

The Relationship between National Fragility, Trust, and Religion

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Introduction

In this article I compare data taken from the World Values Survey and the Fragile States Index which shed some light on why people follow a religion.

The World Values Survey is a global network of social scientists who study changes in people's values and the impact that these have on social and political life. The survey began in 1981 and conducts nationally representative surveys in almost 100 countries, comprising almost 90% of the world's population. Interviews are conducted on a five-yearly cycle and, currently, the questionnaire consists of over 300 standard questions. The World Values Survey data and methodology can be found at <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>

The Fragile States Index data is compiled by the Fund for Peace and is intended to be a measure of the likelihood that a state will erupt into mass violence due to internal conflicts. The Fund for Peace holds that "Fault lines can emerge between identity groups, defined by language, religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, class, caste, clan, or area of origin. Tensions can deteriorate into conflict through a variety of circumstances, such as competition over resources, predatory or fractured leadership, corruption, or unresolved group grievances. The reasons for state fragility are complex but not unpredictable." The index aggregates the following twelve indicators each of which comprises many sub-factors:

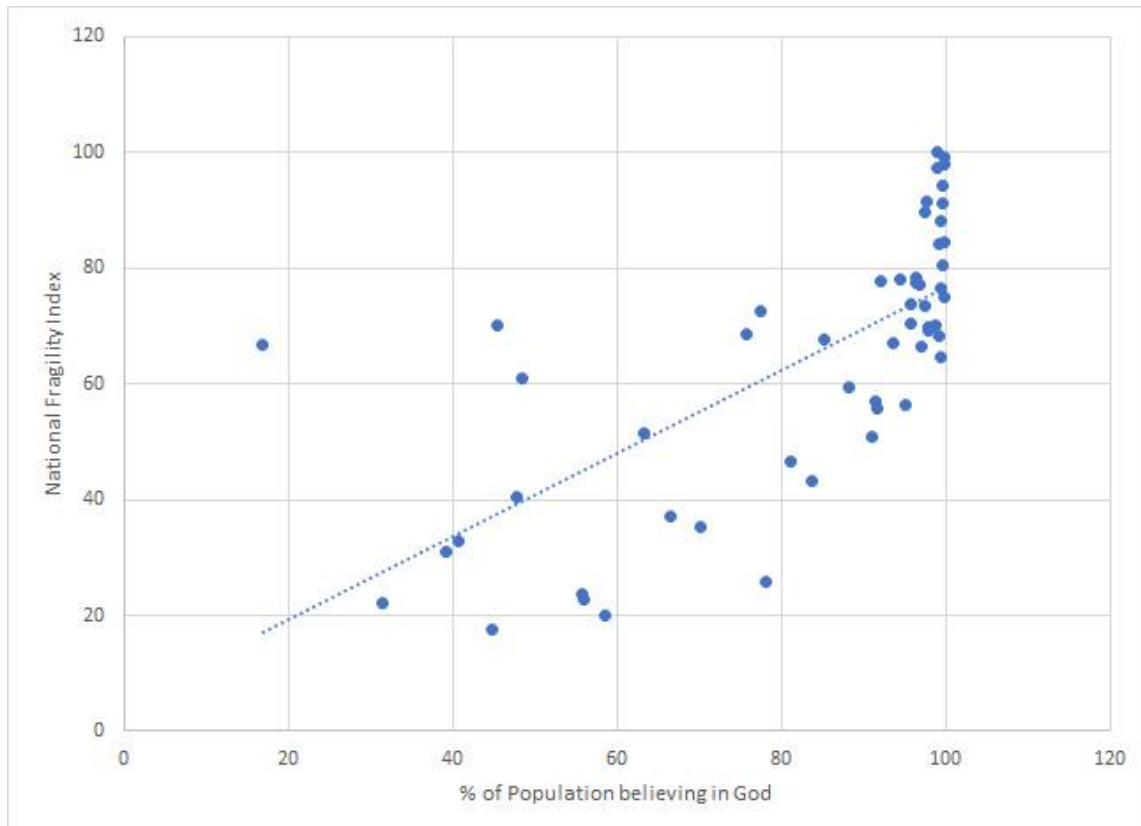
- security threats from, for example, crime, terrorism or rebel movements;
- fragmentation along, for example, ethnic, class, or religious lines;
- divisions between different groups in society, particularly those based on social or political characteristics;
- economic decline;
- inequality within the economy;
- human flight and brain drain;
- the population's level of confidence in state institutions and processes;
- essential public services such as health, education, water, sanitation, electricity, effective policing, etc.;
- the protection of human rights and the rule of law;
- demographic pressures such as population pressures on resources and public services, youth or age bulges, etc.;
- the forced displacement of large communities due to political, environmental, or other causes; and
- the influence and impact of external actors on the functioning of a state.

