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# Religion as a Source of Tolerance and Intolerance: Exploring the Dichotomy

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*Abstract: Previous research on tolerance and intolerance in religion has focused on individuals' internal religious commitment and their relationship within religious groups. In exploring religion's ability to generate both tolerance and intolerance, this qualitative study draws on data from interviews with 220 highly religious individuals living in the United Kingdom and Ireland in 2016 in order to suggest how religious individuals see themselves interacting with tolerance and intolerance in their daily lives. Many of our subjects identified themselves as tolerant people while viewing others as intolerant of their religious beliefs. An analysis of our findings and prior research suggests that religious intolerance is still a reality of current society but religious tolerance can be cultivated in environments of mutual understanding and communication.*

*Keywords: Intolerance, Tolerance, Religion, Interfaith, Religious Community*

## Introduction

While religion is often viewed as a source of love and compassion, having and living religious beliefs can also be divisive. This article seeks to bring a fresh perspective to the dichotomy between religion-based tolerance and intolerance by discussing the daily experiences of religious individuals. We conducted 113 qualitative interviews with 220 highly-religious individuals in the United Kingdom and Ireland to identify common themes in how religious individuals experience both tolerance and intolerance in their day-to-day lives.

Generally, the scholastic community agrees that religious behaviors generate a combination of both tolerance and intolerance. Our study explores that counterintuitive combination. By looking at the daily experiences of religious individuals, we examine the interrelated ties between tolerance and intolerance to demonstrate their impact on religious individuals and their social interactions. Since tolerance is closely related to individual sentiments, we decided to make our study interview-based to get a sense of the internal feelings and opinions of our interviewees. In choosing a qualitative study, we allowed the religious adherents to relay their own opinions on the tolerance and intolerance that they face daily. Our study creates connections between their opinions to indicate how religious individuals as a whole face these unifying and divisive forces. As the secular and religious worlds drift ever farther apart, this study allows readers to understand the forces at work in and around religious practitioners.

By taking a deeper look at religious individuals' personal experiences with religious tolerance and intolerance, readers can gain a unique perspective into the religious community's perceived experiences with religion as a source of both tolerance and intolerance within families, communities, and society at large. As debates over what constitutes intolerance continue, our research provides a valuable insight into what religious individuals actually perceive through their daily experiences.

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## Literature Review

The dichotomy of religion as a source of both tolerance and intolerance is not new. Scholars have studied both sides of this duality to understand why religion produces conflict and unity simultaneously. Hunsberger and Jackson (2005) offer a valuable summary of the literature: First, religion provides a source of meaning for an individual's life, creates cognitive framing according to its teachings, and helps one to make sense of the world. Thus, religious teachings can carry a lot of weight. While some religious doctrines promote tolerance, others may justify prejudice. Second, religion is a place for social identification and group association. At times, members of a religion can improve their standing within the group by looking down on other religious groups. Therefore, the desire for positive social identity may fuel prejudices. On the other hand, in religious groups that promote tolerance, individuals who may be inclined to be intolerant experience social pressure to behave otherwise.

Much of the literature on religion and intolerance relates to the individual worshipper's internal personal commitment to the doctrine of the religion. In their groundbreaking although often-criticized study, Allport and Ross (1967) argue that the level of tolerance shown by religious individuals depends on whether they have an extrinsic or intrinsic orientation. They contend that extrinsic orientation, which is associated with a utilitarian view of religion as a source of social security or status, is also tied to a higher level of prejudice. Intrinsic individuals, according to their research, are those who have internalized a complete commitment to their espoused religious values and are consequently less prejudiced. According to this study, an individual's level of prejudice is directly related to his or her personal motivations for adhering to a set of religious beliefs.

Scholars have since questioned the explanation given by Allport and Ross (Donahue 1985; Hunsberger 1995; Duck and Hunsberger 1999). For example, Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis (1993) supersede the intrinsic-extrinsic argument by theorizing that tolerance is determined by how individuals process their religion. They argue that individuals either fall into a "quest" or a "religious fundamentalism" orientation. Worshipers in the quest orientation are more doubtful of their religious beliefs and more open to variation; they are often associated with greater tolerance toward those of different faiths (Van Tongeren et al. 2016). In contrast, religious devotees in the fundamentalist orientation are convinced of the absolute truth of their beliefs; this mindset has been linked to intolerance in the forms of prejudice and right-wing authoritarianism (Laythe, Finkel, and Kirkpatrick 2002). Similarly, research has suggested that a religious individual's tendency to be tolerant may be affected by how they process their religious views; a literal interpretation of religious beliefs was more likely to create prejudice than a symbolic view (Duriez 2004). These two interpretations of the relationship between religion and prejudice suggest that one's view of religion is more significant than the religion itself.

Many scholars agree that a devotee's attitude toward his or her beliefs will affect how the devotee treats others. Regardless of the terminology scholars use, research generally suggests that different paradigms regarding the value or nature of one's belief system will create different behaviors. However, some scholars suggest that the doctrines being taught in a religion are more important than the individual believer's relationship to that religion. For example, Herek's work suggests that a religious individual's tendency toward tolerance is more dependent on whether or not their religion actively teaches tolerance than on any intrinsic or extrinsic focus (1987).

