

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY CONFORMITY IN RADICAL ENVIRONMENTS: A REVIEW OF THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

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Abstract

Religious-based radicalism is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be understood solely through ideological or political perspectives; it also requires an in-depth analysis of individual and group psychological dynamics. One of the key psychological mechanisms involved in the internalization of radical ideology is conformity, defined as an individual's tendency to adjust beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors to align with group norms. This article aims to revise and expand the discussion on religious identity conformity within radical environments from the perspective of the psychology of religion. Using a qualitative library research method, this study reviews literature from psychology of religion, social psychology, sociology of religion, and contemporary radicalism studies. The findings indicate that religious identity conformity is driven by the need for existential certainty, psychological security, social acceptance, and strong normative group pressures legitimized by religious discourse. From the psychology of religion perspective, radicalism reflects a narrowing of religious meaning that neglects reflective, empathetic, and humanistic dimensions of religion. This article is expected to contribute theoretically to psychology of religion studies and to provide a conceptual foundation for preventive strategies against religious radicalism through the development of moderate, reflective, and inclusive religious identities.

Keywords: conformity, religious identity, radicalism, psychology of religion

INTRODUCTION

Religiously-based radicalism is one of the crucial issues in the socio-religious dynamics of contemporary society. This phenomenon is not only linked to matters of security and social stability, but also touches upon deeper psychological and cultural dimensions, particularly in the way individuals understand, experience and express their religious identity. In various contexts, radicalism often manifests itself in the form of a literal, exclusive, and anti-pluralistic understanding of religion, thereby potentially giving rise to intolerant attitudes and justifications for acts of violence.

Various studies indicate that the spread of radical ideology does not always stem from a deep theological understanding, but rather from social and psychological processes that unfold gradually. Individuals who are in a state of self-discovery, uncertainty about the meaning of life, or under certain social pressures tend to be more vulnerable to religious narratives that offer certainty, a clear moral stance, and a sense of belonging to a group. In this context, religion functions as a source of meaning and identity capable of providing a sense of psychological

The approach of the psychology of religion is relevant to understanding this phenomenon because it views religion not merely as a system of doctrines, but as a system of meaning that exists within the individual's subjective experience. The psychology of religion emphasises that an individual's religiosity is influenced by psychological needs, religious orientation, and social interactions that shape the way individuals interpret religious teachings. When this function of meaning-making is distorted, religion risks being reduced to a rigid and exclusive tool of ideological legitimisation.

One of the psychological mechanisms that plays a key role in this process is conformity. Conformity refers to the tendency of individuals to align their attitudes, beliefs and behaviour with group norms in order to gain social acceptance and avoid rejection. In radical religious environments, conformity is not merely social in nature but also gains religious legitimacy, so that obedience to the group is understood as a form of religious devotion. Such normative pressure encourages individuals to internalise the group's values and identity without undergoing an adequate process of critical reflection.

Furthermore, the formation of religious identity within radical groups often occurs in a dichotomous manner through a clear distinction between one's own group and other groups. This pattern strengthens internal solidarity, yet simultaneously fosters an exclusive attitude and a rejection of difference. Religious identity is no longer understood as a reflective personal process, but rather as a collective identity that must be upheld through uniformity of attitude and belief.

Based on the above, this study focuses on the conformity of religious identity within radical environments, utilising two main theoretical frameworks: the concept of conformity in social psychology and the perspective of the psychology of religion regarding religion as a system of meaning. With this approach, the research is expected to uncover the psychological roots of radicalism and provide a conceptual foundation for strengthening a moderate, reflective, and inclusive form of religiosity.

ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION

The analysis of the situation in this study is aimed at understanding the psychosocial context that underlies the formation of religious identity conformity in radical environments. Religious radicalism does not emerge suddenly, but develops in certain social situations that allow for the gradual internalisation of ideology. These situations are characterised by intense interaction between the psychological needs of individuals and the exclusive social structures

In many cases, individuals in environments with high levels of uncertainty whether economic, social or personal identity tend to seek meaning and direction in life. Kelompok keagamaan radikal hadir dan menawarkan narasi keagamaan yang sederhana dan absolut yang memberikan kejelasan moral. This situation creates a psychological state conducive to conformity, as individuals feel that conforming to the group is the safest way to obtain a sense of belonging and social recognition.

