMES

In the literature, several characteristics of crimes have been distinguished. First, crime seriousness varies from relatively minor offences to serious crimes. Previous studies have shown that crime seriousness, in the sense of the consequences of the crime for individual victims or society as a whole, is related to the extent to which one condemns crimes. While serious crimes like murder and homicide are considered criminal by virtually everyone, there is far less consensus about the gravity of minor offences such as speeding, vandalism, and fare-dodging (Evans & Scott, 1984). Second, a distinction can be made between crimes with a victim, where the rights of others are directly violated or threatened, and victimless crimes. As attitudes toward minor, victimless crimes show greater variation, the present study is limited to these crimes. The crimes examined in this study are: benefit fraud; taking bribes; tax evasion; and fare-dodging on public transport. These behaviours are illegal in every country included in the analysis and that can therefore lead to a formal sanction. However, as they are not very serious and do not involve direct victims, it is conceivable that people may be tempted to commit such an offence if they have the opportunity to do so.

In addition to formal rules that maintain order in a society, social norms (Posner, 1997) exist which influence the extent to which citizens endorse formal rules. People can

disagree on the justifiability of certain crimes; some will judge certain victimless crimes as less serious or even permissible while others will strongly condemn them. The fact that formal rules are not always endorsed by social norms can be illustrated with the effects of religion in, for instance, Dutch and Belgian societies. Here, we can see that dominant religions condemn abortion and gay marriage although these behaviours are permitted under present law, and that they approve other behaviours that are in conflict with the law, like (under certain circumstances) helping illegal immigrants.

MECHANISMS FOR SOCIAL NORMS

Different mechanisms have been proposed to explain why people subscribe to certain social norms. The manner in which these mechanisms exert their influence on social norms is usually explained by the benefits accruing to those who follow the social norm and the costs incurred for deviating from the norm. Here, we study the effects of two of these mechanisms, namely *external sanctioning* and *internal sanctioning* (Posner, 1997; Young, 2008). Both mechanisms influence the costs and benefits resulting from deviating from and conforming to an existing social norm, but the manner in which they exert their influence differs. External sanctioning occurs when other group members reward and punish compliance with, and deviance from social norms. The presence of others is essential for the effectiveness of this mechanism. This is not the case for internal sanctioning, where someone punishes or rewards him- or herself for complying with or deviating from an internalized social norm. The two mechanisms are related to two aspects of religion, namely belonging to a religious organization and individuals' level of religiosity.

External sanctions: belonging to a religious organization

People may join social groups for a number of reasons. For example, they may do so because

it enables them to fulfil a goal that they cannot reach on their own, or because the objective of the group appeals to them. Individual members within these groups see to it that others obey their group's social norms. By following group norms, people gain social recognition; deviating from the group norms can result in sanctions such as condemnation or punishment by other group members (Coleman, 1990). These sanctions are imposed on individuals by other group members and are therefore referred to as *external sanctioning*. External sanctioning leads to conforming behaviour by individual group members. As long as the benefits of belonging to the group outweigh the costs of conforming to the group norms, individuals will remain a member of the group (Hechter, 1987).

Religious organizations are an example of groups in which external sanctioning takes place. Being a member of such social groups gives people the opportunity to collectively avow their faith and work towards common goals such as collecting money for good causes and caring for others within the group. As the members meet on a regular basis (for example when attending religious services) they can observe each others' behaviour. This makes it possible to reward desired, and punish undesired behaviours. In this way, external sanctioning contributes to the adaptation of the existing group norms. As noted, it can be expected that religious groups will disapprove of victimless crimes. This leads to the following hypothesis: "*People who belong to a religious organization condemn victimless crimes more strongly than people who do not belong to a religious organization*" (**Hypothesis 1**).

Internal sanctions: religiosity

The rewarding and punishing of certain behaviours and attitudes can also stem from within the individual. In such cases we speak of *internal sanctioning*, which results from internalized norms. When norms are internalized, an individual accepts that certain behaviours are good or bad and that deviating from these norms will lead to internal sanctions such as feelings of

guilt or shame (Coleman, 1990; Lindbeck, 1995).