Data and the method by which it is gathered can be found at <https://fragilestatesindex.org/>

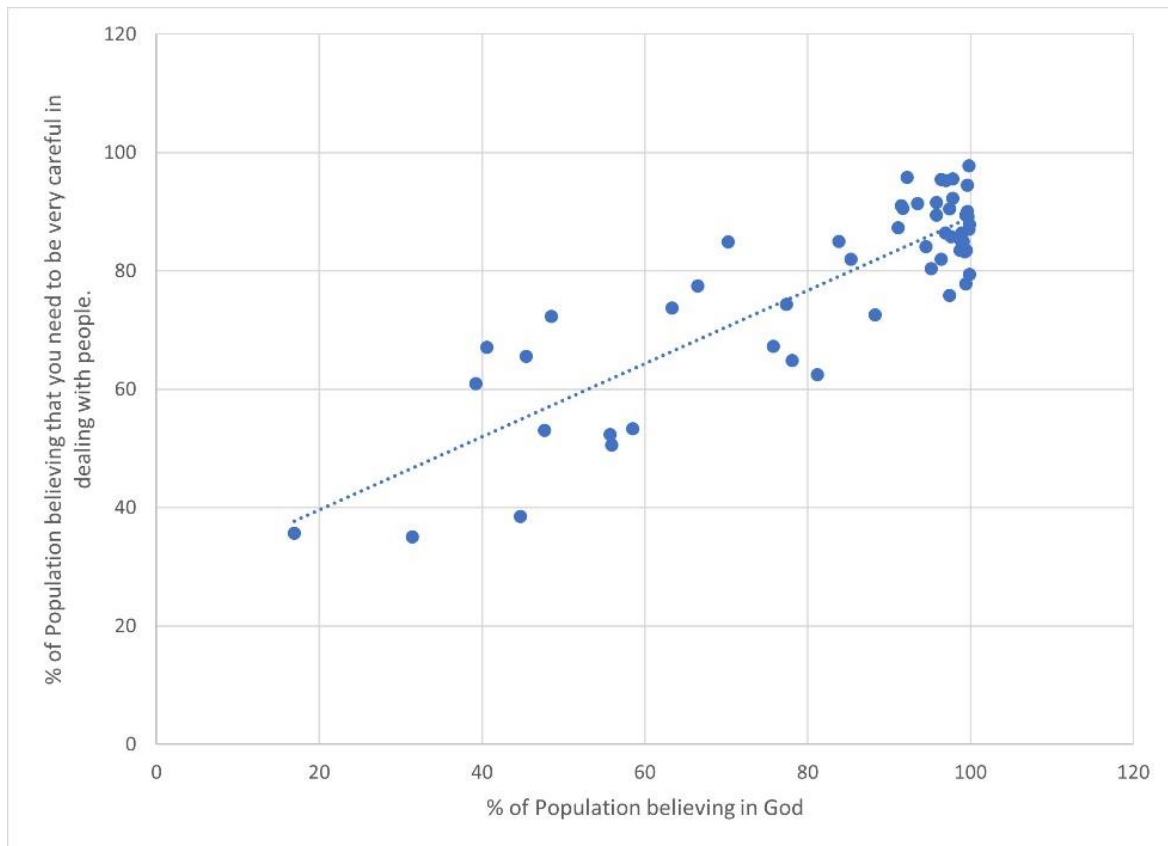
For the 54 countries where both sets of data exist, the graph below compares their National Fragility Index for 2022 with the percentage of the population who, according to the most recent wave of the World Values Survey, believe in God (Q165).