Coward (1986) appears to agree with Herek's findings. He says, "It is also true that the teachings of the great religions can give one the kind of grounding in truth and morality that is essential for true tolerance" (1986, 32). However, he also presents a connection between doctrine and intolerance: "The point...is not that [different religions] compel believers to be intolerant, but that they predispose believers toward dogmatically imposing their viewpoint on others, without really listening to others, and that is intolerance" (1986, 32).

As Coward says, religion may indirectly encourage intolerance. Findings from Wilcox and Jelen (1990) give one possible explanation for the relationship between religious teachings and intolerance. When studying evangelicals, they found that belief in the Bible reinforces ideas of absolute morality and clear right and wrong, something that they see as inconsistent with modern secular society. Additionally, evangelicals believe in what Wilcox and Jelen refer to as a “literal, interventionist Devil” (1990, 43). This may encourage evangelicals—and, by extension, members of other similar organized religious groups—to view those with opposing viewpoints, whether between faiths or within congregations, as the work of the Devil.

In addition to doctrinal input, a religious affiliation may affect prejudice because most religions involve gathering; consequently, other members of the religion or congregation may have an effect on how any one member of the group thinks or acts. In discussing religious conflict in Nigeria, S. Awoniyi (2003) brings up several salient points that may help explain the connection between religious unity and intolerance. He notes that religious groups are especially good at building bonds of brotherhood. These bonds produce often-intense emotional and physical loyalties, which can come into conflict with other religious groups, especially when these groups are competing over political outcomes. Religious particularism, the belief that one’s religion is the only correct way, also plays a role in these conflicts. As Awoniyi says, “Some kinds of ‘holier than thou’ attitudes are inevitable on both sides and an attendant emotional irritability is implied when such religions are in perpetual competition for the souls of men within the same political system” (2003, 127–28).

Other scholars agree with Awoniyi that religion creates groups and a desire to belong. In fact, some scholars have suggested that the negative correlation between intrinsic orientation and prejudice comes more from social desirability bias than from any set of moral values (Batson, Naifeh, and Pate 1978), and Batson and Burris (1994) argue that religious individuals’ displays of prejudice stem primarily from their desire to be viewed as good members of their religious group. Thus, researchers have found that both tolerance and intolerance can be associated with religious group affiliation; the unity of the group may promote internal tolerance, but it may also cause more intolerance toward individuals outside the group.

While interactions within one religious group can create attitudes of both tolerance and intolerance, scholarly findings suggest that interfaith interactions can encourage individuals to exercise greater tolerance through what is commonly referred to as social contact theory. This theory was advanced by Allport, Clark, and Pettigrew (1954), who argued that previously-held stereotypes and negative perceptions tend to dissipate as individuals from different social groups, such as different religions, interact with each other. In their study of religious pluralism, R.K. Brown and Brown expound on this idea:

Extensive social contact is expected to reduce the social stigmas that are attached to individuals from subordinate groups as one learns that people are essentially the same, hence the stereotypes that one develops should lessen. Moreover, social contact is expected to also reinforce a belief in social equality and a shared humanity (2011, 325).

Additional research has confirmed that contact with members of other groups promotes more positive evaluations of outgroups as well as increased friendly social interaction between the groups (Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami 2003; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Pettigrew et al. 2011). Scholarly findings have applied social contact theory to interfaith interactions. In their survey of fifty-two college campuses, Rockenbach et al. (2015) found that college campuses provide opportunities for students to have formal and informal interfaith interactions, which increase pluralistic attitudes and acceptance of religious diversity. Faith schools have also been found to promote tolerance among children of different faiths (Breen 2009).

However, the positive effect of interfaith contact on inclusivity can be dependent on the theological exclusivity of the individual (Merino 2010) and on how much the religion has been accepted by or become mainstream in a society (Brown and Brown 2011). Therefore, the social

contract theory has legitimate value in analyzing interfaith interactions, but it may be overridden by deep-set fundamentalist values or social norms.

Significant research has been done regarding both religious tolerance and intolerance. While these studies have included research on group and individual psychology relative to religion, our study is meant to provide a unique perspective to the tolerance-intolerance issue by focusing on the personal viewpoints of the religious individuals. By letting them tell their own story regarding tolerance and intolerance, we hope to add a pertinent, valuable perspective to current dialogue on the implications of religion on daily life in modern society.

## **Method of Inquiry**

### *Sample*

We employed a purposive sampling approach, seeking religious individuals and religious leaders who reported a high level of involvement in their faith. Our sample consists of 113 interviews with a total of 220 individuals, including 79 families and 62 religious leaders. Interviews were conducted between June 1 and June 15, 2016. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Religious leaders were compensated €40/£30 for their time, and families were compensated €65/£50. All names have been changed to pseudonyms for the anonymity of our participants.