From the perspective of social psychology, the situation demonstrates the strong influence of normative social pressure (normative social influence), in which individuals are driven to conform to group norms in order to avoid rejection or social sanctions. This pressure is reinforced by informational social influence, where the group is perceived as the sole source of truth in understanding religious teachings. In this context, individuals not only conform outwardly but also internalize the group's beliefs as their personal truth.

A radical environment is also characterized by the lack of space for dialogue and critical reflection. Differences in viewpoints are often positioned as threats to the purity of religious teachings or to group loyalty. As a result, individuals tend to avoid critical attitudes and choose conformity as an adaptive strategy. Over time, this condition shapes a dichotomous mindset that rigidly divides religious reality into categories of "right-wrong" or "us-them."

From the perspective of the psychology of religion, the analysis of this situation indicates a distortion in the function of religiosity. Religion, which should serve as a means of spiritual reflection and moral development, is reduced to an ideological collective identity. In this context, conformity to religious identity becomes the primary mechanism for maintaining the stability of radical groups while simultaneously weakening the psychological autonomy of individuals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study indicate that religious identity conformity is the primary psychological mechanism involved in the formation and perpetuation of radical religious environments. Conformity does not emerge as a standalone process, but rather as the result of a complex interaction between individual psychological needs, group normative pressure, and the construction of an exclusive religious identity. These findings are consistent with the research objectives as formulated in the abstract, namely to understand radicalism as a psycho-religious phenomenon rooted in the distortion of religious meaning and the dynamics of closed groups.

Conformity as a Psychological Mechanism in Radical Environments

Conformity is one of the primary psychological mechanisms that plays a role in the formation and maintenance of radical religious environments. Based on this study, it is evident that individuals within radical groups tend to consistently align their attitudes, beliefs and behavioural patterns with group norms. This adjustment is not only evident in external behavioural aspects, such as the manner of worship or religious symbols, but also extends to internal dimensions such as ways of thinking, moral judgements, and the interpretation of religious teachings. This indicates that conformity operates as a deep-seated and ongoing psychological process.

From a social psychology perspective, conformity is understood as an individual's response to group pressure, particularly when the individual is in an ambiguous or uncertain situation. Asch (1951), through his classic experiment, demonstrated that individuals may disregard their own judgements in order to follow the views of the majority group. This finding is relevant to the context of radical religious environments, where individuals often find themselves in a fragile psychological state due to an identity crisis, existential anxiety, or social pressure. In such situations, radical groups offer certainty and clarity of stance, making individuals feel safer when conforming.

The unique aspect of conformity within radical religious environments lies in the religious legitimacy that accompanies it. The group's norms and beliefs are positioned as representations of absolute religious truth, so that compliance with the group is interpreted not only as a social necessity, but also as a moral and spiritual obligation. This religiously legitimised pressure to conform has a stronger binding force than ordinary social pressure. Sulastrri (2021) explains that within closed religious groups, claims of singular truth are often used to reinforce members' compliance and limit the space for critical reflection.

In this context, conformity functions as a psychological adaptation mechanism that provides a sense of security, certainty, and identity stability. Individuals who conform to group norms gain social recognition and a sense of belonging to a community considered morally and religiously correct. However, this adaptive mechanism also has significant psychological consequences. Continuous conformity has the potential to weaken an individual's autonomy of thought and hinder their ability to critically evaluate religious teachings.

From the perspective of the psychology of religion, this situation reflects a shift in the function of religion. Religion, which should serve as a means of personal reflection and moral

development, has instead been reduced to a normative system that demands uniformity. Individuals are directed more towards conforming to the group's interpretation than developing a reflective and contextual understanding of religion. This phenomenon indicates that conformity operates not only at the social level but also influences the individual's cognitive and spiritual structures.

This finding aligns with Hogg's (2014) view, which states that in situations of identity uncertainty, individuals tend to be drawn to groups that offer clear normative structures and identities. Radical environments provide such structures through strict rules and rigid moral boundaries. Conformity then becomes a means for individuals to reduce identity anxiety, even if it means sacrificing flexibility of thought and openness to difference.

Overall, conformity within radical religious environments can be understood as an ambivalent psychological mechanism. On the one hand, conformity provides a sense of security and certainty for individuals seeking meaning and identity. On the other hand, however, excessive conformity reinforces absolutist thinking and hinders the development of mature religious consciousness. Within the framework of the psychology of religion, these findings confirm that conformity plays a central role in the process of radicalisation and needs to be comprehensively understood as the basis for efforts to prevent religiously-based radicalism.

