

Study shows people associate kindness with religious belief

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Experiments conducted by UC Merced researchers find that people who perform good deeds are far more likely to be thought of as religious believers than atheists. Moreover, the psychological bias linking

kindness and helpfulness with faith appears to be global in scale.

Research on the mental link between moral behavior and religious belief goes back more than a decade. Prior research, however, emphasized the dark side of this equation, with participants asked whether they assumed it was more probable that a [serial killer](#) believed in God or was an atheist (people in nations all over the planet thought the latter was more likely).

The UC Merced studies, conceptualized by cognitive science graduate student Alex Dayer and [published](#) in the journal *Scientific Reports*, flipped the switch to the bright side: What if someone was a "serial helper," prone to extraordinary benevolence?

The research found that the stereotype of an extraordinarily good person being religious was dramatically stronger than that of an extraordinarily cruel person being an atheist, said co-author Colin Holbrook, a professor in the university's Department of Cognitive and Information Sciences .

"Though we also found that people intuitively link atheism with immoral behavior, people appear to associate believing in God with being generous, helpful and caring to a much greater extent," Holbrook said.

The research consisted of experiments conducted in two nations with disparate levels of religious belief:

- The United States, where 47% of the population describes itself as religious, according to a recent Gallup poll.
- New Zealand, where 49% of respondents in the 2018 census indicated no religious belief.

Participants read a description of a man who took a path of increasing benevolence, from helping stray animals as a child to, as an adult, giving food and clothes to homeless people. Sometimes, during biting cold

weather, he offered a spare room to homeless families.

Half of the participants were asked which is more probable: The man is a [teacher](#) or the man is a teacher and believes in God. The other half were asked the same question, but the options were "the man is a teacher" or "the man is a teacher and does not believe in God."

The most logical response would be to guess the man is a teacher, a group that would include both teachers who believe and teachers who are atheists. But people have been found to pick the less likely option to this type of question if it matches a strong social stereotype in their minds.

The results were striking. U.S. respondents were nearly 20 times more likely to guess that the helpful man believed in God than that the man was an atheist. In New Zealand, respondents were 12 times more likely to guess that the helpful man was religious.

The bias intuitively connecting [religious belief](#) to socially uplifting behavior was significantly stronger than that found with the study's inverse, "dark side" conditions, which looked for stereotypes of atheists as antisocial. The bias was there, but far less powerful.

"So instead of a stereotype of atheists as immoral driving the effect, the stereotype of the moral person of faith may be the more important force," Holbrook said. "We replicated the findings of the earlier studies linking evil with atheism, but we found that the effects linking prosociality with faith were remarkably larger."

The study's results fit with a theory about the historical development of major world religions that emphasizes cooperation. Belief that a powerful being or spiritual force rewards positive [moral behavior](#)—and punishes [immoral behavior](#)—is shared by all major religions. This kind of belief might help members of religious groups trust one another,

cooperate and grow.

"Strangers with little in common beyond their shared spiritual beliefs in moralizing gods might be more inclined to trust and less inclined to exploit one another," Holbrook said.

Of course, the UC Merced experiments and similar research measure only what stereotypes people project onto others—how they think someone would act based on what they believe.

"Our evidence indicates that people stereotype believers as more likely to care about and help others. But this theoretical model suggests that the [stereotype](#) might actually have had merit in the past as major religions grew or may possibly be true even now—people who believe in God might actually be more likely to help others," Holbrook said.

"The evidence that believers are more prosocial is currently mixed, and it's a question that calls for more research."

More information: Alex Dayer et al, Intuitive moral bias favors the religiously faithful, *Scientific Reports* (2024). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-024-67960-4](#)

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