

Curiosity about religion is viewed as morally virtuous, new research finds

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People from diverse religious backgrounds in the United States view curiosity about religion as morally virtuous, according to new research published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. Atheists also view this curiosity as moral, although less moral than a lack of religious curiosity.

Previous research has examined what makes people curious and how curiosity helps people learn new information, but psychologists know less about how displaying curiosity is viewed by other people. The current research finds that people look favorably on those who show curiosity about religion and science.

"People who display curiosity—about religion or science—are viewed as possessing other moral character traits," says lead author Cindel White, of York University. "We found that observers perceive curious people as willing to put in effort to succeed in life, and observers perceive putting in effort to learn as morally virtuous."

Dr. White and her co-authors asked 1,891 participants to make [moral judgments](#) about people who exhibited curiosity, possessed relevant knowledge, or lacked both curiosity and knowledge about religion and science. Participants attributed greater moral goodness to those who displayed curiosity, a trend which was consistent across Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, and other Christian participants.

"Religious people in the United States can be perceived as, or associated with movements that are, anti-science and dogmatically unquestioning of religious doctrines," Dr. White says. "However, religious participants that we surveyed typically approved of asking question about science, one's own religious, and other people's religions, indicating general approval of people who desire to learn more about religious and scientific questions."

Dr. White notes that the researchers measured observers' perceptions of people who are curious, not what predicts curiosity or how people's levels of curiosity are associated with their actual levels of effort or moral character. The current research also focuses on participants in the United States—White would like to see future studies involve people in a wider array of countries.

In other studies, Dr. White and her colleagues are testing how children between five and eight years old evaluate curiosity about [religion](#) and science. The team is finding that [young children](#) also positively evaluate and reward curiosity, but more research in this area is needed in order to understand the factors at play in this phenomenon.

"There are likely to be certain questions of inquiry, cultural contexts, or settings of inter-group conflict where [curiosity](#) signals negative traits, such as disloyalty to one's in-group," Dr. White explains.

More information: Adults Show Positive Moral Evaluations of Curiosity About Religion, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/19485506231195915](https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506231195915)

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