The coefficient of correlation is an indicator of how two variables are related to one another. It varies on a scale from 0, i.e., unrelated, to 1, i.e., perfectly related. The coefficient can also be

positive or negative depending on whether one of the variables increases or decreases with the other. In the example below, the coefficient of correlation is 0.70 which indicates that national fragility and belief in God, on a national scale, are moderately related.



For the 54 countries where both sets of data exist, the graph below compares two sets of data from the most recent World Values Survey, i.e., the percentage of national population who believe that you need to be very careful in dealing with people (Q57), and the percentage of the population who believe in God (Q165). The coefficient of correlation here is 0.86 which indicates a strong relationship.



Correlation between two variables can indicate cause and effect, but not necessarily so. For example, the two variables may have a common cause. Thus, belief in God, fragility, and the need for care may all have a common cause. Alternatively, belief in God might be interpreted as causing fragility and the need for great care in dealing with people. These options seem unlikely, however. Firstly, because the national fragility index comprises a very wide range of variables and it is difficult to identify anything that has been overlooked which might cause both fragility and belief in God. Secondly, many religions emphasise good relationships with one's fellow human beings, rather than distrust of them.

Cause and effect is unclear, suggesting that feedback processes are involved. This article investigates those processes in some detail and finds that the relationship between the three factors is complex.

The article also provides a general model that is applicable to circumstances in which any two competing cultures, ideologies, or cults draw on the same population.

Ideology and Culture

Before discussing the processes, I would like to describe the differences between a culture, an ideology, and a cult. Some of the characteristics of these three belief systems are examined in the table below. This shows ideologies and cults to be subsets of cultures, and so, the latter term will be used generically. However, individuals vary in their acceptance of values, norms, and beliefs. This variation lies on a scale from extremism, through moderate acceptance and moderate rejection, to extreme rejection. This blurs the boundary between an ideology, a cult and a culture.

Characteristic	Culture	Ideology	Cult
Includes norms?	Y	Y	Y
Includes values?	Y	Y	Y
Includes beliefs?	Y	Y	Y
Includes symbols or identity demarcation?	Y	Y	Y
Organises a group of people?	Y	Y	Y
Has written or spoken guidelines that are taught?	Y	Y	Y
Is socialized through community reward and punishment?	Y	Y	Y
Creates an “us and them” distinction?	Y	Y	Y
Has a political focus?	N	Y	N
Has a religious focus?	N	N	Y
Has evolved?	Y	N	N
Has been invented by a founding agent or agents?	N	Y	Y
Is doctrinal, i.e., rigid, fixed, resilient, dogmatic, involving certainty of belief, and resistant to evidence based updating?	N	Y	Y
Has strong in-group favoritism and strong out-group distrust?	N	Y	Y
Is evangelized or propagandized?	N	Y	Y
Uses family and kinship metaphors, e.g., “brothers of the revolution”?	N	Y	Y

Table 1 - Comparison of the characteristics of cultures, ideologies and cults. Derived in part from (Zmigrod, L., 2022)

Cultures, ideologies, and cults all satisfy the needs of their subscribers. They can also act as contra-satisfiers for others. The greater the overall level of satisfaction they provide, compared with other available alternatives, the greater the likelihood that the culture, ideology, or cult will be adopted. The ideal culture is, therefore, one that satisfies all of everyone’s needs. However, this satisfaction must be within the limits of sustainability, based on truth, and flexible in the event of change.

Religion

Religious cultures preceded more modern ones, such as secularism and consumerism, and have become well established across the world. The latter are, in general, relative newcomers and can therefore be perceived as a threat.

Religion provides many satisfiers, for example a community that satisfies our need for relatedness. In particular, however, it provides a ready-made psychological defence mechanism against anxiety caused by our existential givens. Four existential givens were identified by the

American psychotherapist, Irvin D. Yalom (Yalom, 1980), and a religion can provide a defence mechanism against each. It does so by altering our beliefs from truths that cause us anxiety to promises that are less painful and can neither be proven nor disproven.

