

Reminding people of their religious belief system reduces hostility

October 15 2014

Few topics can prove more divisive than religion, with some insisting it promotes compassion, selflessness and generosity, and others arguing that it leads to intolerance, isolation and even violence.

New research conducted at York University, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, may shed some light on religion's actual influence on believers – and the news is positive.

"Based on our premise that most people's religious beliefs are non-hostile and magnanimous, we hypothesized that being reminded of religious beliefs would normally promote less hostile reactions to the kinds of threats in everyday life that usually heighten hostility," says researcher Karina Schumann, the article's lead author, now a postdoctoral fellow at Stanford University.

To test this hypothesis, participants either received a simple reminder of their [religious belief](#) system ("which religious beliefs system do you identify with?") or not. They were then exposed to either threatening experiences (such as thinking about their own death or failing at an academic assignment) or not. They were then given a chance to judge and assign punishments for transgressors, criminals and worldview critics.

Across nine different experiments with 910 participants, the results consistently supported the hypothesis for Christians, Jews, Muslims and Hindus alike. The religiously reminded were significantly less hostile

and punitive in the threatening circumstances than the non-reminded participants were (there were no effects of the religious reminders among the non-threatened participants).

"Our research suggests that people generally associate their religious beliefs with Golden Rule ideals of forgiveness and forbearance, and that they turn to them when the chips are down, in threatening circumstances," says York U psychology professor Ian McGregor, the article's second author. "This research contributes to the current dialogue on religion by demonstrating that even brief religious belief reminders not accompanied by any explicit beliefs or injunctions tend to promote more magnanimous, less hostile choices in threatening circumstances."

Though the researchers say the link between religion and magnanimity may seem surprising given that news headlines so often focus on atrocities committed in the name of religion, their results suggest that for most people, the influence of religion may be more positive than what is often portrayed in the media.

"Part of the reason for our magnanimity finding could be that in our research we focused on religious ideals, whereas extremist groups may often be more focused on intergroup rivalries and coalitions than the core religious ideals of love and forgiveness," says Schumann. "Future research is needed to determine whether reminders of religious belief can also foster magnanimity in non-Western countries, among less educated individuals, and in the context of high-stakes conflicts in which transgressions are committed by others with competing religious convictions."

More information: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol 107(3), Sep 2014, 432-453. [DOI: 10.1037/a0036739](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036739)

Provided by York University

Citation: Reminding people of their religious belief system reduces hostility (2014, October 15)
retrieved 19 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2014-10-people-religious-belief-hostility.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.