

Religion, Deception and Self-Deception

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*Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight. – Proverbs 12:22*

All today's major religions extoll honesty as a vital virtue. Abstaining from falsehood and deception is one of the five precepts of basic morality in Buddhism, one of the ten *yamas* in Hinduism, and is at the core of two of the 10 commandments in the Old Testament (three if you count the ban on adultery). In the Sunni Hadiths, Muhammad is reported to have warned “when honesty is lost, then wait for the Hour” (Sahih al-Bukhari 6496, Book 81, Hadith 85) The Hour, of course, is the Hour of Judgment, Doomsday.

The emphasis that religions place on honesty is part of a larger association between morality and religion—an association that has, in part, led many to make assumptions about the morality of religious people. Extensive research has now shown that the more religious someone is, the more trustworthy they are perceived as being (Gervais, Shariff & Norenzayan, 2011; Tan & Vogel, 2008). People are apt to trust believers from other religions—even religions they have never heard of—more than doubters from their own religion (Shariff & Clark, 2015). Even atheists judge believers to be morally superior to their fellow atheists (Gervais, 2014). How do these assumptions square with the accumulated evidence? Does religion indeed make people more honest?

The answer depends, stubbornly, on what we mean by *religion*, what we mean by *honest*, and what we mean by *make*. Recent religious priming research has produced evidence of ephemeral effects; thinking about God in the moment increases honest behavior. Decades of research on *religiosity* and honesty have failed to find any consistent relationship, save for a reliable correlation between religiosity and socially desirable responding. This relationship may be best explained by a dispositional propensity toward self-deception and positive illusions—a

third variable that underlies both religiosity and socially desirable responding. In fact, this dispositional propensity may have shaped aspects of religion specifically in order to sate the need for such aggrandizement.

### **Defining terms and fractionating constructs**

To understand religion's relation to honesty, these must be understood as broad terms with distinct components. Theorists have been justifiably keen to divide religiousness into different forms. The most enduring and empirically researched of these divisions is Batson's (1976) observation that religious individuals can be intrinsically, extrinsically, or quest oriented. Intrinsic and extrinsic orientations represent two poles on a spectrum (Allport & Ross, 1967). On the intrinsic side are individuals for whom religion is solely its own end, an ultimate motivation. Conversely, extrinsically oriented people practice their religion as a means to an end, often as a way of gaining social capital. Religion is used as an instrument to achieve other goals. The majority of religious individuals fall somewhere between these two extremes. For example, devoutly religious people who consistently live their faith (intrinsic) might also use their religion to make friends in a new city (extrinsic). For another group of people, religion is neither an end nor a means to an end, but a search for truth (Batson, 1976). These "quest oriented" individuals are motivated to seek answers to their important religious questions, even though they typically do not expect to find definitive answers.

Besides orientation, much of the existing literature on religion and honesty categorizes believers by their religious affiliations and denominations, though distinctions more fine-grained than believers versus non-believers are rarely explored. Information about the frequency of religious behaviors like prayer and service attendance is also commonly collected. Both

intrinsic and extrinsic attend religious services, but intrinsic typically attend at the extreme ends of the spectrum, while extrinsic attend more casually, since they are primarily doing so for social reasons (Allport & Ross, 1967). Not surprisingly, the intrinsically religious report more prayer than extrinsic (Batson, 1976). Quest oriented individuals rarely attend services, but do report some acts of personal religious devotion, consistent with their focus on spirituality.

