

Holy Safety Net! Religion and Recklessness

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Moral instruction is a big part of religion. That's why most faiths come with strict laws of personal conduct. Indeed, many believe that living a sober life, free of risk and excess and recklessness, is evidence of devotion to a higher power.

But most instruction of this sort focuses on recklessness with a moral dimension: Don't drink too much. Don't gamble away your family's security. Don't let sexual temptations ruin your marriage. Don't steal someone else's property. And so forth. These transgressions are considered not only risky, but also wrong.

So what about risk taking that has no connection to right or wrong? Sky diving, for example, or cycling without a helmet? Does religiosity discourage these high-stakes activities as well?

Not according to a team of Stanford University psychological scientists, who believe that the opposite dynamic may be in play with this kind of risk. Daniella Kupor and her colleagues suggest that belief in God could actually increase the tendency to take certain risks—specifically, risks with no moral overlay. Their reasoning is that God is for most believers a source of security and protection, and feeling safe in God's care could diminish fear and boost bravery and daring.

The scientists ran a series of experiments to see if priming people with the idea of God makes them feel safe, and if this sense of security in turn makes them more prone to such risk taking. They used word games and writing exercises to subtly trigger thoughts of a deity for only some of the volunteers. Then they used various measures to assess all the volunteers' interest in—and propensity to take part in—a variety of moderately risky behaviors, including recreational activities. All the studies provided consistent evidence that reminders of God boost this kind of non-moral risk taking.

Kupor and her colleagues wanted to compare secular risk taking directly with moral risk taking. They also wanted to replicate their preliminary findings in a more naturalistic setting, so they designed a field experiment using Facebook. They ran six advertisements for one day each, but they subtly manipulated the language to prime religious thinking or not. So for example, an ad might say: "God knows what you're missing! Find skydiving near you." Or it might leave God out: "You don't know what you're missing! Find skydiving near you." In addition to skydiving, they ran ads for bribery (a clearly immoral behavior) and video gaming, a no-risk control.

They ran a total of more than 450,000 ads on users' pages, and measured the click-through rate. The results were consistent with their hypothesis. Facebook users primed with the word God clicked more often on the ad for skydiving, but less often on the ad for bribery, compared to when God was not mentioned. The mention of God did not affect their clicking on the neutral gaming ad.

So even a simple, colloquial expression mentioning God boosted interest in non-moral risk taking. The

scientists ran other versions of these studies to clarify the underlying dynamic at work in people's risk assessments. They found, importantly, that people primed with thoughts of God felt safe from potential harm—and it was this sense of safety that allowed them to take risks. Indeed, reminders of God boosted risk taking only when God was viewed as a source of protection. And when these people took risks that turned out badly, they reported more negative feelings about God—as if their protector had let them down. The scientists report and discuss these findings in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*.

References to God pervade daily life. One interesting implication of these findings, the scientists say, is that risk taking may vary from religion to religion, culture to culture. God the protector may inspire everyday risk taking, but a punitive God—the “fire and brimstone” God of certain Christian sub-cultures—probably would not, since punitive deities do not offer safety and security.

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