Given that this sample was not randomly selected, this study does not attempt to draw broad conclusions about the opinion of an entire population on the topic of the religious tolerance and intolerance. Rather, we seek to gain further insight into how the issue may be perceived among religious individuals. For this reason, our sample deliberately includes people with a high self-reported level of religious participation, with 81 percent of the lay participants rating their level of activity in their faith as a 6 or a 7 on a 7-point scale. In terms of gender, 59 percent of participants were male and 41 percent were female. Eighty percent of the sample was Christian (34% from various Protestant denominations, 28% Catholic, 12% non-denominational Christian, 3% members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and 3% other), 10 percent Muslim, 4 percent Jewish, and 5 percent other (Hindu, Buddhist, and Baha'i). In terms of race, 78 percent of participants were white, and 22 percent were an ethnic and/or racial minority (including African, Asian, Middle Eastern, Indian, Caribbean, and Latino).

Participants were contacted primarily via the religious institutions' websites. We first reached out to religious leaders via phone or email. We then invited them to be interviewed and to refer strong families within their congregation who would be interested in being interviewed. To increase our sample size, we also sent flyers to over 1,000 places of worship throughout Ireland and the UK. This approach yielded few respondents, so we continued to contact religious leaders directly and employed some snowballing among our participants, particularly among the less prominent faiths, such as Judaism and the non-Abrahamic faiths.

### *Interview Procedure*

Our team members conducted semi-structured interviews in June of 2016. Interviews took place in person, generally in either the participants' home or at their place of worship. Interviews lasted seventy minutes on average and consisted of approximately twenty open-ended questions. Follow-up questions were used to elicit further information based on participants' responses. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Our interviewees were asked a wide variety of questions. While all were asked about their experiences with religious tolerance and intolerance, not all made references that directly fell into the sub-themes discussed below. In terms of this article, 316 references were made to religious tolerance while 741 references were made to religious intolerance. Efforts were made to group respondents' references into logical and interesting sub-themes, but not every reference could be included. It is also important to note that the focus of our study is not on any one particular

religion. Similarly, we do not intend to draw comparisons between any religions. Instead, we seek a deeper understanding of individual experiences of tolerance and intolerance from a broad variety of religious perspectives.

### ***Coding and Analysis***

The transcriptions were coded and analyzed using a team-based methodology (Marks 2015). This methodology is used in qualitative research to produce results that are more reliable, valid, and replicable (Levitt et al. 2018; Marks 2015). Strategies for greater reliability included keeping a detailed audit trail of the coding, coding in pairs, and tracking inter-rater reliability. The data coding also used the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Grounded theory approach is used to construct theory based on data instead of preconceived notions held by researchers. The data was analyzed using NVivo 11 qualitative coding software.

The resultant codebook was given to two pairs of undergraduate students enrolled in a semester-length research methods course. The relevant interview accounts were divided between the pairs and each account was coded twice, once by each member of the partnership. After interviews were completed, the data was coded in four steps. First, open coding was conducted in order to identify broad themes in the data. Second, axial coding was used to condense these broad themes into manageable groups and subgroups. Third, each piece of data was reviewed to determine whether these condensed groups and subgroups had enough data to provide viable support. Finally, the data was again searched to find counterexamples in order to falsify emergent findings (Gilgun 2005). Then, coding partners met to review their codes line-by-line in a check and balance system, resolving discrepancies as they arose.

While our sample includes people from a variety of faiths, our analysis does not separate participants by religious affiliation. This was done in an effort to specifically analyze commonalities that exist among religious individuals as a whole rather than potential differences between distinct faith traditions. While there are some who disagree with such an approach due to the diverse nature of different faith traditions (Prothero 2011), grouping individuals of differing religious affiliations by a common sense of “religiousness” (Berk and Besta 2012) is frequently used to evaluate the general effect of religiosity independent of a person’s specific faith tradition (Brown et al. 2011; Dalton, Dollahite, and Marks 2018).

Our article does not seek to make any claims about what constitutes religious tolerance. While this subject has been a valuable topic of scholarly and legal study, especially in recent years, we do not make empirical or legal judgements as to what constitutes tolerance or intolerance. Rather, we approach the data from a perspective point of view, examining how the interviewees perceived their own experiences in connection to tolerance or intolerance. We present these religious devotees’ perspectives regarding their relationships to each other, to other religious communities, and to society as a whole.

### **Themes and Findings**

We identified two major themes from our data. The first theme we identified is that religion acts as a source of tolerance and acceptance. Under this first major theme, two sub-themes emerged. First, religion can promote religious tolerance through teaching tolerance-based virtues, encouraging individuals to be examples, and providing role models of tolerance. Second, interfaith interactions promote tolerance by allowing participants to proactively learn about other faiths, identify commonalities, accept differences, and unite against anti-religious sentiments.

