

Religious believers think God values lives of out-group members more than they do

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Belief in all powerful supernatural entities that police moral behavior between people has been shown to promote prosocial behavior between co-religionists. But do these effects extend to members of different

religious groups? In a new paper, which will appear in print in an upcoming special issue of *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, Michael Pasek, Jeremy Ginges, and colleagues find that, across religious groups in Fiji and Israel, religious believers see God as encouraging people to treat others in a more universal, or equal, manner.

The studies reported in this paper are part of a broader project, led by Ginges and funded by the Templeton Religious Trust and the U.S. National Science Foundation, that investigates the effect of religious [belief](#) on relations between different ethno-religious communities.

Whether exemplified through the crusades, the Holocaust, or modern persecution of Uyghur Muslims in China, religion is often implicated as a source of intergroup conflict. This leads many to believe that religious diversity makes societies less cohesive.

"Contrary to popular opinion, our findings suggest that, at least in some contexts, religious belief can attenuate, as opposed to promote, religious tension," says Pasek.

The team, led by researchers at The New School for Social Research and Artis International, conducted three preregistered studies, comprising two field studies with Christians, Hindus, and Muslims in Fiji (727 people total), and one online study with Jewish Israelis (539 people).

In every study, people were asked if a passerby should sacrifice his life to save five individuals trapped in a burning house. In one scenario, the trapped people were of the same religion as the passerby. In another scenario, the trapped people were from a different religion than the person passing by. For each scenario, study participants also indicated which action they thought God would prefer.

Across studies and [religious groups](#), the researchers found that when

participants did not uniformly think that out-group members should be saved, they thought that God would be more likely than them to want an in-group member to sacrifice his life to save out-group members. Moreover, when people showed a preference for saving in-group members more than out-group members, they thought that God would be less likely to endorse such in-group favoritism.

Findings replicate and extend a study by Ginges and colleagues from 2016, shedding new light on how people view God's moral preferences.

"In our previous research, we found similar beliefs among Muslim Palestinian youth, who thought that Allah would be more likely than them to want an in-group member to save Jewish Israelis. Our current work shows this belief is also held among Christian, Hindu, and Jewish populations," says Ginges.

According to Pasek, "this suggests that the potential for religious beliefs to promote intergroup cooperation is not just limited to members of proselytizing religions, like Christianity and Islam."

This work also helps to confront an ongoing challenge in [psychological research](#)—the overreliance on samples from WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, and democratic cultures).

As Pasek explains, "A key contribution of our research is that it extends knowledge to understudied populations, like indigenous Christian iTaukei in Fiji, helping psychologists build theories that generalize beyond WEIRD contexts."

More information: Michael H. Pasek et al, God Values the Lives of My Out-Group More Than I Do: Evidence From Fiji and Israel, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/1948550620904516](#)

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