Belonging to a religious organization itself does not necessarily imply that individuals have internalized the group's social norms. It is conceivable that people who belong to a religion endorse certain social norms only as a result of the presence of other group members and not as a result of their own convictions. The internalization of social norms means that religious beliefs guide people's behaviour. This introduces another characteristic of religions, namely peoples' religiosity. Although it might seem plausible to assume that belonging to a religious affiliation and religiosity are strongly related, this is not necessarily the case. First, the level of religiosity of the members of the group might vary within religious affiliations. The social norms within these groups can therefore be influenced by external sanctions, while the level of religiosity can have a complementary effect. Second, religiosity is not restricted to people who belong to a religious affiliation: people who do not consider themselves a member of a particular religious group can still be religious. Thus, on the one hand there are people who belong to a religious affiliation, but experience a very low level of religiosity, and on the other hand there are people who do not belong to a specific religious affiliation but who report a high level of religiosity (Robertson, 1970; Campbell & Coles, 1973). If having a religious affiliation and religiosity turn out to have distinctive effects on the social norms of people, this is a reason to distinguish these two characteristics of religions. Assuming that religions offer a normative framework in which crimes are condemned, we further assume that the internalization of these norms will lead to a condemnation of these crimes. This leads to the second hypothesis: *"The level of condemnation of victimless crimes is positively related to the level of religiosity"* (**Hypothesis 2**).

The difference between external and internal sanctions

In principle, the assumed outcome of internal and external sanctioning is the same, namely

that it leads to conformity with the social norms that exist within a certain group. However, the manner in which this outcome is reached differs. External sanctions are the result of *being a member of a social group*. When someone deviates from the social norms of a certain group this will lead to punishment, while following the norms will lead to reward by the other group members. In the case of internal sanctioning, the punishments and rewards result from *the person's own conviction* that a certain act is justifiable or not. Therefore, external sanctioning requires the presence of others, while internal sanctioning does not. In the latter case, people are convinced that the norm needs to be followed, even though no others are present (French & Raven, 1959). As it can be assumed that it is impossible for the members of a group to constantly monitor each others' attitudes and behaviours, external sanctioning never functions optimally. While people can hide their attitudes and behaviours from others, they cannot do so for themselves. Therefore, it can be assumed that when they themselves are convinced that something is prohibited this will affect their behaviour and attitudes – even when no other group members are present. The third hypothesis is therefore as follows: *“Religiosity is a better predictor of the level of disapproval of victimless crimes than belonging to a religious organization” (Hypothesis 3).*

DATA AND METHOD

Data

Data from multiple waves of the *World Values Survey (WVS)* are used to test the three hypotheses. The WVS is a large scale, international survey in which citizens are questioned on social, cultural and political norms and values and it is based on – and integrated with – the prior *European Values Study* (Halman, 2001; European Values Study, 2008; World Values Survey, 2008). Consisting of almost 270,000 respondents from more than 80 countries, it is the largest standardized survey of its kind. Until 2004, four waves had taken place – each of

the countries participated at least once. In nationally representative samples, each time at least 1,000 face-to-face interviews were conducted with citizens of 18 years and older. As the variables needed for the present study are not available for every country and wave, we had to use a selection of the total dataset. This resulted in a dataset consisting of information on 128,243 persons across 70 countries.

Dependent variable: justifiability of victimless crimes

In the WVS, respondents are asked to what extent they find certain behaviours justifiable. Some of these behaviours are not forbidden by law in all countries under study and can therefore not unambiguously be defined as a crime. Only behaviours that are forbidden by law in all countries, about which respondents in all countries were questioned in each wave, and behaviours that are not directed at individuals, were used in the present study. This is the case with four behaviours, namely how acceptable people find the following statements: “claiming government benefits to one is not entitled”, “accepting a bribe in the course of professional duties”, “cheating on taxes”, and “avoiding paying the fare on public transport”. For each item, respondents were asked to rate the level of justifiability on a scale from (1) never justifiable to (10) always justifiable. The four items were combined into the scale measuring “*justifiability of victimless crimes*” (Cronbach’s Alpha = .71) by adding the values on the four original items. This scale variable is used as an indicator of the extent to which victimless crimes are perceived to be unjustifiable and has a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 40.

