

Are religious people more moral?

October 24 2017, by Dimitris Xygalatas



Credit: Dimitris Xygalatas

Why do people distrust atheists?

A recent study we conducted, led by psychologist [Will Gervais](#), found widespread and extreme [moral prejudice](#) against [atheists](#) around the world. Across all continents, people assumed that those who committed immoral acts, even extreme ones such as serial murder, were more likely to be atheists.

Although this was the first demonstration of such bias at a global scale,

its existence is hardly surprising.

Survey data show that Americans are [less trusting](#) of atheists than of any other social group. For most politicians, going to church is often the best way to garner votes, and coming out as an unbeliever could well be [political suicide](#). After all, there are no open atheists in the [U.S. Congress](#). The only known religiously unaffiliated representative describes herself as ["none,"](#) but still denies being an atheist.

So, where does such extreme prejudice come from? And what is the actual evidence on the relationship between religion and morality?

How does religion relate to morality?

It is true that the world's major religions are concerned with moral behavior. Many, therefore, might assume that religious commitment is a sign of virtue, or even that morality cannot exist without religion.

Both of these assumptions, however, are problematic.

For one thing, the ethical ideals of one religion might seem immoral to members of another. For instance, in the 19th century, Mormons considered [polygamy](#) a moral imperative, while Catholics saw it as a mortal sin.

Moreover, religious ideals of moral behavior are often limited to group members and might even be accompanied by outright hatred against other groups. In 1543, for example, Martin Luther, one of the fathers of Protestantism, published a [treatise](#) titled "On the Jews and their Lies," echoing anti-Semitic sentiments that have been common among various religious groups for centuries.

These examples also reveal that religious morality can and does change

with the ebb and flow of the surrounding culture. In recent years, several Anglican churches have revised their moral views to allow [contraception](#), the [ordination of women](#) and the blessing of [same-sex unions](#).

Discrepancy between beliefs and behavior

In any case, religiosity is only loosely related to theology. That is, the beliefs and behaviors of religious people are not always in accordance with official religious doctrines. Instead, popular religiosity tends to be much more practical and intuitive. This is what religious studies scholars call "[theological incorrectness](#)."

Buddhism, for example, may officially be a religion without gods, but most Buddhists still treat Buddha as a deity. Similarly, the Catholic Church vehemently opposes birth control, but the vast majority of Catholics [practice it anyway](#). In fact, theological incorrectness is the norm rather than the exception among believers.

For this reason, [sociologist Mark Chaves](#) called the idea that people behave in accordance with religious beliefs and commandments the "[religious congruence fallacy](#)."

This discrepancy among beliefs, attitudes and behaviors is a much broader phenomenon. After all, communism is an egalitarian ideology, but communists do not behave any less [selfishly](#).

So, what is the actual evidence on the relationship between religion and morality?

Do people practice what they preach?

Social scientific research on the topic offers some intriguing results.

When researchers ask people to report on their own behaviors and attitudes, religious individuals claim to be more altruistic, compassionate, honest, civic and [charitable](#) than nonreligious ones. Even [among twins](#), more religious siblings describe themselves as being more generous.

But when we look at actual behavior, these differences are nowhere to be found.

Researchers have now looked at multiple aspects of moral conduct, from charitable giving and cheating in exams to helping strangers in need and cooperating with anonymous others.

In a classical experiment known as the "[Good Samaritan Study](#)," researchers monitored who would stop to help an injured person lying in an alley. They found that religiosity played no role in helping behavior, even when participants were on their way to deliver a talk on the parable of the good Samaritan.

This finding has now been confirmed in numerous laboratory and field studies. Overall, the results are clear: No matter how we define morality, [religious people](#) do [not behave](#) more morally than atheists, although they often say ([and likely believe](#)) that they do.

When and where religion has an impact

On the other hand, religious reminders do have a documented effect on moral behavior.

Studies conducted among American Christians, for example, have found that participants donated [more money](#) to charity and even watched [less porn](#) on Sundays. However, they compensated on both accounts during the rest of the week. As a result, there were no differences between

religious and nonreligious participants on average.

Likewise, a study conducted in [Morocco](#) found that whenever the Islamic call to prayer was publicly audible, locals contributed more money to charity. However, these effects were short-lived: Donations increased only within a few minutes of each call, and then dropped again.

Numerous other studies have yielded similar results. In my own work, I found that people became more [generous](#) and [cooperative](#) when they found themselves in a place of worship.

Interestingly, one's degree of religiosity does not seem to have a major effect in these experiments. In other words, the positive effects of religion depend on the [situation](#), not the disposition.

Religion and rule of law

Not all beliefs are created equal, though. A recent cross-cultural study showed that those who see their gods as moralizing and punishing are more impartial and [cheat less](#) in economic transactions. In other words, if people believe that their gods always know what they are up to and are willing to punish transgressors, they will tend to behave better, and expect that others will too.

Such a belief in an external source of justice, however, is not unique to religion. Trust in the [rule of law](#), in the form of an efficient state, a fair judicial system or a reliable police force, is also a predictor of moral behavior.

And indeed, when the rule of law is strong, religious belief [declines](#), and so does [distrust](#) against atheists.

The co-evolution of God and society

Scientific evidence suggests that humans – and even our primate cousins – have innate [moral predispositions](#), which are often expressed in religious philosophies. That is, religion is a [reflection](#) rather than the cause of these predispositions.

But the reason religion has been so successful in the course of human history is precisely its ability to capitalize on those moral intuitions.

The historical record shows that supernatural beings have not always been associated with morality. Ancient Greek gods were [not interested](#) in people's ethical conduct. Much like the various local deities worshiped among many modern hunter-gatherers, they cared about receiving rites and offerings but not about whether people lied to one another or cheated on their spouses.

According to psychologist [Ara Norenzayan](#), belief in morally invested gods developed as a solution to the problem of large-scale cooperation.

Early societies were small enough that their members could rely on people's reputations to decide whom to associate with. But once our ancestors turned to permanent settlements and group size increased, everyday interactions were increasingly taking place between strangers. How were people to know whom to trust?

Religion provided an answer by introducing [beliefs](#) about all-knowing, all-powerful gods who punish moral transgressions. As human societies grew larger, so did the occurrence of such beliefs. And in the absence of efficient secular institutions, the fear of God was crucial for establishing and maintaining social order.

In those societies, a sincere belief in a punishing supernatural watcher

was the best guarantee of [moral behavior](#), providing a public signal of compliance with social norms.

Today we have other ways of policing morality, but this evolutionary heritage is still with us. Although statistics show that atheists commit [fewer crimes](#) than average, the widespread prejudice against them, as highlighted by our study, reflects intuitions that have been forged through centuries and might be hard to overcome.

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