Honesty is similarly complex. Humans are dishonest with themselves and each other in myriad ways, from being overly generous in their self-assessments to being prone to cheating and stealing from others. The central distinctions in the literature surrounding honesty and religion are between self-deception and other-deception. Self-deception refers to unconscious dishonesty, when people believe their own falsehoods, half-truths and exaggerations. People are often motivated to self-deceive in order to protect themselves from difficult truths—psychologically squirming into more comfortable, if less accurate, mental positions (Taylor & Brown, 1988). One way that researchers assess self-deception is by gauging honest reporting of unjustifiably positive self-concepts (Paulhus, 1984). Other-deception, which is self explanatory, is further broken down into stealing, cheating, lying, and finally, impression management – deliberately misleading others in an attempt to appear good. Although nearly everyone is inclined to respond to questions in socially desirable ways, it has long been recognized that religious individuals tend to do so and do so to a greater degree (Batson, Naifeh & Pate, 1978). Asking people about deceptive practices always has a certain circularity. Are those participants who admit to frequent lying really the least honest? Are those who report rarely if ever lying, actually lying about their lying? Self-reports of lying, it turns out, actually track quite closely with cheating and other forms of dishonesty in behavioral studies, suggesting that these self-reports are meaningfully valid measures (Halevy, Shalvi & Verschuere, 2013). Still, since

socially desirable responding tends to increase with degree of religiosity, assessing general honesty across the spectrum of religious belief is difficult (Batson et al., 1978). Highly religious individuals are particularly unlikely to give honest answers about their bad deeds, even anonymously. Therefore, researchers interested in the relationship between religion and honesty have plumbed the toolkit of lie scales and laboratory tasks that aim to disentangle truth from dishonesty, and self-deception from other-deception. Though findings on religion and honesty are mixed, and sometimes appear to contradict each other, most of these differences can be explained.

### **Religious priming and deception**

In the past decade, religion researchers have turned to priming techniques in order to test how the cognitive salience of religious concepts affects subsequent thought and behavior. These methods aim to test the causal impact of religions by randomly assigning participants to a 'religious situation,' and comparing them to a neutral, unprimed group. This research has made use of a broad array of different priming techniques, from rapid and subliminally presenting participants with religion-related words to using existing environmental cues such as church buildings and audible calls to prayer, and has tested a broad array of dependent outcomes, from racial prejudice to EEG measures of error related negativity (for a review, see Shariff, Willard, Andersen & Norenzayan, 2015).

Prosocial behavior has been among the most researched of these outcomes. Religious priming has been shown to increase generosity (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007), cooperation (Ahmed & Salas, 2011), and volunteerism (Pichon, Boccato & Saroglou, 2007).

Fewer studies have looked directly at the effect of religious priming on honesty. Randolph-Seng & Nielsen (2007) primed participants with a scrambled sentence task before having them complete Hartshorne and May's (1928) classic circle task. Participants were instructed to write numbers in small circles with their eyes closed, while alone in a room. They were incentivized to cheat by peeking. Those whose performance vastly exceeded statistical plausibility were deemed to have cheated. As predicted, this cheating occurred less frequently among the group that had previously received the religion prime. A second study, using subliminal religious primes, found the same pattern of results.

In both Randolph-Seng & Nielsen's (2007) study, and a more recent study that found similar effects using the Muslim call to prayer as a naturalistically occurring environmental prime (Aveyard, 2014), honesty is operationalized as not *cheating*. Rodriguez, Neighbors & Foster (2013) may have found evidence for the opposite pattern of results when it comes to distinguishing honesty from *lying*. These researchers investigated the effect of religious primes on self-reports of drinking behavior, finding that respondents gave significantly more moderate retrospective reports of their drinking behavior when they first answered a number of questions about their religion. While the discrepancy between responses in the religious and control conditions does not necessarily indicate deception (the authors suggest memory effects as another possibility), the results are suggestive that religious priming may sometimes decrease honesty, leading people to adjusting their responses to be more socially desirable.

Nevertheless, this is one study, and the results are ambiguous. No study has explicitly tested for the effect of religious priming on lying to others or self-deception. Even for the more established findings that religion increases prosocial behavior and reduces cheating, the boundary conditions have yet to be fully delineated. Few studies have tested the longevity of the

priming effects, for example, and those that have suggest that the effect may be short-lived (Duhaime, unpublished; Edelman, 2009; Malhotra, 2010; see below). Indeed, that baseline religiosity rarely predicts prosociality differences in the unprimed, control conditions of these studies suggests that the religious are not in a perpetual state of being religiously primed. Whatever effects religious primes have, once individuals are removed from the religious situation, they eventually return to baseline. It is thus critical to understand how religion relates to this baseline, dispositional level of deception.