Independent variables: religious affiliation and religiosity

Respondents are asked whether they belonged to an organised religion and if so, which one. Although we hypothesize that there is an overall effect of belonging to a religious organization and the disapproval of victimless crimes, we acknowledge that the intensity of

this relationship may differ across religious affiliations. To control for this, three dummy variables were constructed to define whether someone belongs to a Christian, an Islamic, or some other organised religion. “No religious affiliation” is used as the reference category in the analysis. The level of *religiosity* is measured with the question “How important is God in your life?” (1 = not at all important; 10 = very important). This variable is standardized in order to make the strength of the effect comparable with the effect of belonging to a religion.

Control variables

Because the level to which people see victimless crimes as wrong may be influenced by factors other than religious affiliation and religiosity, some control variables are added to the analyses that are available in the WVS and that have been used in previous research. These are the demographic variables *gender* and *age* (in years), the socio-economic factor *level of education* (with a dummy variable for ‘average education’ and for ‘high education’ and ‘low education’ being the reference group), and a variable indicating the level of informal social control, measured with the variable “how important is your family in your life?”. The effect of this variable on the *importance of the family* is measured with a dummy variable for ‘family important’ and ‘family very important’ and with ‘family unimportant’ being the reference group.

Method of analysis

The data used in this study are measured at the individual level, but it is probable that these measures are not independent, as the respondents in this study originate from 70 different countries. The dominant cultures and religion, as well as legislation, and legal penalties, will all vary between these countries. Therefore, the attitudes of people *within* a country might be more alike than those of people *between* countries. In addition, some countries took part in the

WVS more than once. Even though the WVS is not a panel study, the data gathered within countries in different waves are likely to be related. One of the assumptions of traditional regression methods, like Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression, is that the independent variables need to be independent of each other. It is unlikely that this assumption is met and therefore multilevel regression modelling is applied to analyse these nested data (Goldstein, 1995; Snijders & Bosker, 1999), leading to a model accounting for variance at the individual level (level 1), the WVS wave (level 2), and the country level (level 3).

The analysis was carried out in different steps. First, an empty model was estimated, which serves as a reference point to evaluate the fit of the rest of the models. In Model 1, the influence of the control variables is studied. Next, the effects of belonging to a religious affiliation (Model 2a) and of religiosity (Model 2b) are separately estimated. All variables under study are included simultaneously in Model 3 in order to compare the effects of religious affiliation and religiosity. The log-likelihood is then estimated for every model. The difference in log-likelihood between two models (called ‘deviance’) tells us to what extent the new model is an improvement (has a better ‘fit’) in comparison to the previous model.

RESULTS

Descriptive results and results of the bivariate analyses

Table 1 shows that the majority of respondents belong to a Christian religion, followed by respondents who are not part of any organised religion, and respondents who affirm membership of the Islamic religion. A minority of respondents belong to some other religious groups.

TABLE 1

In the present sample, members of the different religious affiliations are not equally distributed across the 70 countries. The majority of the Christian respondents live in Spain

(5.5% of the total sample) and South Africa (4.1%), the majority of Islamic respondents reside in Turkey (17.8%) and Egypt (8.5%), and the majority of respondents belonging to a remaining religious affiliation resides in India (32.2%) and Japan (10.7%).

Using Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs), we tested whether the level of religiosity differs between religious affiliations and between countries. The level of religiosity turns out to differ between countries ($F_{(69, 128,173)} = 1,018.80, p < .01$), as well as between religions ($F_{(3, 128,239)} = 12,585.19, p < .01$). Respondents living in Pakistan, Jordan, and Morocco are, on average, the most religious (they have scores of 10.00, 9.97, and 9.97, respectively) while respondents living in the Czech Republic, Sweden, and Denmark are the least religious (with scores of 3.82, 3.94, and 3.99). Table 1 shows that people belonging to Islamic affiliations have the highest religiosity scores; people who do not report any religious affiliation score the lowest on the religiosity scale.