The second major theme we identified is that religion can act as a source of intolerance. Under this major theme, four sub-themes emerged. First, religious differences within those from the same faith lead to intolerance. Second, differences in religious beliefs and practices can create intolerance in families and communities. Third, having different religious beliefs and practices engenders intolerance between those of different religions. Finally, religious individuals overwhelmingly feel that a modern, secular society promotes intolerance towards religion.

Table 1: Numerical Content Analysis of Qualitative Coding

	Theme	# References	# Sources	% Interviews
1a.	Religion Teaches Tolerance	98	58	50.9
1b.	Interfaith Interactions Promote Tolerance	218	76	66.7
2a.	Intolerance within the Same Religious Community	62	46	40.4
2b.	Intolerance between Different Religion	129	64	56.1
2c.	Distance within Families and Communities	37	29	25.4
2d.	Religion Not Acceptable in Secular Society	513	107	93.9
	Total	845	113	100 (85.1)

Note: The percent of interviews is calculated out of the 113 interviews that contain accounts related to tolerance/intolerance, not out of the larger sample of 134 interviews conducted.

Source: Carlile, Galbraith, and White 2016

### ***Theme One: Religion as a Source of Tolerance***

#### **Subtheme One: Religion Teaches Tolerance**

Interviewees from a variety of different religions discussed how their religion taught them tolerance. For many interviewees, their religion’s teachings of love and forgiveness helped them become more tolerant. Single mother Erin suggested that attending church has changed the way she interacts with those around her: “I personally think it does make you a better person, it gives you morals, it gives you respect. It shows you how to respect people and not talk down to people.”

Similarly, Lucy argued that being a Quaker encourages her to see the viewpoints of others. She said: “You try to find that of God within everyone, and you respect that of God within everyone. It’s hard sometimes. That’s a very challenging one to always do if it’s someone you perceive as being absolutely horrible and hateful and you try and look at that bit of God within them and find a bit of respect.” Harry, a Hindu, agreed, saying, “love God, love your neighbor is a general principle for anyone in spiritual life. And then with that you can generally respect anyone in any religion.” Many other participants agreed that their religion encouraged them to cultivate virtues that helped them practice tolerance in their day-to-day interactions.

Other interviewees shared how being an example of their faith encouraged others to be more tolerant of them. Emily, an Anglican, shared an experience in which her devotion to her beliefs encouraged her peers to respect her beliefs as well: “I don’t ever swear at work, and I know that certain people curb their language when I’m in the room. Not because I’ve particularly told them off for swearing, but because I never swear, they kind of see it as an example.” Beyond being an example, some participants found value in verbally sharing their beliefs. Stephan, a young businessman, said, “When you step up and you say your belief, they step up for you because you had the courage to say.” These individuals found that living and sharing their beliefs encouraged others to be more understanding and supportive of them.

Similarly, several interviewees said that viewing God as a tolerant being inspired them to show more tolerance toward others. Oliver, a Christian youth minister, discussed how he was able to show love to his friend who was gay, even though Oliver didn’t agree with his lifestyle: “On controversial issues it’s not that difficult because for me it’s back at the basis that God loves you.” Fifty-two-year-old Scott had a similar experience: “Well, the Bible says we love because God first loved us. So, because I’ve experienced that love and know that I’ve experienced it, then I’m able to love those around me, so that impacts all of my friendships, all of my relationships fruitfully.”

Our interviews indicate that many religious devotees find direction in their belief in an all-loving God. This belief can cause them to be more tolerant, even to those of other religions or those with lifestyles contrary to their religious standards.

## Subtheme Two: Interfaith Interactions Promote Tolerance

Regular interactions with those from different faiths were key in promoting tolerance, according to our study participants. Interviewees made dozens of references to how interacting with neighbors and peers of different religions facilitated tolerance. One way in which those from different faiths showed tolerance toward each other was by celebrating commonalities. Ahmed, an Islamic faith leader, was asked how he united his inter-faith group and gave this response:

One of the things we should discuss first is why we are meeting each other. Because we live in the same city, it is good to. Then after discussion we did say that “lets’ share what’s common among us.” We are all believers of one God...Let’s celebrate that, and let’s see how you see God and how we see God. It’s the same God in reality.

Jordan, an Anglican spiritual leader, had similar feelings: “There’s something about working out what your faiths have in common. Because there are very few faiths, I can’t think of any, that aren’t supportive of loving your neighbor, making a difference to people’s lives in a good way. There’s a lot of common ground.” Realizing the things they had in common made it easier for people of different faiths to come together.

When discussing how to relate with people from different faiths, many interviewees emphasized the importance of respecting religious differences. Callum, a Pentecostal, shared that interacting with those from different faiths required laying aside differences and cultivating mutual respect:

There’s a colleague of mine in the town here who was asked to meet with the local imam to talk about an interfaith event coming up. When they sat down together, my colleague said to him, “Let’s just get one thing straight. I’m not going to convert you, and you’re not going to convert me.” So, Christianity is a very proselytizing faith. But there are times when, in order to engender our mutual understanding, you lay that to one side.