### **Religiosity and other-deception**

The extensive research trying to elucidate the relationship between people's religiosity and their tendency to deceive others has produced a mixed picture. Religiosity as measured by church attendance consistently predicts more lying, whereas intrinsic religiosity often predicts less. For example, Storch and Storch (2001) reported that prayer, meditation, independent study of scripture, and scores on measures of intrinsic religiosity were associated with lower self-reported rates of academic dishonesty. In contrast, church attendance was correlated with more self-reports of cheating. Desmond and Kraus (2012) found that this pattern went beyond cheating. Adolescents who reported that religion was important to them (i.e. were intrinsically religious) reported lying to parents less, but, again, higher rates of church attendance were associated with increased self-reported instances of lying to parents. Batson (1976) and many others, over the decades, have interpreted inconsistent findings to mean that religion does not successfully promote prosociality. Others (e.g. Leak & Fish, 1989) have been more agnostic about the direction of the causal arrow, exploring religiosity's connection to deception without much speculation about what underpins it. More recently, dispositional factors underlying both religion and honesty have been implicated (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010).

Why would religious primes appear to encourage honesty in behavioral studies, while frequent church attendance – which should indicate consistent religious priming – correlate with greater likelihood to lie and cheat based on self-reports? There is so far no definitive answer to this question, though plausible and non-exclusive explanations exist. Based on religious priming research showing the relative power of the religious situation, it appears that church attendance might not keep religious values salient over the long-term. Evidence on the ephemeral nature of the “Sunday effect” further supports the assumption that attending church does not lead to lasting behavioral improvements. For example, Malhotra (2010) found that people who reported church attendance only bid higher for charitable causes in online auctions on Sundays. On all other days, there were no differences in bids between attenders and non-attenders after appeals to charity. Pornography consumption is another behavior on which doctrine would lead us to expect a difference between religious believers/attenders and non. Again, however, the evidence, conducted at the state level, shows merely a Sunday effect (Edelman, 2009). States with many churchgoers show a marked decline in porn traffic on Sundays, but the churchgoers seem to make up for lost time during the rest of the week – average porn traffic over the course of a week is the same for highly religious states, with many church attenders, as it is in states with drastically lower rates of attendance.

Besides at least some of its effects being temporary, church attendance can also be an indication of extrinsic religiosity, and extrinsic motivations are notoriously bad at producing reliably good results compared to intrinsic motivations (e.g. Deci, 1971; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Just as a parent threatening to hit a child for bad behavior won’t make them well-behaved when the parent is gone, a preacher threatening damnation is unlikely to permanently improve the moral behavior of an individual attending church to gain social capital. Intrinsically religious

individuals tend to be at the poles of the church attendance spectrum; they go either all the time or not at all (Allport & Ross, 1967)—giving the impression of a null linear effect. Without careful attention to this curvilinear pattern, which is rarely mentioned in the literature, correlating attendance with honesty might mask the underlying effects of different motivations (i.e. an extrinsic religion as poor motivator explanation). Both of these potential explanations, though speculative, suggest trait-level explanations for discrepancies in honesty.

### **Religiosity and social desirability biases: Are the religious trying to deceive others or themselves?**

Issues with self-reports within studies of religious honesty do not end with the above unanswered questions. As mentioned earlier, religious participants are particularly disinclined to portray themselves negatively, which is especially problematic in honesty research (Batson et al., 1978). Since the late 80s, it has been well-established that intrinsic (but not extrinsic or quest-oriented) religiosity is correlated with higher social desirability scores (Leak & Fish, 1989). Why would the most sincerely religious people be the most dishonest about themselves?