Religious affiliations differ with respect to the extent to which people believe that the victimless crimes under study are justifiable ($F_{(3, 128,239)} = 963.38, p < .01$). A post-hoc test shows that all pair-wise differences in perceived justifiability are statistically significant, except from the Islamic respondents and the members of some other religious affiliations. On average, Islamic respondents and those of any other organised religion score the lowest on the crime condemnation scale, followed by Christians, while those who do not belong to any religious affiliation score the highest. Finally, the level of perceived justifiability of criminal acts differs statistically significant between countries ($F_{(69, 128,173)} = 229.64, p < .01$).

Multivariate analyses

Table 2 provides an overview of the results of the multilevel analyses. The model that only includes the control variables (Model 1) is presented in the first data column. All control variables turn out to have a statistically significant negative effect on the perceived

justifiability of victimless crimes. In general, females judge these actions to be less justifiable than men, older people less than younger people, people with an average or higher education less than people with a lower education, and people who find their family important or very important less than those who find their family unimportant. The log-likelihood of this model is lower than the log-likelihood of the empty model (which only controls for the country of residence and the wave of the WVS): the deviance is 5,063.80 ($p < .01$). Thus, the 'fit' of the model increases by taking into account the control variables.

TABLE 2

In Models 2a and 2b, the effects of membership of a religious affiliation and of religiosity are studied separately. Adding religious affiliation membership to the model (Model 2a) increases the model fit as the deviance in log-likelihood with Model 1 is 184.50 ($p < .01$). People who belong to a Christian, an Islamic, or some other religion judged the victimless crimes to be less justifiable than people who do not belong to an organised religion. This is in accordance with the first hypothesis, in which we stated that members of a religious affiliation would condemn victimless crimes more strongly than those who do not belong to a religious affiliation. There seem to be differences between the religious affiliations, as Islamic people are least likely to perceive these crimes as justifiable, followed by Christians and people who belong to some other religious affiliation. However, we did not test whether these differences are statistically significant. Model 2b shows the effects of religiosity. The fit of the model increases (deviance with Model 1 = 502.40, $p < .01$). The results are in agreement with Hypothesis 2, which stated that the level of religiosity is negatively related to the perceived justifiability of victimless crimes.

Model 3 includes membership of a religious affiliation as well as religiosity. Even though the effects of both variables are somewhat smaller than in Model 2a and 2b, they both remain significant predictors of the perceived justifiability of victimless crimes. Hypothesis 3

stated that religiosity is a better predictor than belonging to a religious affiliation. Whether this is the case has been tested in two different ways. First, Model 2a and 2b have been compared. This comparison shows us that the deviance of Model 2b is significantly larger than the deviance of Model 2a (deviance Model 2b from Model 2a = 317.90, $p < .01$), which means that Model 2b has a significantly better 'fit' than Model 2a. This indicates that religiosity indeed has a stronger effect on the condemnation of victimless crimes than religious affiliation membership does. Second, the standardised coefficients in Model 3 confirm the stronger negative effect of religiosity. Therefore, the results are in accordance with Hypothesis 3.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this study we empirically tested the effects of religious affiliation and religiosity on social norms about victimless crimes. The analyses have shown that religion leads to a stronger condemnation of committing victimless crimes via external sanctions (due to belonging to a religious affiliation) as well as internal sanctions (due to the internalization of norms). In addition, internal sanctions are shown to have a stronger effect on the condemnation of victimless crimes than external sanctions do. This study therefore demonstrates that the norms people have towards these offences are influenced in two different ways, namely both by belonging to a particular religion and by the internalization of norms. Although it is of importance to take account of the religious affiliation to which people belong, we have shown that citizens' religiosity is of even greater importance when trying to explain public reactions to criminal behaviour. Future studies should further develop the distinction between belonging to a religious affiliation and religiosity and test their effects on alternative norms or behaviour, in addition to the norms investigated in the present study. Further study is also needed to answer the extent to which external and internal sanctions are relevant for norms in

other areas such as attitudes towards the family, work, and politics.

