10th International Conference of Panel Data Users in Switzerland

Workshop - Religion and Religiosity

Title

What best explains (changes in) attitudes towards Islam in Switzerland?

Author

Alexander Yendell, University of Bern University of Bern, Faculty of Theology, Institute for Empirical Studies on Religions

Abstract

Negative attitudes towards Islam and anti-Muslim sentiments are high in Switzerland. Although open towards religious plurality, many Swiss people feel threatened by Islam. This raises the question of why negative attitudes towards Islam are so high. The SHP offers indicators derived from sociological and social-psychological theories. One is Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which argues that people tend to enhance the status of their own group and devalue other groups ("The social in-group has to be better than the social out-group"). National and religious identity are discussed in this context as factors which could negatively influence the views towards Islam of a Christian and religiously unaffiliated majority. Another prominent theory is deprivation theory, which postulates that, faced with competition for scarce economic resources, economically deprived groups are more likely to derogate (Muslim) immigrants (McCutcheon, 2000; Rippl & Baier, 2005; Decker et al., 2010, 2016). Important here is the distinction between objective deprivation (for instance, low income, low social status, unemployment) and subjective deprivation (for instance, people's own estimation of their economic situation compared to that of others). Interpersonal trust is also considered to be a key factor in explaining negative attitudes especially towards Islam (Pickel & Yendell, 2018; Pollack et al., 2014).

One question that has so far attracted little research is whether religiosity plays a significant role in explaining attitudes towards Islam. Most statistical analyses based on the data provided by opinion surveys consider only very few indicators of religiosity, such as church attendance and denomination (e.g. Pollack et al., 2014; Rebenstorf, 2018). This does not allow a differentiated discussion of the role of religiosity and can lead to contradictory results (ibid.; Allport & Ross, 1967). The Centrality of Religion Scale (Huber & Huber, 2012), which is part of the SHP-waves 2012 and 2015, offers the opportunity to differentiate between personal and social religiosity. The idea of an intrinsic religiosity (Allport & Ross, 1967) would suggest that high levels of personal religiosity are linked to positive views of others, whereas social religiosity is correlated with higher levels of xenophobia; in other words, social religiosity is thought to support a religious position which excludes others (Merino, 2010).

The multivariate analyses of the SHP-waves 2012 and 2015 reveal that there are many indicators to explain why people have a negative view of Islam. Low interpersonal trust, a difficult financial situation, a low level of education, and a low level of personal religiosity are important factors for negative attitudes towards Islam. Considering the panel character of the SHP and the changes regarding the dependent and the independent variables, a regression analysis reveals that, besides a gain in interpersonal trust, an increase in personal religiosity is a striking factor which explains why people evaluate Islam more positively.