Religious Identity and Ingroup–Outgroup Dynamics

Religious identity is a central aspect of the psychological dynamics of radical groups. Based on this study, it is evident that religious identity within radical circles is not formed in a personal and reflective manner, but is instead constructed collectively through group membership. Individuals tend to define themselves based on their affiliation with a particular religious group, whilst identities outside the group are viewed as different, even opposed. This pattern indicates that religious identity functions as a social marker that reinforces the boundary between “us” and “them”.

From a social psychology perspective, these dynamics can be explained through the social identity theory proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). This theory explains that individuals have a tendency to classify themselves into specific social groups (ingroups) and distinguish them from other groups (outgroups). This categorisation process aims to enhance self-esteem and provide a sense of belonging. In radical religious environments, this process occurs intensely because religious identity is positioned as the primary an identity that supersedes other social identities.

This study shows that the construction of religious identity within radical groups is dichotomous and exclusive. The ingroup is perceived as morally and religiously correct, whilst the outgroup is often viewed as deviant, heretical or threatening. Such patterns of meaning reinforce internal solidarity and group loyalty, but simultaneously foster intolerant attitudes towards difference. Religious identity ceases to be a means of spiritual development and instead becomes a rigid tool of social distinction.

The findings of this study align with Hogg's (2014) view that, in conditions of identity uncertainty, individuals tend to seek out groups that offer a clear and definitive identity structure. Radical environments provide this clarity through simple and absolute definitions of identity. By joining a group, individuals gain a sense of psychological security because their identity has been collectively defined. Conformity to religious identity then functions as a mechanism to maintain that clarity of identity.

However, strong ingroup-outgroup dynamics also have significant psychological consequences. Individuals who have internalised group identity tend to assess social reality solely through the group's perspective. Views and values from outside the group are difficult to accept because they are perceived as a threat to collective identity. Sulastri (2021) asserts that within exclusive religious groups, group identity is often maintained through narratives of threat that frame outsiders as ideological opponents.

From the perspective of the psychology of religion, this situation indicates a narrowing of religious experience. Religious identity, which should develop through a process of personal reflection and social dialogue, is instead frozen into a rigid collective identity. Religion loses its transformative dimension and functions more as a symbol of group membership. Individuals are judged not on the basis of spiritual depth, but on the basis of conformity to the group's identity and norms.

This study also found that ingroup-outgroup dynamics contribute to the reinforcement of conformity and radicalism. When religious identity is understood in an exclusive manner, differences of opinion are no longer viewed as variations in interpretation, but rather as forms of deviation. This closes the space for dialogue and reinforces social polarisation. A rigid religious identity serves as the basis for legitimising intolerant attitudes and the rejection of other groups.

Overall, religious identity within radical environments functions as a psychological instrument that strengthens group cohesion whilst simultaneously establishing clear symbolic boundaries against outsiders. Within the framework of the psychology of religion, these findings confirm that ingroup-outgroup dynamics play a significant role in the process

of radicalisation. An exclusively constructed religious identity not only reinforces internal conformity but also creates a social distance that hinders the development of an inclusive and dialogical form of religious pluralism.

The Need for Meaningful Certainty and Radicalism

The need for meaningful certainty is a key psychological factor influencing an individual's involvement in radical religious environments. Based on this study, it appears that individuals facing identity uncertainty, social pressure, or existential anxiety tend to seek a system of meaning capable of providing clarity and psychological stability. In this context, religion often becomes the primary reference point as it offers a comprehensive framework of meaning for understanding life and social reality.

From a religious psychology perspective, Paloutzian and Park (2013) view religion as a 'meaning system' that helps individuals interpret life experiences, manage suffering, and cope with existential uncertainty. The findings of this study indicate that radical religious groups exploit religion's function as a system of meaning by offering religious narratives that are simplistic, absolute, and minimal in ambiguity. These narratives provide instant answers to various life issues and place individuals in a moral position deemed clear and correct.

The certainty of meaning offered by radical groups holds a strong psychological appeal, particularly for individuals experiencing an identity crisis or a failure to meet their psychosocial needs. In such circumstances, the complexity of social reality is often perceived as a psychological burden. Radical groups then step in by simplifying reality into rigid dichotomies of right-wrong or halal-haram. Conformity to a radical religious identity becomes an adaptive strategy to reduce anxiety and existential confusion.