Keeping with the theme of mutual respect and understanding, Daniel, a Jewish rabbi, said this:

If I have a particular faith, if I have a particular belief system and I’m in a room together with other people who have faith, who have a belief system, what is it that I would want for myself? I would want them to be tolerant and understanding of me. If that’s what I want, I need to display that to them.

Similarly, Zahra, a Muslim and an interfaith activist, shared how she promoted interfaith and intercultural understanding by encouraging people to step out of their cultural “boxes” but to respect differences while doing so:

To the German people I say, “Get out of your western box and learn to respect people of other faiths and cultures. The world is full of people. It’s not just the western people. Learn to respect them.” Similarly, I go to Pakistan and Malaysia and say “Get out of your Muslim box. Learn to respect other faiths. They have their beliefs. They have their own custom. What right does it give us to dismiss and reject them?” It’s really the same message, but alternating it to the orders that I’m in. The whole idea is to look beyond your own world. Don’t be closed in your box and think people need to become like you. We’re all different. You’re different. I’m different. You have to learn to respect my differences and you have to learn to appreciate that I celebrate my differences, whether I’m a Muslim or a Christian.

Many individuals shared how being exposed to other faiths in their community helped them and their families be more tolerant. Omar, a Muslim father of two, gave one example:



This is what it would be good for our kids, take them to church, take them to the different temples, that doesn't mean that they'll turn into that religion, but they need to understand...I think that would make you understand what is around you, and it makes you more tolerant, and it gets you into the community, you meet different people, you can't just sit back and say, "I'm Islam and that's me."

Taking this principle further, James, a Jewish accountant, shared how visiting the homes of coworkers of different faiths changed his perspective: "I'm more tolerant now because of my friend in the office. If you have people in your home, and you go in their home and you see their kids and they see your family, you're more relaxed to their life." For James, stepping into the homes of those not of his faith helped him understand his colleagues and be more accepting of their beliefs.

Other interviewees spoke about how interfaith communities unified against the anti-religious sentiment that they felt from the outside world. Catholic Reverend Elliot said this about interfaith experiences:

One of the arguments we bring amongst us Christians, different faiths, different churches, is that nowadays we need to join forces together, not be against each other. We already have the world against us. Whatever religion I think, that's the fundamental step is respect. If I feel that I'm free to practice my faith and pass it on to others, to talk about it to others, you have the right to do the same.

Elliot's statement suggested that current societal climate drives religious communities to unite, and he believed that religious freedom for one group would mean religious freedom for all. This comment suggests that uniting interfaith communities creates tolerance in society and between religions. Overall, the interviewees' experiences indicate that interacting with people of different faiths creates greater tolerance. Different religions are able to find common ground when they interact regularly with each other, learn from each other's beliefs, and unite against intolerance.

## ***Theme 2: Religion as a Source of Intolerance***

### **Subtheme 1: Intolerance within the Same Religion**

Despite the message of tolerance that religion can promote, many individuals shared how differences of belief or interpretation within their own faith communities engendered intolerance between members of the same religion. Riya shared how her interpretation of her Hindu faith led her to be misunderstood by members of her religious community: "I have not been misunderstood by people of different religion, but from Hindu people. They think I'm not a true Hindu, not loyal, or I'm favoring other religion. That's heartbreaking...If we are from the same faith, you have that liberty to express it." Riya's experience suggests that being of the same religion opens up a dialogue in which members can criticize each other's interpretation of the faith. It also indicates the existence of factions, even within a single religion, and some of the pain that this dissonance can cause the members.

Jack, a Christian pastor, agreed: "Christians are very easily offended inside the church, and they're never offended to another outside the church. They're full of forgiveness in places of work, and then they are very easy offended inside the church." These testimonials indicate that offense and intolerance are ripe even within one congregation; whereas members of a religion may bond together over external intolerance, they can be broken apart by inside intolerance.

Often, controversial issues were sources of contention within the congregation. William, a bishop in the Church of Scotland, shared how he approaches controversial issues carefully to avoid offending members of his congregation who may have different views:

If you take the issues of human sexuality and same sex marriage, which we're going to address next week, it's very difficult for me to speak clearly because, actually, because of the internal dialogue within the life of my church. My focus is a) on trying to help our church to come to decisions which are honorable, faithful, and generous in terms of our understanding of scripture and our faith. But also to deal with our own internal divisions in a way that does not fracture our unity. Therefore, I find it very difficult to speak with a single voice into the society because, in fact, what I have to do is to reflect the uncertainty which is there, not just within our faith community, but within society itself. That's either helpful or unhelpful, but it is the reality of leadership for somebody like me. Our churches carry divisions about these issues.

William's position as a faith leader led to the fear of stoking contention and intolerance within his own congregation, so he had to speak about controversial issues with care. Many of the interviewees agreed with these faith leaders that intolerance was a problem even within a single, ostensibly united religion.