We hypothesized that belonging to a religious affiliation has consequences for social norms and the results of the empirical analyses were supportive. One restriction of this study is that – except for two main affiliations – no distinction is made between different religious affiliations. The analyses indicate that it would be useful to make such a distinction in future studies, as we found differences in the level of condemnation of victimless crimes between the main religions distinguished in this study. There are two plausible explanations for this difference, based on the assumption that belonging to a religious group leads to external sanctions. First, it is possible that the religions distinguished in the present study differ with respect to their normative content, in the sense that the moral frameworks of some religions are more strongly related to the condemnation of victimless crimes than those of other religions. In that case, it is possible that religious affiliations hold different norms regarding the seriousness of the crimes, resulting in higher sanctions. Studying this would require a narrative analysis of the different religions. A second plausible explanation is that the differences between the religious affiliations is not so much a result of the perceived seriousness of violating social norms and of the sanctions, but more a result of the likelihood that violations of the social norms are observed by others. Instead of a narrative analysis of the different religious groups, this would require studying the social structure of these groups in order to determine whether religious groups differ with regard to the probability that group members sanction each other.

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Table 1
Descriptive statistics

Religious affiliation	Respondents N (%)	Religiosity^(a) Mean (SD)	Attitudes to offending^(b) Mean (SD)
None	32,048 (18.00)	4.46 (3.46)	10.24 (6.97)
Christian	74,934 (58.40)	7.77 (2.74)	9.34 (6.55)
Islamic	20,155 (15.70)	9.29 (1.73)	7.37 (5.46)
Remaining	10,106 (7.90)	7.99 (2.56)	7.50 (6.05)
Total	128,243 (100.00)	7.43 (3.12)	9.05 (6.50)

Notes:

^(a) “Religiosity” is measured with the item “How important is God in your life?”, ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 10 (very important).

^(b) “Attitudes to offending” is measured on a scale ranging from 4 (never justifiable) to 40 (always justifiable).

Table 2
Multilevel analysis findings

	(Model 1)	(Model 2a)	(Model 2b)	(Model 3)
Religious affiliation				
None (reference)	---	---	---	---
Christian		-.299** (.025)		-.125** (.026)
Islamic		-.330** (.032)		-.185** (.033)
Remaining		-.182** (.026)		-.094** (.030)
Religiosity				
			-.477** (.021)	-.431** (.023)
Control variables				
<i>Demographic</i>				
Gender female	-.274** (.017)	-.259** (.017)	-.224** (.017)	-.223** (.017)
Age	-1.122** (.018)	-1.106** (.018)	-1.085** (.018)	-1.083** (.018)
<i>Socio-economic</i>				
Low education (reference)	---	---	---	---
Average education	-.188** (.020)	-.205** (.020)	-.218** (.020)	-.224** (.020)
High education	-.161** (.021)	-.172** (.021)	-.182** (.021)	-.186** (.021)
<i>Informal social control</i>				
Family unimportant (reference)	---	---	---	---
Family important	-.817** (.044)	.796** (.044)	-.772** (.044)	-.767** (.044)
Family very important	-.353** (.044)	-.342** (.044)	-.337** (.044)	-.334** (.044)
-2 log-likelihood	823,437.40	823,252.90	822,935.00	822,896.00
Deviance	5,063.80** ^(a)	184.50** ^(b)	502.40** ^(b)	541.40** ^(b)
Variance level 3	1.245**	1.242**	1.242**	1.243**
Variance level 2	4.164**	3.920**	3.874**	3.745**
Variance level 1	35.846**	35.795**	35.707**	35.697**

Notes: 128,243 respondents in 70 countries

Standardized regression coefficients are reported; standard errors are given between brackets

Empty model: -2 log-likelihood = 828,501.20; variance level 3 = 1.275; variance level 2 = 3.954; variance level 1 = 37.291

^(a) Compared to the empty model

^(b) Compared to Model 1

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$