This finding aligns with Silberman's (2005) view, which asserts that religion, as a system of meaning, can function both constructively and destructively. When religion is used to open up space for personal reflection and meaning-making, it contributes to an individual's psychological well-being. However, when the religious system of meaning is monopolised by a particular group and positioned as the sole truth, religion has the potential to become a tool for ideological justification. In the context of radicalism, this monopoly on meaning restricts alternative interpretations and closes off space for dialogue.

Within the internal environment of radical groups, the need for certainty of meaning is reinforced through social and structural mechanisms. The group's hierarchical and closed structure limits members' access to sources of meaning outside the group. Individuals are directed to understand social and religious reality solely through the group's lens. This

situation reinforces individuals' psychological dependence on the group and increases the level of conformity regarding religious identity.

From a social psychology perspective, the search for certainty of meaning is also linked to the need for cognitive stability. Individuals facing ambiguity tend to seek simple and definitive explanations. Radical groups provide this certainty through doctrines that leave no room for doubt. Conformity to these doctrines is then perceived as a form of spiritual and moral success, even at the expense of the complexity of religious understanding.

This study shows that the need for certainty of meaning is not inherently negative. However, when this need is met through exclusive and absolutist religious narratives, it can fuel the process of radicalisation. Individuals become less tolerant of differences and more readily accept the legitimisation of symbolic and structural violence in the name of religion. This suggests that the fulfilment of the need for meaning, when not balanced by critical reflection, has the potential to lead to serious social consequences.

Overall, this discussion confirms that the need for certainty of meaning is a significant psychological factor in explaining individuals' involvement in radical religious environments. Within the framework of the psychology of religion, these findings indicate the importance of developing a reflective, open, and contextual system of religious meaning. Such efforts are necessary so that religion can function as a source of psychologically healthy meaning, whilst preventing the misuse of religion as a basis for justifying radicalism.

Religious Orientation and Vulnerability to Conformity

Religious orientation is an important psychological factor that influences how individuals interpret and practise religious teachings. This study found that religious orientation plays a significant role in determining an individual's level of vulnerability to religious identity conformity within a radical environment. Individuals differ not only in their level of religiosity, but also in their religious motivations and goals, which ultimately influence their response to group pressure.

Allport (1966) distinguishes religious orientation into two main categories: intrinsic and extrinsic orientation. Intrinsic religious orientation is characterised by the internalisation of religious values as a deeply felt guide to life. Conversely, extrinsic religious orientation views religion as a means to achieve other goals, such as gaining social security, status, or group acceptance. The findings of this study indicate that individuals with an extrinsic religious orientation tend to be more vulnerable to conformity pressure within radical religious environments.

In the context of radical groups, an extrinsic religious orientation finds its relevance because such groups offer various forms of psychological and social benefits. Group membership provides a sense of security, a clear social identity, and strong moral legitimacy. Individuals with an extrinsic orientation find it easier to conform to group norms because religion is understood in instrumental terms, rather than as a space for personal reflection. Conformity to religious identity then becomes a means of maintaining social standing and gaining recognition from the group.

Conversely, individuals with an intrinsic religious orientation theoretically possess the potential to resist conformity pressures. This orientation emphasises personal meaning, critical reflection, and consistency between beliefs and actions. However, the findings of this study indicate that within a closed and hierarchical radical environment, even an intrinsic orientation can be eroded. Continuous normative pressure, accompanied by religious legitimisation, has the potential to weaken an individual's moral autonomy and restrict the space for personal reflection.

From the perspective of the psychology of religion, this suggests that religious orientation does not exist in isolation, but is influenced by the social context in which the individual is situated. A radical religious environment creates a structure that restricts alternative expressions of religiosity and encourages uniformity. Individuals who initially possess an intrinsic orientation may be driven to conform in order to maintain group membership and avoid social or symbolic sanctions.

This finding is consistent with contemporary research showing that an extrinsic religious orientation is positively correlated with intolerant attitudes and a high tendency towards conformity. Sulastrri (2021) asserts that the use of religion as a tool for social legitimisation increases an individual's tendency to follow group norms without critical evaluation. In the context of radicalism, this reinforces acceptance of claims of a single truth and undermines reflective attitudes.

Furthermore, this study indicates that susceptibility to conformity is determined not only by an individual's religious orientation, but also by the intensity of group pressure and the internal structure of radical groups. Hierarchical, exclusive structures with minimal dialogue increase the likelihood of conformity, even among individuals with a relatively mature religious orientation. This confirms that radicalism is a phenomenon involving complex interactions between individual factors and the social environment.

