

Religion can spur goodness—but it depends

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Courtesy University of British Columbia and [World Science](#) staff

Belief in God encourages people to be helpful, honest and generous—but only when religious thoughts are fresh in their minds or when such behavior enhances reputation, researchers say.

Those are the conclusions of a new study based on an analysis of research spanning the past three decades addressing the issue. The study, by Ara Norenzayan and Azim Shariff at the University of British Columbia in Canada, are published in the Oct. 3 issue of the research journal *Science*.

The paper first reviews data from anthropology, sociology, psychology and economics. The authors then explore how religion, by encouraging cooperation, contributed to the rise of large, stable societies of unrelated individuals.



Among the findings:

Anthropological data suggests there is more cooperation among religious societies than others, especially when group survival is threatened.

Economic experiments indicate that religiosity increases trust among participants.

Psychology experiments show that thoughts of an omniscient, morally concerned God reduce levels of cheating and selfish behaviour.

“Religiously-motivated ‘virtuous’ behaviour has likely played a vital social role throughout history,” said Shariff, a doctoral student. “One reason we now have large, cooperative societies may be that some aspects of religion – such as outsourcing costly social policing duties to all-powerful Gods – made societies work more cooperatively in the past.”

Across time, observe the authors, the notion of an all-powerful, morally concerned “big God” usually begat “big groups” – large-scale, stable societies that successfully passed on their cultural beliefs.

Today, religion has no monopoly on kindness and generosity, the researchers noted: in many findings, non-believers acted as helpfully as believers. The last several centuries have seen the rise of non-religious mechanisms that include effective policing, courts and social surveillance. “Some of the most cooperative modern societies are also the most secular,” said Norenzayan. “People have found other ways to be cooperative – without God.”

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