

Religious folks behave better — with a catch

UBC psychologist's study finds believers need to think God is watching to be on their best behaviour

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Psychologist Ara Norenzayan's study in the journal *Science* reviews 30 years of research into religion and moral behaviour.

Religious people tend under certain conditions to be more helpful and generous than others because their belief in God assumes the existence of an allknowing “supernatural police” force that monitors their behaviour, says University of B.C. psychologist Ara Norenzayan.

The prestigious journal *Science* published an article on Thursday by Norenzayan and his assistant, Azim Shariff, that concludes that religious people generally act more ethically than atheists — but only on two conditions.

One: Religious people behave better when they believe their good acts toward strangers will be noticed and will enhance their reputation among their peers, Norenzayan said Thursday.

Secondly, experiments show religious people generally behave more kindly and generously when they have been freshly reminded, in a casual and subconscious way, of a morally tinged God or supernatural being.

If researchers remove those two conditions, Norenzayan said, “all of a sudden you don’t find any differences” between the behaviour of the religious and non-religious.

Emphasizing that he is not out to either defend or attack religion, Norenzayan said the Science article goes beyond mere anecdotes and opinion about religion and looks at the “hard scientific evidence” that anthropologists, psychologists, economists and others have gathered during the past 30 years.

Norenzayan, who has gained international attention for his psychological experiments into how religion affects the way humans act, said the five-page Science article does not necessarily contradict those who argue religion exacerbates conflict between cultures.

That’s because the UBC researchers discovered in their survey of all the research available that religious people are often more generous and helpful (or “pro-social”) to members of their own religion, not necessarily to outsiders.

The Science article, titled “The Origin and Evolution of Religious Prosociality,” shows that even though religion has been helpful in creating moral behaviour, it has no monopoly on producing honest and empathic people.

The beneficial role that an allknowing, morally concerned God has played in history, Norenzayan said, is in some cases being replaced by non-religious mechanisms — such as effective policing, courts and social surveillance.

While Norenzayan found some people behave more ethically when researchers have reminded them of their belief in God, he said many of us behave more ethically simply because a police cruiser drives by or a convenience store contains a surveillance camera.

Still, Norenzayan said, religiously motivated virtuous behaviour has played a vital role throughout history — by encouraging cooperation among large groups of genetically unrelated people. For instance, Norenzayan said, recent anthropological studies have suggested there is more cooperation among religious societies than non-religious ones, especially when group survival is under threat.

Economic studies, meanwhile, have shown religiosity increases trust, he said. Experiments have shown a random sample of people will tend to give more money to people they are told are religious.

Such trust findings have political ramifications, said Norenzayan. Even though non-religious Canadians generally trust their secular governments and courts, he said that's not the case in countries such as Russia and Iran. "In those countries religion may be the only thing that works" at keeping citizens functioning in an ethical way, he said.

In addition, various psychology experiments, some conducted by Norenzayan himself, have shown belief in God reduces cheating and selfish behaviour.

In one psychological experiment out of dozens surveyed by Norenzayan and Shariff, children were explicitly instructed not to look in a box and then left alone with it. "Those who were previously told that a fictional supernatural agent — Princess Alice — was watching were significantly less likely to peek inside the forbidden box," says the article.

Norenzayan said he is grateful the global scientific community has become much more open in the past six years to researching religious behaviour. In the past, any exploration of religion and spirituality was stigmatized by most academics in secular universities. "The debate has been so polarized in the past. All I want is for scientists to set aside their likes and dislikes and look at the empirical data."

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