



# Journal of Applied Sciences

ISSN 1812-5654

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## People Who Donate to Religions Are More Likely to Punish Selfish Behaviour, New Study Finds

*When subconsciously exposed to religious ideas and concepts, religious people are far more likely to actively punish those they believe are acting selfishly and unfairly, a new study has revealed.*

The research, led by Dr Ryan McKay from Royal Holloway, University of London, is published Nov. 24 in Proceedings of the Royal Society B.

In the experiment, a series of words were flashed on a computer screen so quickly that they could not consciously be perceived by participants. Previous studies have indicated that priming participants with religious concepts promotes moral and fair behavior, especially among the religious, and the researchers wanted to investigate if such priming also promotes the punishment of unfair behavior. Historically, religion carries formidable material, physical and emotional costs and risks, from sacrificing crops to risking infection by ritual piercing.

“The fact that religions are so successful is a biological puzzle in the sense that evolutionary processes eliminate practices which squander energy or resources. And yet religions prosper despite encouraging this behavior,” says Dr McKay. “One possibility is that these ‘costly’ religious practices persist because they promote and enforce cooperative behavior within religious groups. Our study reveals that for those who financially support religious institutions, subliminal religious messages strongly increase the costly punishment of unfair behavior, even when such punishment is to their individual material disadvantage.”

The 304 participants were asked a series of questions about how religious they were, including if they donated to a religious organization. “People who financially support organizations are actively investing in the norms of those organizations,” explains Dr McKay. “For example, if I support

the RSPCA and I see someone being cruel to an animal, I am more likely to want to punish this individual because I really support the cause -- it’s about putting your money where your mouth is. Financial support is a more reliable indication of an individual’s religiosity than someone just saying they’re religious.”

In the experiment, Player ‘A’ was asked to choose between two allocations of payoffs to themselves and Player ‘B’ -- either a fair allocation (whereby both players received the same amount of money) or an unfair allocation (whereby Player A received much more than Player B). After Player A’s decision, both were then exposed to a series of rapidly presented words relating to religious concepts. Player B was subsequently given the opportunity to spend money from their own share to reduce A’s payoff.

The results of this experiment show that religious priming substantially increased the punishment of unfair offers amongst those who donated to religions.

“This particular subset of players may have punished those who acted unfairly because the religious concepts presented to them activated norms pertaining to fairness and its enforcement,” says Dr McKay. “Another possibility, not mutually exclusive, is that the religious primes activated the notion that they are being watched by a supernatural agent. Religious participants may have punished unfair behaviors in order to maintain their standing in the eyes of this agent.”