

The Roots of Religious Behavior

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In the beginning of the 20th century, William James delivered a series of lectures that eventually became *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. In it, James grappled with notions of the value of religion in relation to science and argued that religious belief was a basic part of human existence. Therefore, it was worthy of academic inquiry.

Fast-forward 110 years to a symposium focusing on new studies of God and religion. Applying experimental scientific methodology to these questions, these psychological scientists focused on how God and religious belief are connected to individual behavior. Religion and God, it turns out, have very different psychological roots, and people behave quite differently when one or the other motivates them.

This distinction was demonstrated in numerous studies in which participants were subliminally primed. Sometimes, they were primed with the word God or with the word religion. Others were primed with images of vengeful, punishing Gods or benevolent, gentle Gods.

One group of researchers explored what effect these primes have on pro-social behavior and found that

people thinking about God were more generous to outsiders than they were to insiders, while people thinking about religion were less inclined to help those whom they saw as outsiders.

Researchers also made a distinction between mean Gods and kind Gods, and they examined how people who were primed with these concepts behaved when faced with opportunities to cheat or steal. People who were primed with the notion of a forgiving God ended up being far more dishonest than those who were primed with the punishing God.

Beliefs in a powerful, intervening God can also diminish an individual's motivation to pursue both personal and prosocial collective goals. A reminder of God ended up undermining an individual's motivation to pursue personal and collective goals. In other cases, certain aspects of religious belief end up enhancing the pursuit of those goals.

What psychological scientists have learned is that religion and God may activate the better angels of our nature. But what those angels are telling each of us to do can be very different.

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