Early studies showing this relationship were based on studies using the predominant measure of self-enhancement at the time, Crowne and Marlowe's (1960) Social Desirability Scale (SDS). The SDS differentiates between endorsements of positive traits and behaviors and denial of negative ones, but does not provide insights on what motivates socially desirable responding. A number of researchers (e.g. Donahue, 1985; Watson, Morris, Foster & Hood 1986) questioned whether the relationship between dishonest self-enhancement and religiosity was real, or whether it was an artifact of the SDS. The SDS counts endorsements of positive behaviors as self-enhancement, meaning that if religious individuals were honestly more likely to engage in these behaviors, then a systematic—but artifactual—relationship between religiosity

and self-enhancement would emerge. Some items on the SDS contain content that might be especially pertinent to religious believers. Higher endorsement among believers on items such as “I always try to practice what I preach,” do not indicate believers’ propensity to fake good, argue the critics, but are instead honest responses reflecting genuinely more positive behavior.

Leak and Fish (1989) thus sought to investigate whether religious believers’ tendency to report more socially desirable behavior was primarily caused by religiously relevant content in the SDS, by efforts to deliberately mislead others (i.e. impression management), or by honest reports of false beliefs (i.e. self-deception). The authors looked at the relationship between religious orientation and the impression management and self-deception subscales of Paulhus’s (1984) Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR). The BIDR measures impression management by asking participants to rank statements about socially undesirable behaviors that are nonetheless quite common on a scale from 1 – “not true” to 7 – “very true.” “I have never dropped litter on the street,” and “I don’t gossip about other people’s business,” are two examples. For every statement that a participant rates as very true at a 6 or 7 (or a 1 or 2 for reverse-scored items), one point is added to their impression management score. The self-deception subscale includes statements pertaining to common things that people might prefer to deceive *themselves* about, such as, “It would be hard for me to break any of my bad habits,” and “When my emotions are aroused, it biases my thinking.” These subscales are intended to separate concepts that people tend to be motivated to lie to themselves about from those that they are more motivated to lie to others about. Moreover, unlike the SDS, the BIDR contains a minimum of religiously relevant content. Leak and Fish (1989), found that intrinsic religiosity was correlated with both impression management and self-deception, while extrinsic and quest orientations were correlated with neither, even after accounting for the religious content in some

scale items. Not only did participants who earnestly believed in and viewed their religion as an ultimate motivation self-enhance more—a finding consistent with previous studies—but this relationship was due in part to intentional misrepresentation, an attempt to deceive others by deliberately inflating one's self-presentation.

Gillings and Joseph (1996) used the same subscales of the BIDR, but associated them with responses on Francis and Stubb's (1987) Scale of Attitudes towards Christianity (FSAC). Rather than distinguishing intrinsic, extrinsic and quest orientation, the FSAC is specific to Christianity and is at least intended to be just intrinsic-oriented. Items include, "I believe that Jesus still helps people," "I believe that God listens to prayers," and "The church is very important to me." In this case, Gillings and Joseph (1996) found that higher scores on this scale were unrelated to self-deception, but were positively correlated with impression management. Participants who reported strong beliefs in and high importance of God, Jesus and the church were also more likely to intentionally lie about themselves. The lack of relationship between self-deception and religiosity, which is inconsistent with other findings (e.g. Leak and Fish, 1989), may be due to the differences in content between intrinsic religion scales and the FSAC. Extrinsically oriented Christians might be about equally likely to agree that the church is important, for example.

Though many studies replicated the overall relationship between religiosity and socially desirable responding, even after controlling for religious content in scales, other studies occasionally reported inconsistent results (e.g. Richards, 1994), prompting continued support for the interpretation that intrinsic religiosity's association with supposed dishonesty was actually based on truthful reports of behaviors. In an effort to settle the debate, Trimble (1997) reported a meta-analysis of religious socially desirable enhancements confirming that intrinsic but not

extrinsic religiosity is related to this type of dishonesty. Still, this pattern of results, though empirically well supported, was counter-intuitive and hard to reconcile with previous theories of extrinsic religiosity. Recall that extrinsic religiosity refers to the type of religion that is used as a means to an end, usually as a means to social connections and solace (Allport & Ross, 1967). Why would the tendency to lie about oneself not relate to this form of religion, but instead align with the form of religion that is practiced sincerely as its own end? Evidence did not seem to align with theory.