Existential givens are contra-needs or states that we wish to avoid but are unable to. Further details can be found at <http://rational-understanding.com/2021/08/20/contra-needs-and-existentialism/>. The four existential givens are:

- (a) **Death.** Yalom regards death as being the most pressing of our concerns. Death is inevitable and the knowledge of it pervades the conscious and unconscious mind. This leads, at times, to great anxiety. However, most religions promote a belief in some form of existence after death that alleviates this anxiety.
- (b) **Freedom (lack of guidance).** In the existential sense, freedom does not mean social and political liberty. Rather it means fear arising from a lack of guidance in our lives. Most religions provide an ethical framework that gives us this guidance.
- (c) **Isolation (separateness).** Existential isolation is not the same as loneliness. The latter arises from the physical absence of other human beings with whom to interact. Existential isolation refers to the unbridgeable gap between oneself as an individual, others, and the world that we inhabit. It means that, inevitably, we are apart from others and cannot merge ourselves with them. Most religions encourage the belief that we have a very close relationship with God, can communicate with him through prayer, and that he knows our minds. Some call this oneness with God. Again, this alleviates the anxiety of isolation.
- (d) **Meaninglessness.** Yalom argues that we need meaning in our lives. However, meaning is not inherent in the physical universe, but rather it is something that we create for ourselves. The absence of meaning can lead to distress and even suicide. So, most religions provide a source of meaning for their followers.

Without the satisfiers provided by a religion, the knowledge of death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness can be a contra-satisfier that it is difficult to come to terms with. To know that these states are unavoidable is a cause of distress and anxiety. So, to alleviate this we may turn to religion. However, once we accept a religion:

- a) We become a part of its culture.
- b) We do not wish to give up its more tangible satisfiers such as community and will be unwilling to do so unless, at the same time, we put effort into replacing them.
- c) We resist accepting the truth about our existential givens: firstly, because it would require considerable effort to revise our existing belief system or mental schemata; and secondly, because such a major effort would not necessarily reward us. Unless we seek other ways of coming to terms with our existential givens, rejecting a religion would create new anxieties, and we have not evolved to actively seek these.

Cultural Change

A transition from a religious to a secular consumer culture is ongoing in the West and is spilling over into other countries, for example, those in the Middle East. Both the religious culture and the secular consumer culture are conditioned in their adherents by the cultures' leaders. They are also instilled in us by our peers through a process of socialization. Both processes involve the promise of satisfiers and the threat of contra-satisfiers in return for cultural compliance. So, socialization is also a form of operant conditioning.

We learn our core beliefs through socialization in childhood. Although they can alter as we age, for most of us they do not. So, any change in the need for religion will lag by about a

generation after any change in a nation's other institutions. Thus, more than one culture may be actively promoting itself within a nation at any one time.

Not all aspects of a culture are a satisfier for everyone. Some will regard certain aspects as a contra-satisfier. If they regard a culture as a net contra-satisfier then they will resist attempts at conditioning and socialization. In the case of religion vs. secular consumerism, the latter appeals to our more basic needs to which, if they are not satisfied, we give a greater priority than our higher needs. So, particularly among the more deprived sections of a population, a secular consumer culture will be attractive. In turn, this attracts people who see the secular consumer culture as a potential source of power.

Interactions between competing cultures

The interactions between two competing cultures that draw on the same population are shown in the diagrams below. These diagrams describe a general process in which the two cultures A and B might, for example, be two businesses competing for the same customers or two ideologies, such as nationalism and globalism, competing for the same followers. Thus, culture A could be a religion and culture B secular consumerism.