### **Subtheme Two: Religion Creates Distance in Families and Communities**

Some of the participants indicated that embracing a religion created divisions between them and their friends or family. Forty-year-old David shared how becoming Catholic distanced him from his mother: "Even my own mother. I used to be closer to her before I came to faith. I'm sure there are many different factors for that. Somehow, it's created a gap between us. She normally controls herself, but sometimes she will come up with a little snipe like something like that and I can feel the power of that disapproval... Yes, it is hard. That's tough for me." David also said that his religion was causing him to feel estranged in his workplace community: "At work as well even. People won't discuss certain things with me because they know my faith. I guess that's respectful in a sense but also missing out. I'd hate to be kind of holy-Joe kind of figure within their world. Sometimes you just get kind of put on that shelf. Believe me, I'm not really that type of person at all." David believed that his religious convictions were causing people to label and exclude him while he also experienced familial tension with his mother.

Others shared similar sentiments about their religious beliefs creating distance between them and their peers in the community. Anthony, whose religion prevents him from playing sports on Sunday, explained that he frequently had to switch sports as a youth in order to avoid Sunday matches. He shared, "I felt a lot of hardship going through those years. I couldn't identify myself to one sport... It did separate me from the majority of people my age because my beliefs were against what the rest of the world were doing."

Similarly, Rosi, a young Christian woman, shared how her faith estranged her from her friends, who saw her as self-righteous. She explained,

Things I really feel deep down, I wouldn't discuss with them because I know they would turn around and say, "You think you're better than everybody else. You think you make all the right decisions." That's not true. I know I make a lot of wrong decisions, but I wake up every morning and say to myself, "I'm going to be this way today, I'm going to make the best decision I can for myself and everybody else around me."

For Anthony, Rosi, and individuals with similar experiences, merely living their beliefs served to distance them from their peers. Even if this distance did not create downright persecution, it still acted as a barrier between these religious individuals and those around them.

### **Subtheme Three: Intolerance between Different Faiths**

Religious differences between those of different faiths were also a significant source of discomfort and intolerance. Evangelical pastor Elliot shared that the strength of Catholicism in Irish society presented challenges for his congregation. He told the story of one father in his congregation, who attempted to put his daughter on a waiting list to get into a particular school: “So he went to put his daughter on the list, and they said to him, ‘Are you Catholics?’ He said, ‘No, we are Christians though. I am even a trained Chaplain.’ They said to him, ‘I am sorry, we must give priority to Catholics first.’ That’s happening here.”

Many Muslims in particular faced intolerance due to being inaccurately associated with extremist minority groups. Yousef, a Muslim father and husband, expressed the challenge of this prejudice:

On top of that, especially nowadays, we have more problems since 9/11. Anything you want to say is taken very different in context. Anything you want to do is taken very different. How it is in this country, the government has brought duty upon everyone in relation to extremism, terrorism. So that duty has fragmented the Muslim Community...Because teachers before, they used to see Islam in a very positive way, now they see it in a very negative way. And this negative mess has been created by the media, by the government, by the politicians, by other scenarios, which have made difficult challenges for us.

Lewis and Shannon, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), had similar experiences of intolerance and misunderstanding:

Just talking generally, I feel that people in this country that people are still misinformed about our religion. People if they have heard stuff about the church, it’s the stuff that is pretty negative. Ministers of other religions will often just read the anti-Mormon literature so they’ve got enough ammunition to fire at someone if they need to.

Regarding these religious divisions, Canon Toby gave an explanation as to why religious differences produce this intolerance:

What divides us, I think, is fear. What leads to fear is usually ignorance. We are uneasy with something that’s different, something that we can’t quite sort of understand ourselves and put in a box. And I think that that’s true of many people’s attitudes towards Christians, towards Catholics. It’s because we don’t know and we don’t take the time to ask and to experience and to share that we are wary and keep our distance.

As discussed earlier in this article, many individuals promote tolerance through communication and shared experiences. It seems that intolerance often originates from the opposite: the lack of will to communicate and learn about others.

### **Subtheme Four: Religion Not Accepted by a Secular Society**

One of the most common sub-themes within the data was that religion is not accepted by society. Interviewees discussed how they felt that discussing or expressing religion in public was not politically correct, how many of their non-religious peers saw religion as outdated, how they felt religion was under attack from the legal system, and how they sometimes faced intolerance because their own beliefs came into conflict with societal values.

Many individuals spoke about the discomfort they felt regarding expressing their religious beliefs in public. Libby and Mark, a Catholic couple, shared this perspective: “I’d say in the last ten years Scotland and Britain have become a place where it’s harder to discuss religion in public

without being told ‘nay, we don’t discuss that in public. You do that with your other religious friends.’ There are a lot of people trying to sideline religion from public life.” Imam Nabih communicated a similar view: “Moreover, we see that the media is also becoming anti-religion. Here we are talking about a situation where politics is anti-religion. Laws is anti-religion. Media is anti-religion. Obviously these three factors, education is becoming anti-religion. These factors altogether will influence the public viewpoint, and as a result of this, the public is becoming anti-religion.” Related to Nabih’s view of an anti-religious society, Methodist minister Ben shared his discomfort after participating in a public interfaith meeting:

I couldn’t help but feel self-conscious. It was a public setting, and they’d okayed it with the management, but there were other people there, and it kind of made me cringe a bit. I wouldn’t have done it that way. I still probably would have done it, but the whole fact about praying at the end—I wouldn’t have done that at a public setting. I find that difficult sometimes. It’s very privatized.