The amount of distinct versus shared variance of the self-deception and impression management subscales of the BIDR was also still uncertain. Burriss and Navara (2002) used experimental manipulations in an effort to determine which interpretation of previous studies was accurate. In between two administrations of the BIDR, half the participants were asked to disclose something negative about themselves—a process that would threaten participants' self-concepts and thus potentially provoke a compensatory response. The other half were asked to disclose something positive, and thus non-threatening. If socially desirable responding was due to honest answers to religiously biased questions, there should be no difference with a threat to self-concept. If, however, this relationship was based on dishonesty—particularly due to self-protection, as proposed by Batson, Naifeh and Pate (1978)—the researchers expected to see an increase in self-enhancement after negative self-disclosures. Participants were also given two subtle and easy opportunities to help the experimenter, as a means of impression management: Rewinding the audiotape of their self-disclosure and picking up a purportedly accidentally dropped pen.

Consistent with the findings of Trimble's (1997) meta-analysis, Burriss and Navara's (2002) first administration of the BIDR, prior to the self-disclosure manipulation, showed

intrinsic religiosity to be positively correlated with the impression management subscale, but uncorrelated with the self-deception subscale. However, intrinsically religious participants who were assigned to give a negative self-disclosure showed significant increases in self-deception following the manipulation. That is, participants in the negative disclosure condition gave more self-deceptive responses on the BIDR during that second administration compared to their previous responses and compared to other intrinsically oriented participants who disclosed something positive. Intrinsic religiosity did not predict changes in impression management after either positive or negative self-disclosures. Further supporting self-deception as the causal force of increases in socially desirable responding after the negative disclosures, these increases did not predict more helping behaviors. In fact, intrinsically religious participants in the self-threat condition were significantly *less* likely to manage their impressions by helping the experimenter. In sum, the higher someone's intrinsic religiosity, the more likely they were to lie *about* themselves in the pretest measure, the more likely they were to lie *to* themselves following self-threat, and the less likely they were to behave more helpfully.

This tendency of religious individuals to report significantly more goodness but not show correspondingly superior behavior underlies a good deal of the last several decades' research on religiosity and honesty. Though there are some conflicting and inconsistent results from self-reports of honesty and within the social desirability literature, the preponderance of evidence indicates that religiosity does not predict greater honesty.

This pattern of results for honesty largely converges with research on religiosity and prosocial behavior in general. Though priming participants to think about religion, explicitly or implicitly, does align behavior with doctrine (Shariff, Willard, Anderson & Norenzayan, 2015),

the vast majority of studies on religious cooperation find little or no baseline differences between religious and non-religious individuals (Kramer & Shariff, 2015).

### **The self-enhancing personality**

Taking stock, the evidence thus far supports the assertion that the only reliable and meaningful difference in honesty between religious believers and non-believers (absent concurrent cues of supernatural monitoring) is that religious individuals self-enhance more (e.g. Batson et al., 1978; Leak & Fish, 1989). Thus far, we have presented differences in honesty between believers and non-believers as they are overwhelmingly presented in the literature: as resulting from differences of beliefs, or at the very least, third variables. Sedikides and Gebauer (2010) provided evidence that a causal arrow could run in the opposite direction—religiosity does not motivate people to self-enhance more (as measured by socially desirable responses), instead self-enhancement inspires greater religiosity. Allport (1950) initially raised the idea that religiosity is a method of self-enhancement six decades earlier. Sedikides and Gebauer (2010) turned the idea into a specific formulation and tested it with a meta-analysis.

Sedikides and Gebauer's (2010) assertion that religiosity is a by-product of self-enhancement rests on two fundamental assumptions: 1) that people are so motivated and prone to self-enhancement that they will use practically any means available to them, and 2) that self-enhancement is more basic than religiosity. As the authors note, a wide range of accepted psychological phenomenon makes the truth of the first assumption evident.