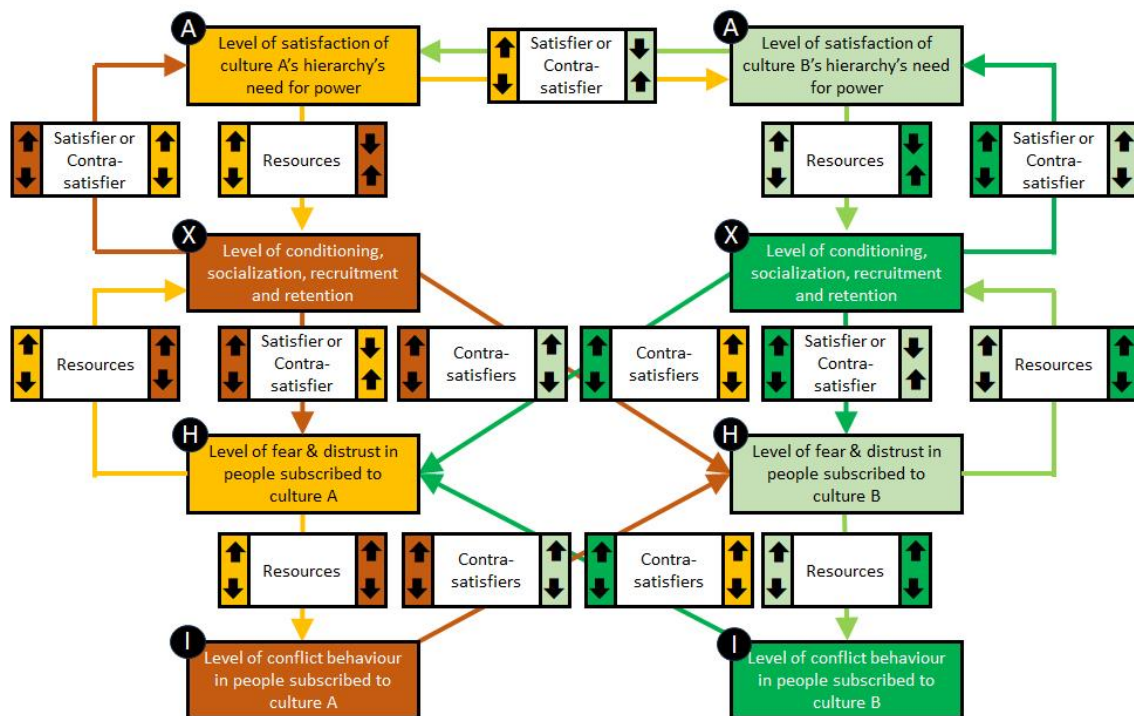


Figure 1 - Interactions between two competing cultures.

Note that X is broken down in more detail in Figures 2 and 3.

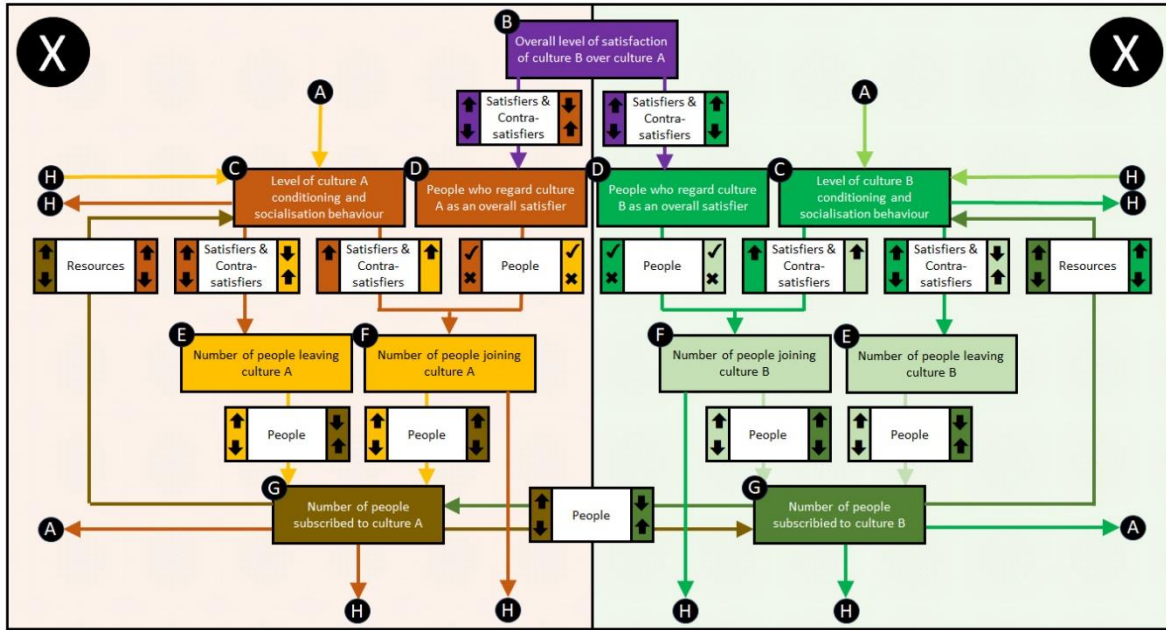


Figure 2 - Interactions between two competing cultures. Detail of X.