Even as a professional religious leader, Ben felt uncomfortable discussing religion in a public environment, and interviewees like Libby, Mark, and Nabih felt the same. While many in our sample gratefully acknowledged that they were free to practice their religion as citizens of the UK, many also shared similar sentiments to those above, namely that they no longer felt comfortable bringing their religion into the public sphere.

Many also shared how society left them with the feeling that their religious beliefs were outdated. Reverend Stuart shared the discomfort he felt because his religious beliefs did not support gay marriage. He shared a story in which a woman asked him if he supported gay marriage:

And there is kind of totting and kind of shame, and you’re trying to explain that it’s actually not as simple as a government change. The real issue is about faith and what we believe about scripture and marriage. That was fairly affable, but there was still that “You are behind the times. You are holding a view that is no longer acceptable.”

Lucy, a Quaker, shared that religion is often viewed as antiquated: “I think there is a general feeling amongst quite a few people that perhaps if you have a faith, you might be a bit simple or not quite strong enough to live your life without leaning on some imaginary God.” Christian leader Alexander indicated that a member of his congregation had even been asked “‘Isn’t Christianity just a crutch for weak people?’” at job interview, and he suggested that his college-age congregants are “the most conscious that what they believe is not politically correct and less acceptable.”

In general, many felt that traditional religious views were no longer generally accepted, and they saw society as becoming increasingly secular. Matthew, a Pentecostal faith leader, shared his worries: “Within society, there’s a growing animosity towards Christianity, so you have to be very delicate about what subjects you are speaking about...So, there is, if somebody wanted to engage me in that subject, I think yes, I’m happy to talk about it, but I would be hesitant.”

Chris, a Catholic, summed up the feelings expressed by many of our interviewees:

I find that it is an imposition of someone’s philosophy or belief system. Usually the idea is that people of religion want to impose their religion on those around them. My impression is that it’s the opposite. That secular people say that they’re fine with my having religion, but in fact because they have particular moral beliefs and certain things that they think should be permissible, I’m forced to accept that those things are alright. So, I’m in the difficult position of having to accept two moral codes: the one informed by my faith and then the one imposed by society.

For many individuals that we interviewed, this tension between a secularized society and their own religious beliefs was a significant source of conflict and concern in their daily lives. It directly influenced how they shared their beliefs and interacted with others.

## Discussion

Our article aims to give a new perspective to the experiences of religious individuals regarding tolerance and intolerance. While we do not wish to address the psychological reasons behind tolerant and intolerant attitudes or even what defines these attitudes, our study examines how religious individuals view the tolerance and intolerance that they perceive around them. In the course of our interviews, the participants discussed the what, why, and how of their personal encounters with tolerance and intolerance, both as they found it directed towards themselves and how they experienced it toward others.

Many of our participants believed that they were more tolerant because of their church's doctrine regarding good moral behavior and the nature of God. This finding is compatible with previous research, which suggests that a religion's active teaching of tolerance will positively influence its congregants (Chonody et al. 2013; Coward 1986; Herek 1987). Associated with Allport and Ross' extrinsic-intrinsic theory (1967), we found that tolerant behaviors and internal religious interactions, such as listening to doctrine or making personal improvement, were usually closely associated. In contrast, interviewees that were more focused on social interactions tended to concentrate more on the intolerance they felt; they discussed intolerance from society, friends, family, and fellow religious adherents. While this correlation does not validate all aspects of the controversial Allport and Ross study, it does suggest that the extrinsic-intrinsic theory may still have some value if tolerance and intolerance are tied to an individual's internal or external outlook.

Just as the research indicates a strong correlation between interfaith interactions and tolerance (Dovidio et al. 2003; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Pettigrew et al. 2011), our interviewees expressed that interfaith interactions helped them to better understand people of other religions. Many found that their stereotypes were unfounded, and they had a lot more in common with people of other faiths than they initially believed, suggesting that social contact is critical in diminishing stereotypes (Dovidio et al. 2003; Ellison and Powers 1994). Additionally, our study participants and the research suggest that interfaith interactions are successful when participants experience increased social contact and compare similarities (Brown and Brown 2011). Intolerance is usually characterized by imposing one's views on others and refusing to listen to other opinions (Coward 1986), so it is significant that interviewees who had experienced successful interfaith encounters emphasized the importance of being willing to listen and not trying to convert each other.