“They use strategically whatever means are available to them to do so. These means include the relevant situation or agents in people's immediate social context (e.g. self-serving attributions, downward social comparisons), aspects of their past (e.g.

counterfactual thinking, discounting), aspects of their future (e.g. self-handicapping, redefining moral standards to fit actions), and aspects of their culture (e.g. associations with successful or powerful others, elevating the importance of the in-group; Hepper, Gramzow & Sedikides (2010); also see Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Campbell & Sedikides, 1999).”

Religiosity fits easily into this framework as another cultural path to self-elevation.

The second assumption, that self-enhancement as a trait is more structurally basic than religiosity is also perfectly credible. Self-enhancement is dispositional (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Individuals with propensities to self-enhance frequently and unconsciously are relatively high in trait-level self-enhancement, which is stable over time. Unlike religiosity, it does not have multiple, distinct components and manifestations. Many studies, including longitudinal ones (e.g. McCullough, Enders, Brion & Jain, 2005; Wink, Ciciolla, Dillon & Tracy, 2007) report that personality traits influence religiosity, not the other way around. Even the greatest of religious changes—faith conversions—do not change personality traits of individuals (Paloutzian, Richardson & Rambo, 1999).

The view that religion itself is the causal factor differentiating believers and non-believers has intuitive appeal. Religious rules typically date back centuries, with changes made and disseminated hierarchically. Children are trained from an early age, in homes and specialized religious services (e.g. Sunday school) to be virtuous in accordance with their family’s faith tradition. Even decades into their religious training, adults still go to religious services, read about their religion and seek religious counsel. Nevertheless, explanations of religious dishonesty as operationalized by SDS that portray religiosity as a cause rest on several less than parsimonious assumptions about self-enhancement: 1) that self-enhancement is the single

dispositional trait that is reliably changed by religiosity, 2) the structurally complex construct of religiosity shapes the much simpler disposition to self-enhance, and 3) the causal arrow goes from religiosity to self-enhancement despite reverse chronological emergence (Heaven & Ciarrochi, 2007).

Conceptualizing religiosity as a result of a self-enhancing disposition is not only more parsimonious and better aligned with other personality and social psychological theory, it makes sense of discrepancies between the kinds and levels of honesty related to intrinsic, extrinsic and quest religiosity. Sedikides and Gebauer's (2010) meta-analysis of studies on socially desirable responding (SDR) found that in places where religiosity is most common (e.g. the United States at the macro level and Christian universities at the micro) intrinsic religiosity and SDR are most strongly positively correlated, while extrinsic and quest religiosity are negatively related. This is because within cultures that value Christianity, self-enhancement does not produce extrinsic and quest orientations, which are contrary to Christian ideals. Sincere and unselfishly motivated Christianity is the cultural norm for what it means to be a good, religious person in the United States. Therefore, it is the profile produced by self-enhancement here. However, in the U.K., where intrinsic religiosity is less exalted, a different pattern emerged. There, intrinsic religiosity was only weakly related to SDS, and extrinsic religiosity was positively related, since self-enhancement reasonably leads to extrinsic religiosity in a culture where it is more acceptable to use religion as a means to an end.

Religious belief could be self-enhancing far beyond helping us establish ourselves as good citizens. As Triandis (2011) pointed out,

“What would be more consistent with our hopes, needs and desires than to have an omnipotent entity support our battles...? Examination of the gods around the world

indicates that in most cultures gods help people reach their goals... Furthermore, in the case of many religions, the beliefs are extremely complimentary to the adherents. ”

