

# Study explores prosocial behavior within, between religious groups

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Does a commitment to one's God facilitate altruistic behavior that benefits only members of the same religious group? Or does it extend to helping members of a different religion?

University of Illinois Chicago social psychologist Michael Pasek and colleagues examined this question through field and online experiments

involving more than 4,700 people from diverse ethnoreligious populations in three political and cultural contexts.

Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Jews in the Middle East, Fiji and the United States were given the opportunity to share money with anonymous people from different religious groups.

The study, which appears in the journal *Psychological Science*, found participants showed more generosity toward strangers when prompted to think about God. Moreover, participants' giving increased equally no matter if recipients were members of the same [religious group](#) or a different group.

"Religion is often thought to promote intergroup conflict and fuel hostility between people who hold different beliefs. Quite to the contrary—our findings suggest that belief in God, which is an important aspect of most world religions, may sometimes promote more positive intergroup relations," said Pasek, UIC assistant professor of psychology, who is a lead author on the study.

The researchers had participants play multiple rounds of a real economic game in which they divided a sum of money between themselves and different individual recipients.

Participants were asked to think carefully before making their choice during the initial rounds. In the latter rounds, researchers asked participants to think about God before making their choice.

Thinking about God led to an 11% overall increase in giving (relative to what they gave at first) across experiments and sites, regardless of conflict levels or perceived threat.

According to Jeremy Ginges, professor of psychology at The New

School of Social Research and one of the study's lead authors, the results suggest that thinking about one's God may promote cooperation across religious divides, rather than assumed antipathy, but it is unlikely that such beliefs always promote harmony.

"Belief in gods may encourage cooperative norms that help us trade goods and ideas across group boundaries, which is essential to human flourishing. Of course, we are also a parochial species. Our team is now investigating how moral and supernatural beliefs help people balance their parochialism with their need for intergroup cooperation," Ginges said.

**More information:** Michael H. PASEK et al, Thinking About God Encourages Prosociality Toward Religious Outgroups: A Cross-Cultural Investigation, *Psychological Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/09567976231158576](https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976231158576)

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