Participants in our study often discussed the tight nature of their religious community, which had an impact on both tolerance and intolerance. In such close-knit communities, a desire for social belonging is strong, and the experiences of our interviewees suggest the need for religious unity within one community (Awoniyi 2013; Batson and Burriss 1994). This may manifest as prejudice against other religious groups, or it may exhibit as contention within one community. The need to maintain unity may cause members of a congregation to feel uncomfortable, repress their own opinions, contradict the opinions of people outside the group, or even leave the group, all of which happened to various members of our study. The intolerance that some of our participants experienced within their religious community may be attributed to the tendency of group members to regularly compare ideas within the group in order to achieve ideological unity (Putra and Wagner 2017). It may also, as research suggests, tailor the individuals' beliefs toward intolerance because they are surrounding themselves by polarized individuals and literature (Zhang et al. 2018).

The focus of our interviewees was on the intolerance that they felt they experienced from the community outside their own religion. In many cases, a religion's clear sense of right-or-wrong

morality (Wilcox and Jelen 1990) contradicts with the more fluid morality of the external world, and this may cause contention. Additionally, research indicates that adherents of one religion are seen as disrupting social unity because their beliefs create societal divisions (Short 2002); this describes the divisions that our participants felt between themselves and people of other belief systems.

One notable aspect of this study was the focus of the participants on their own tolerance and other people's intolerance. This likely does not describe the entire situation accurately because the interviewees may have been falling into self-serving bias, not willing to share negative experiences of themselves but willing to reflect on the negative actions of others. While this is a bias, it does not detract from the fact that religious individuals experience intolerance and express tolerance, and it does provide an interesting view on their overall perception of events. This disconnect between bad behavior and self may arise in part from the religious tendency to identify the world in subdivisions of "us" and "them" (Takaya 1992), a pretty clear trend in our study, wherein participants tended to divide the world into "people who discriminate/general society" and "me/my religion/religious people." Research suggests that members of a consciously formed group, such as a religious community, will also be very conscious of the differences between their group and the outgroup; this may create a tendency toward identifying differences between one's religion and those not of one's religion (Putra and Wagner 2017).

A research theory that our study upholds is the idea that the goal to form a successful pluralistic community should be focused more on greater communication and understanding rather than tolerance; this theory suggests that tolerance can be considered "conflict arrested" and a barrier to actual interactions (Kazanjian and Laurence 2007, 5). Our participants indicated that positive experiences they had with tolerance were characterized by communication and understanding, whereas experiences of intolerance tended to be based in a lack of communication and understanding. Having actual interactions with people of other belief systems rather than hypothetical ideology also appeared to be beneficial to legitimate understanding for the people of our study. Thus, our study supports the idea that communication and understanding are critical to creating a society in which people of different belief systems can peacefully communicate and cohabitate. It would be incredibly valuable for future research to examine how better communication and therefore tolerance can be facilitated in our modern multicultural society.

### *Limitations*

Despite the valuable nature of our work, there are notable limitations. First, our study focused on religious individuals and tolerance. Our work indicates that holding and living religious beliefs results in incidences of tolerance and intolerance. However, non-religious belief systems may also engender incidences of tolerance and intolerance. For example, further studies might examine how atheists or agnostics experience tolerance or intolerance in societies that are predominately religion-based. Additionally, in focusing on the religious perspective, the views of non-religious individuals were not included. Further research should include the non-religious perspective on religious tolerance and intolerance; this might include how lacking a religion might promote tolerance, how non-religious people view interfaith tolerance or intolerance, how non-religious people may feel intolerance from religious groups, and how non-religious people perceive the religious perspective of intolerance. Furthermore, our study was conducted only in a limited area of the United Kingdom and Ireland. Many of our subjects indicated that they felt religious intolerance originating from the British or Irish secular community, but the geographical limitations on our study kept us from examining the secular-religious relations in other countries. Conducting similar research in other countries will indicate if our research holds true over a variety of cultures and societies. Overall, our research, while valuable in and of itself, also opens up a number of possibilities for further research.

## Conclusion

Even though our study covered a number of people from different religious backgrounds, there were distinct commonalities in how the participants identified tolerance and intolerance in their daily lives. As a whole, religious adherents believe that their doctrines promote tolerance through teachings, a better understanding of deity, and their example to others. Additionally, participants of interfaith interactions believe that these encounters help them become more tolerant toward other religions. However, the average daily life of a religious person also includes instances of intolerance. The religious individuals that we interviewed indicated that they felt intolerance from members of their own congregations, families, and friends. They also felt intolerance arising from members of other religious communities and from society as a whole. The consistency of these findings indicates that religion does create attitudes of both tolerance and intolerance, which members of religious communities encounter on a regular basis.

Due to the nature of our selection process and the qualitative nature of our study, our findings cannot be applied broadly to the religious community. However, our study acts as an interesting examination of the dichotomy between tolerance and intolerance in the average religious adherent's everyday life. The religious individuals that we interviewed found both intolerance and tolerance around them. Our study is valuable because it shows how religious devotees view the intolerance and tolerance that they see themselves experiencing. Our discussion of the tolerance-intolerance environment in a religious setting is both interesting and timely, and it suggests that research in this area still has far to go. Where religion exists in this world, there will be unity, but there will also be conflict; our study presents an insider perspective of the consequent impact that religious adherents see on themselves.

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