

'Releasing' people from Catholic guilt increases generosity towards church, research shows

December 6 2012

People who recall being absolved of their sins, are more likely to donate money to the church, according to research published today in the journal *Religion, Brain and Behavior*.

Researchers from Royal Holloway and the University of Oxford assigned participants two [memory tasks](#). In the first, they were asked to privately recall a sin that they had committed in the past, while in the second, they recalled attending [confession](#) for this sin or imagined doing so, if they had not confessed in reality.

Each participant was also given an opportunity to donate to a local [Catholic church](#) by placing some money in an envelope. For some participants, this donation was collected before they recalled being absolved of the sin, whereas for others the donation was collected afterward.

The results showed that recalling (or imagining) absolution strongly increased church donations, with the effect more pronounced in participants who believed in divine judgment and engaged in [religious activities](#) such as reading the bible or praying.

Dr Ryan McKay from the Department of Psychology at Royal Holloway said: "Recent evidence has suggested that people are more likely to behave prosocially, such as helping, sharing, donating, co-operating and

volunteering, when they feel guilty. This raises the question of whether [religious rituals](#) of absolution, in which people are absolved of their sins and released from guilt, would actually make people less prosocial.

"However, the results of our study suggest the opposite - that 'releasing' people from their sin has a positive prosocial effect. This indicates that the Catholic ritual of confession is an effective means of promoting commitment to the church"

Many other religions feature the concept of absolution in varying forms, such as Prāyaścitta in the Hindu tradition and Istighfar in Islam. The researchers are now keen to see if similar results would be seen beyond [Catholicism](#). The research is part of a wider project on 'Ritual, Community and Conflict' supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Provided by Royal Holloway, University of London

Citation: 'Releasing' people from Catholic guilt increases generosity towards church, research shows (2012, December 6) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-12-people-catholic-guilt-generosity-church.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.