

Religion makes people helpful and generous -- under certain conditions: UBC researchers

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Belief in God encourages people to be helpful, honest and generous, but only under certain psychological conditions, according to University of British Columbia researchers who analyzed the past three decades of social science research.

Religious people are more likely than the non-religious to engage in prosocial behaviour – acts that benefit others at a personal cost – when it enhances the individual's reputation or when religious thoughts are freshly activated in the person's mind, say UBC social psychologists Ara Norenzayan and Azim Shariff

Their paper "The Origin and Evolution of Religious Prosociality" appears in the October 3, 2008 issue of the journal *Science*.

The two-part paper first reviews data from anthropology, sociology, psychology and economics. Norenzayan and Shariff then go on to explore how religion, by encouraging cooperation, became a factor in making possible the rise of large and stable societies made of genetically unrelated individuals.

To date, says Norenzayan, the public debate whether religion fosters cooperation and trust has largely been driven by opinion and anecdote.

"We wanted to look at the hard scientific evidence," says Norenzayan, an associate professor in the Dept. of Psychology.

The investigators found complementary results across the disciplines:

- Empirical data within anthropology suggests there is more cooperation among religious societies than the non-religious, especially when group survival is under threat
- Economic experiments indicate that religiosity increases levels of trust among participants
- Psychology experiments show that thoughts of an omniscient, morally concerned God reduce levels of cheating and selfish behaviour

"This type of religiously-motivated 'virtuous' behaviour has likely played a vital social role throughout history," says Shariff, a Psychology PhD student.

Shariff adds, "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 cultures and through 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.

The study also points out that in today's world religion has no monopoly on kind and generous behaviour. In many findings, non-believers acted as prosocially as believers. The last several hundred years has seen the rise of non-religious institutional mechanisms that include effective policing, courts and social surveillance.

"Some of the most cooperative modern societies are also the most secular," says Norenzayan. "People have found other ways to be cooperative – without God."

Source: University of British Columbia

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