Overall, this discussion confirms that religious orientation plays a significant role in explaining an individual's vulnerability to religious identity conformity. Within the

framework of the psychology of religion, these findings highlight the need to strengthen intrinsic religious orientation, accompanied by an open and dialogical religious environment. Such efforts are crucial to preventing destructive conformity and fostering the development of reflective and inclusive religiosity.

The Need for Cognitive Closure and the Process of Radicalisation

The need for cognitive closure is a key psychological factor in understanding the process of religiously-based radicalisation. This study shows that individuals with a high need for cognitive closure tend to avoid ambiguity and prefer explanations that are simple, certain and definitive. Within the context of a radical religious environment, this need finds fulfilment through religious doctrines that are absolute and leave no room for doubt.

Kruglanski and colleagues (2014) explain that the need for cognitive closure drives individuals to reach conclusions quickly and defend them, even when available information is limited. The findings of this study suggest that a radical environment provides ideal conditions for the fulfilment of this need. The group's doctrines are presented as absolute truths, so individuals are not encouraged to question or evaluate the teachings they receive. Conformity to the group's religious identity then serves as a psychological shortcut to achieving cognitive stability.

In practice, the need for cognitive certainty does not arise in isolation from other psychological factors. Identity uncertainty, social pressure and existential anxiety reinforce the individual's drive to seek certainty. Radical environments exploit this situation by offering a black-and-white framework of thought and minimising the complexity of social reality. Individuals are directed to understand the world through rigid right-wrong categories, thereby reducing the cognitive load arising from ambiguity.

From a social psychology perspective, this reinforces conformity and group polarisation. Individuals with a high need for cognitive certainty tend to be more compliant with group norms and more resistant to information that contradicts group beliefs. This explains why members of radical groups often display a defensive attitude towards criticism and tend to reject dialogue with outsiders. Sulastris (2021) states that a rejection of ambiguity is one of the key characteristics of exclusive religious groups.

The internal environment of radical groups also plays a role in reinforcing the need for cognitive closure. The group's hierarchical and closed structure limits members' access to alternative perspectives. Information is selected in such a way as to support the group's narrative, whilst differing views are marginalised or regarded as a threat. In these

circumstances, conforming to a religious identity becomes an adaptive strategy that enables individuals to maintain cognitive and emotional stability.

However, fulfilling the need for cognitive certainty through absolute doctrine has significant psychological and social implications. Individuals become less tolerant of differences and more readily accept the legitimacy of exclusionary actions in the name of religion. A mindset that rejects ambiguity hinders individuals' ability to understand the complexity of social reality and the diversity of religious interpretations. In the long term, this contributes to the reinforcement of radical attitudes and social polarisation.

Within the framework of the psychology of religion, these findings suggest that the need for cognitive closure acts as a key mediator between an individual's psychological needs and the structure of a radical environment. Religion, when presented as a closed system of truth, becomes an effective means of satisfying the need for cognitive certainty. However, the use of religion in this way has the potential to hinder the development of a reflective and inclusive religious consciousness.

Overall, this discussion confirms that the need for cognitive closure is a significant psychological factor in the process of radicalisation. Efforts to prevent radicalism need to consider strategies for managing the need for cognitive certainty in a healthy manner, for example through religious education that encourages tolerance of ambiguity, open dialogue, and critical thinking. Such an approach is essential to ensure that individuals do not become trapped in a destructive conformity to religious identity.

The Implications of the Psychology of Religion for the Prevention of Radicalism

From the perspective of the psychology of religion, the findings of this study confirm that radicalism is a form of distortion of religious experience. Religion loses its reflective and transformative functions, and is reduced to a rigid ideological identity. Excessive conformity to religious identity weakens an individual's moral autonomy and hinders the development of a mature religious consciousness.

Therefore, efforts to prevent radicalism cannot rely solely on security and ideological approaches. A religious psychology approach is needed to help individuals build a religious identity that is reflective, inclusive, and rooted in universal human values. Religious education that encourages dialogue, critical thinking, and spiritual maturity is key to reducing destructive conformity.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this discussion, it can be concluded that religious identity conformity is the primary psychological mechanism that plays a role in the formation and perpetuation of radical religious environments. Conformity is reinforced by the dynamics of in-group–out-group social identity, the need for certainty of meaning and cognitive certainty, and a religious orientation that tends to be extrinsic. From a religious psychology perspective, radicalism reflects a distortion of religious experience, wherein religion is reduced to a rigid ideological identity that stifles critical reflection and dialogue.

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