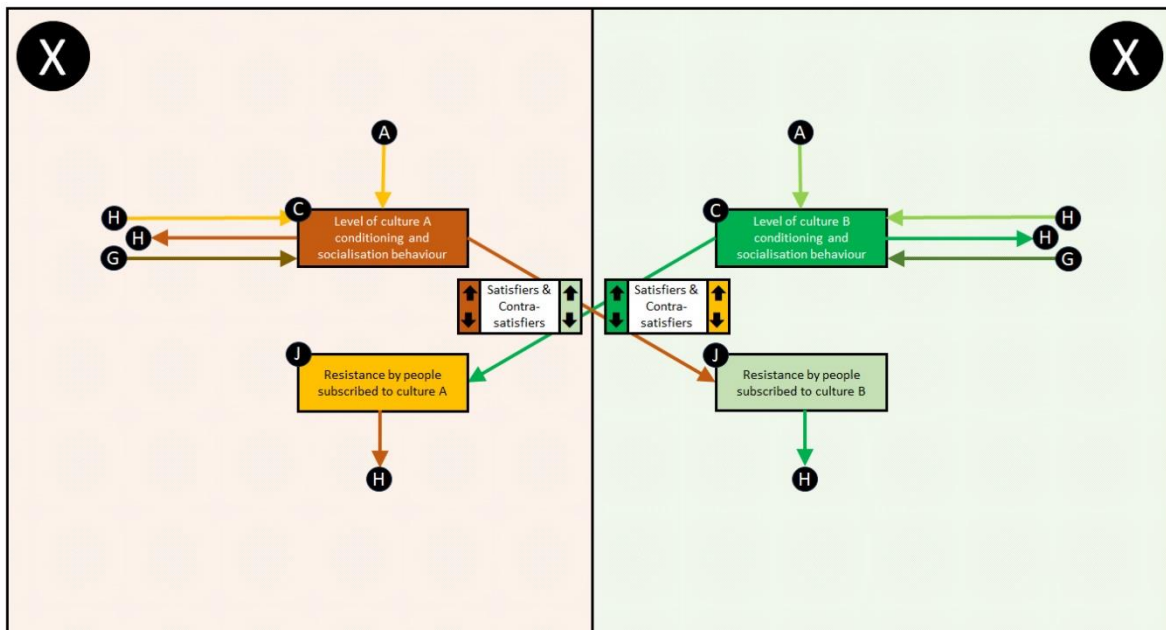


Figure 3 - Interactions between two competing cultures. Further detail of X.

The key to symbols used in these diagrams is given in my article on social systems theory at <https://rational-understanding.com/2024/03/06/a-theory-of-society-derived-from-the-principles-of-systems-psychology-ecology-evolution/>.

The diagrams are explained as follows, where (YZ) means the relationship between Y, a cause, and Z, an effect.

(AA) The leaders of two competing cultures see any growth in the power of the other as a contra-satisfier. This contra-satisfier diminishes the level of satisfaction of their need for power. Conversely, any decrease in the power of the other is a satisfier that increases their level of satisfaction.

(GA) This power is based on the number of people subscribed to the culture. So, any increase in this number is a satisfier that increases the leaders' level of satisfaction. Conversely, any decrease in the number is a contra-satisfier that decreases their level of satisfaction.

(AC) Any decrease in the level of satisfaction of the leaders of a culture will result in them engaging in increased competition. This takes the form of increased conditioning behaviour.

(GC) An increase in the number of people who subscribe to a culture results in an increase in socialization behaviour.

(XH) Efforts by one culture to increase the number of people who subscribe to it are regarded as a contra-satisfier by a competing culture and increase its level of fear and distrust. Note that (CH) or the level of conditioning and socialization by the other culture, (FH) or the number of people joining the other culture, and (GH) or the number of people subscribed to the other culture all contribute to (XH).