### **The functional value of religious deception**

Many functionalist approaches to explaining why religions exist as they currently do have focused on the group benefits that religions may have afforded throughout history (Graham & Haidt, 2010; Norenzayan et al. in press; Shariff, 2011). For example, religions that encouraged adherents to sacrifice self-interests for the group are likely to have developed an advantage in competitions with other less unified groups. However, certain aspects of religions may have radiated because of their appeal and benefits afforded to the individual—not least the maintenance of a positive self-concept. For example, most religions view theirs as the only correct one, and their adherents as especially favored by God. Such views may serve important group functions by enhancing ingroup trust and parochial altruism (Norenzayan et al., in press), but the personal appeal of feeling blessed and chosen cannot be discounted. Religious believers can also commonly expect to live forever, in paradise. Though the belief in a hellish afterlife may be an effective way of inspiring ethical behavior, the promise of a heaven may not be (Shariff & Rhemtulla, 2012). Instead, both correlational and experimental research indicates that the belief in heaven offers individuals well-being benefits (Shariff & Aknin, 2014). These

beliefs are all much more complimentary than what we know about the role of the self that can gleaned from biological evolution. Religions give people a means to inflate their value, manage fears of death and lead happier lives (Becker, 2007; Inzlicht, McGregor, Hirsh & Nash, 2009; Vail, Arndt & Abdollahi, 2012). Religions may have been shaped and spread, in part, by these very motivations.

There is reason to believe that in modern times and countries, the balance between group-focused self-sacrificial behavior and individually appealing aspects of religion may be increasingly tilting towards the latter. Secular mechanisms for reward and punishment of behaviors that impact the group abound, and, in many societies, may have obviated the need to rely on religious elements to ensure honesty and cooperation. In fact, secular trends and mechanisms may today be more effective at doing so. Rates of violence are decreasing even as religious belief declines worldwide (Pinker, 2011), atheistic societies are among the most peaceful (Paul, 2005), and most behavioral studies of prosociality in general, and honesty in particular, show the non-religious to perform no worse than the religious (Kramer & Shariff, 2015). This is correlative research, and though experimental work shows that the priming of secular institutions can increase prosociality as much as priming God concepts (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007), delineating the effects of secular and religion forces awaits more direct testing.

At the same time, these modern countries have become more religiously diverse, increasing the options for potential converts. In the United States, over 50% of adults have changed their religion (Pew, 2009). This porousness between religions places pressure on religions to appeal to individuals. The self-enhancing personality may represent a very large market. Religions that cater to them may prove more successful at maintaining and recruiting adherents.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Does religion make people more honest? Religious situations do—at least temporarily.

Reminding people of their religious beliefs, or even subliminally priming them with religious

concepts makes them less likely to cheat (Shariff et al., 2015). As discussed above, churchgoing, and maybe merely the religious significance of Sundays, temporarily increases bids to charity (Malhotra, 2010) and decreases porn traffic (Edelman, 2009), two behaviors that are as relevant to doctrine as honesty. Future research could test the Sunday effect on honesty directly, perhaps through a cheating task. It is also still to be determined how temporary the Sunday effect might be more precisely than “about a day,” and whether actually attending church, versus being of a religious faith in which Sundays are significant, impacts the effect.

Religiosity does not. Higher rates of reported church attendance correlate with more admissions of lying and cheating (Storch & Storch, 2001; Desmond & Kraus, 2012), which reliably correspond to behavioral measures (Halevy et al., 2013). Intrinsic religiosity correlates negatively with such admissions, but the differences can be explained by socially desirable responding (Paulhus, 1984). Indications of self-enhancement, both unconscious self-deception and purposely misleading impression management, tend to increase with level of intrinsic religiosity, at least in the United States. Dispositional self-enhancement parsimoniously explains both socially desirable responding and intrinsic religiosity (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010). Reversing the causal arrow when considering the link between lying to and about oneself as a function of religiosity is theoretically compelling and supported by meta-analytical evidence, but further research is still needed to determine boundary conditions, cross-cultural reliability and possible genetic underpinnings of self-enhancement as a personality factor. The relative contributions of the self-enhancing personality and the socially supportive features of religious groups in improving the health and happiness of self-enhancers and religious believers are also yet to be ascertained. Nevertheless, absent religious contexts, it appears that the only consistently demonstrated honesty-related difference between people with no or relatively low belief and

those with higher belief is the underlying propensity to self-enhance. Beliefs in gods, afterlives and other supernatural concepts may offer yet another way in which humans deceive themselves to aggrandize their lives and selves.

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