

# Review of: "Religiocentric Expression, Intolerance, and Conflict between Majority and Minority Ethnic Groups in Bangladesh"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Religion-informed conflict is one of today's primary challenges around the globe, especially in settings of majority versus minority ethnic religious politics. Uddin and Wahab have contributed an extraordinary piece of work that addresses this challenge within a Bangladeshi setting with which they have deep familiarity. Informed by broad and deep studies in the social psychology of religion, they offer a highly disciplined, field-testable, scientific study of probable correlations between their subject groups' types of religiosity and group tendencies toward conflictual behavior. They test these correlations against many complex variables, of which the most important may be majority and minority status in Bangladesh.

Writing this review as director of a team of ethnolinguists and scholars of comparative religion, rather than as a psychological sociologist, I do not presume to comment on technical features of the several statistical methods employed by the authors. Affirming impressive features of this study, I add several comments from out of our team's approach to the study of religions and conflict.

*Affirmation.* Consistent with many recent studies, the authors presuppose certain psycho-social categories of religiosity, such as "religiocentrism" vs. "religiorelativism," which are associated, respectively, with tendencies to "public expression of religiosity" vs. [we assume] "non-public," "intolerance" vs. "tolerance," "exclusivity" vs. "relativity," and "conservatism" vs [we assume] "relativism." Within the context of our own ethnolinguistic science, we (members of our team) do not apply such contrast pairs to the study of religious behavior. But we affirm the strength of Uddin and Wahab's achievement within the context of those contrast pairs. Their results should demonstrate to peers in the psycho-sociology of religion that, within the context of Bangladesh, there are strong correlations between the left side of those contrast pairs (starting with religiocentrism) and what the authors identify as tendencies to conflict and between the right side (starting with tolerance) and a diminished tendency to conflict. The authors "check the buttons" on strong scientific work: they achieve significant contact with a broad range and number of local religious groups; their surveys explore a suitable range of variables, with fascinating categories of inquiry and a reasonable use of controls; data collections and statistical analyses are performed with precision, appropriate quantity, and up-to-date tests for model fit and error. Overall, the work enables readers to replace what we might merely guess about religion and conflict with strong empirical evidence from a contemporary hot spot of potential conflict. Within the terms of the report, we would be interested in future work comparing majority/minority status and tolerance/intolerance across a range of nations/regions. We are also interested to learn more about the latent construct of "religious conflict" and how it may be associated with various kinds of on-the-ground conflict.

*Discussion.* Working among Urdu speaking religious and other identity groups in Pakistan, our “VPA” research team has spent seven years developing and testing an ethnolinguistic tool for diagnosing such groups’ probable behavioral tendencies toward other groups. I mention this research because it addresses questions of religion and conflict through presuppositions that contrast in interesting ways from those adopted by Uddin and Wahab and their peers in the social psychology of religion in settings of tension or conflict. This is not the place to say too much about our methods (for that, see [vpareports.org](http://vpareports.org)). But I hope that Uddin and Wahab would be stimulated to engage in discussion about the different kinds of results that may be generated by different types of science informed by different types of presuppositions. I know that members of our VPA research team would relish conversations with the authors of this fine paper. For now, I will list a few of our contrasting presuppositions and the different purposes of inquiry and somewhat different results that emerge from our different sciences.

First a brief explanation of terms. “Value Predicate Analysis (VPA)” is a diagnostic tool that uncovers correlations between a modest-sized group’s spoken or written value judgments and the probable near-future behavior of that group in relation to other groups. VPA processes a single class of signals: changes in the number of meanings that members of a group associate with key value terms in the discourse of their teachers and influencers. The strongest signals appear in groups whose members share commitment to overarching values or beliefs (groups sharing a common ideology, social cause, or set of religious practices). VPA correlates these signals with near-future changes in the group’s behavior. We have consistently observed 9 classes of numbers-of-meaning (we call these degrees of “*semantic range*”) that correspond to 9 classes of probable behavioral responses to the environment and toward other groups. VPA analysts characterize these classes as 9 types of tolerance/intolerance toward other groups.

Here is a tentative but plausible set of contrasts between the presuppositions and findings of Uddin and Wahab (“UW”) and of VPA:

1. *Types of religious group:*

- UW: Religiocentric vs. Religiorelativist
- VPA: When first examined, each religious group tends to display a dominant semantic range along with some differences within subgroups. When revisited at different times and different conflict settings, each group dominant range will change (e.g. 2-3 degrees higher or lower).
- *Tentative lesson* (subject to UW’s response!): UW tends to associate a fixed qualitative type with each group, and the types tend to display either side of a binary or contrast pair. VPA associates groups with quantitative classes and observes periodic changes in a group’s class.

2. *Valorization of each group type*

- UW: Unless I misread (please correct me!), UW appears to associate one of the two types with high-value or some manner of relative goodness.
- VPA: VPA seeks not to attach moral values to the subjects of study. But see #3.

3. *Academic and Practical functions of each project.* Both UW and VPA may value the results of their work as potential contributions to peacebuilding efforts. But there are some differences:

- UW: Present an academic, psycho-social study of correlations between types of religious group and religious conflict. The levels of disciplined statistical analysis are offered to demonstrate the significant probability of a causal link between religiocentrism and conflict. UW thereby foster and strengthen established methods of causal analysis, applied in this case to correlations between type of religiosity and likelihood of conflict.
- VPA: Presents an ethnolinguistic study of correlations between its analysts' observations of a group's linguistic signals and the analysts' observations of that group's tendencies toward any one of 9 types of tolerance/intolerance. Its methods are scientific but it offers strictly practical recommendations: that, employing VPA methods, peace-builders may discover comparable correlations and that these may expand and enrich their peace-building tools and strategies.
- *Tentative lesson:* Observing religious groups in tension or conflict, social scientists may be stimulated to contribute their disciplines and energies to studying such groups in their settings of tensions or conflict. What is the goal of such study? It may be to gain an understanding of underlying causes. It may be to uncover data of practical use to peace-builders. Academic guilds tend to caution against the latter. But what contributions might our academic studies make to potentially life-saving work? And what contribution may practical studies make to our academic work?