(CJ) Attempts to condition or socialize people who subscribe to the other culture will result in resistance by them. That is, they will impose contra-satisfiers on those who attempt this. The greater the conditioning and socialization effort, and the greater the number of people subscribed to the other culture the greater the resistance. This also contributes to XH.

(HC) An increase in the level of fear and distrust among those who subscribe to a culture will also increase their level of socialization behaviour.

(CF) The conditioning and socialization of people into a culture involves the offer of satisfiers or rewards for compliance and the imposition of contra-satisfiers or punishments for non-compliance. Initially, this competition can be positive with an emphasis on the satisfiers that the culture brings to its subscribers. However, it can become negative citing the contra-satisfiers of the other culture or it can become coercive by imposing contra-satisfiers on non-subscribers.

(DF) However, only those who regard a culture as a greater overall satisfier or a lower overall contra-satisfier than the alternatives will subscribe to it. If none do, then there will be no new subscribers irrespective of the amount of conditioning or socialization effort.

(BD) The more one culture offers greater overall satisfaction or lower overall contra-satisfaction than another, the more people favour it over the other.

(FG) The more people who join a culture the more people there are subscribing to it.

(CEG) People will leave a culture either because they have come to prefer the alternatives or through natural wastage. An increase in conditioning and/or socialization will reduce the former but not the latter.

(CGC) Thus, a positive feedback loop can form in which socialization effort increases with the number of people subscribed to a culture, and the number of people subscribed to the culture increases with socialization effort. However, this increase in the number of people subscribed to a culture is limited by the availability of non-members who see the culture as a greater overall satisfier or a lesser overall contra-satisfier than the alternatives.

(ACGA) There is also a feedback loop in which a reduction in the leaders' level of satisfaction causes an increase in conditioning behaviour. This in turn, causes an increase in the number of people subscribed to the culture which then increases the leaders' level of satisfaction.

(GG) The number of people in a population is finite. So, the more people who subscribe to one culture, the fewer there are to subscribe to the other.

(HC) The greater the level of fear and distrust in a culture the greater the level of socialization.

(GH) An increase in the number of people who subscribe to a culture is a satisfier for the members of that culture and reduces their level of fear and distrust of other cultures. On the other hand, a decrease in the number of members is a contra-satisfier that increases their level of fear and distrust.

(CGHC) Thus, a feedback loop can develop in which an increase in socialization effort causes an increase in the number of people subscribed to a culture. This, in turn, causes a decrease in the level of fear and distrust, leading to a reduction in socialization effort. Conversely, a decrease in socialization effort results in a decrease in the number of members, an increase in fear and distrust, and thus, an increase in socialization effort.

(HI) An increase in the level of fear and distrust causes the subscribers to a culture to increase their level of active hostility towards another culture, i.e., the former engage in conflict by imposing contra-satisfiers on the latter.

(IH) An increase in the level of hostility from one culture increases the other culture's level of fear and distrust.

(HIHIH) Thus, a feedback loop forms in which conflict escalates. Without intervention, this can become violent.

Discussion and Conclusions

A relationship between national fragility, trust and religion does exist, both in practice and theoretically.

When an established religious culture meets a secular consumer culture, the latter often offers greater overall satisfaction and begins to gain adherents. This threatens the established religious culture generating greater fear and distrust, greater conditioning and socialization behaviour, some of which can be coercive, and greater conflict with adherents to the secular consumer culture. This coercion and conflict contributes to national fragility. Correlations between national fragility, trust and religion involve several feedback loops that make it unclear which is the cause and which the effect. However, the overall cause is probably a new secular consumer culture gaining traction within a traditional religious one.

There are, of course, other possible causes. However, I have searched the data and have not found any correlation as strong as the ones above. For example, confidence in government and belief in God have a coefficient of correlation of 0.20; confidence in government and trust have a coefficient of correlation of 0.21.

The above diagrams can be used to identify interventions that may stabilize the relationship between two cultures that draw on the same population and prevent conflict from escalating into violence. For example, power sharing in Northern Ireland was an intervention in the relationship (AA).

References

<https://fragilestatesindex.org/>

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