

**Do Religious People Help  
More? Not So You'd Notice**

## Do Religious People Help More? Not So You'd Notice

By Alfie Kohn

[This is a slightly expanded version of the published article.]

In a society that teaches us to associate morality with religion, it is easy to assume that a strong relationship exists between piety and pity, between God and good. After all, the sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity, like those of most supernatural belief systems, contain reminders to be compassionate and charitable.

But by encouraging their believers to think of themselves as chosen people or as being in possession of absolute Truth, and by teaching that humans are sinful and in need of salvation or enlightenment, religions often send a darker message. As Bertrand Russell wrote, "The more intense has been the religion of any period and the more profound has been the dogmatic belief, the greater has been the cruelty and the worse has been the state of affairs."

On the one hand: the commitment to social justice of Gandhi, the Rev. Martin Luther King, and contemporary champions of Liberation Theology. On the other hand: religious bigotry and wars fought in the name of some god, from the Hebrews who "utterly destroy[ed] the men, women, and children, of every city" (Deut. 3:6) as they invaded Canaan to the barbaric Christian Crusaders to contemporary fanatics killing in Allah's name.

What, then, can we surmise about the likelihood of someone's being caring and generous just from knowing he or she is a believer? Virtually nothing, say psychologists and sociologists who have studied that question over the last few decades. Among the research findings:

- \* In the 1950s, a scientific study of about 2,000 Episcopalians across the U.S. turned up "no discernible relationship between involvement [in the Church] and charitable acts. In some cases, a negative relationship appears."
- \* In a questionnaire-based study of male college students in 1960, there was only a slight correlation between altruism and belief in God, and no correlation at all between altruism and attendance of religious services.
- \* Interviews with randomly selected adults in 1965 found that nonbelievers were "nearly as frequently rated as being a good Samaritan, having love and compassion for their fellow man, and being humble as the most devout..."
- \* Less than half of college students in a 1975 study resisted the temptation to violate an honors code on an exam, and religious beliefs were unrelated to honesty. (In fact, atheists were the only group in which a majority did not cheat.) Religion was also irrelevant to the students' willingness to volunteer time with disabled children.
- \* In 1984, a researcher who interviewed more than 700 people from different neighborhoods in a medium-size city expected to find that religious people were especially sociable, helpful to their neighbors, and likely to participate in neighborhood organizations. Instead, she found that religious involvement was unrelated to these activities.
- \* In their study of people who rescued Jews from the Nazis, Samuel and Pearl Oliner found that "rescuers did not differ significantly from bystanders or all nonrescuers with respect to their religious identification, religious education, and their own religiosity or that of their parents."

The one interesting relationship that has appeared, as Gordon Allport and Michael Ross wrote in the 1960s, is a "long parade of findings demonstrating that churchgoers are more intolerant of ethnic minorities than nonattenders" – although those who go to church frequently are less prejudiced than those who seldom attend.

Allport, however, wasn't content to let matters stand there. He wondered whether attitudes and behaviors might be predictable not on the basis of how religious one was, but how one was religious – that is, the approach taken to one's creed. Indeed, people committed to the intrinsic value of their beliefs turned out to be more tolerant of minorities than those who were mostly interested in what they could get out of religion for themselves. Those whom Allport labeled as "indiscriminately proreligious" were the least tolerant of all.

Other studies have suggested that people with an intrinsic orientation are more likely than others to describe themselves as helpful or empathic. But do they actually help more? Is there any approach to religion that is reliably associated with a greater willingness to assist others in need – compared with other religious styles or with no religion at all? Apparently not.

In a clever experiment published in 1973, John M. Darley and C. Daniel Batson found that seminary students on their way to take part in an experiment often walked right past a man slumped over and groaning in a doorway. Some of the subjects, ironically, had been asked to give a talk on the Biblical parable of the Good Samaritan, but they were no more likely to stop and help than others if they thought they were late. And no particular style of religiosity was related to the likelihood of helping the victim.

Batson, who teaches psychology at the University of Kansas, thinks there is a third approach to religious belief that should be placed alongside Allport's intrinsic and extrinsic categories. He calls it the "quest" orientation and says it describes the sort of person who is "interested in religious questions but suspicious of easy answers," unafraid to challenge and doubt his or her own beliefs.

Batson has not been able to find a clear link between the quest dimension and the frequency of helping behavior. But he does believe that people scoring high on this measure may have a different style of helping and may be motivated to help for different reasons. Specifically, they seem inclined to come to the aid only of people who ask for help rather than insisting on rescuing those who want to be left alone.

In a new study, he and six student collaborators made it difficult for subjects to qualify for the privilege of helping someone in need. The rationale was that people who just wanted to feel good about themselves (or avoid guilt) might volunteer to help but then not try very hard to qualify. Batson found that subjects characterized by the quest orientation were not any more eager to help than others, but that those who did volunteer then worked harder to earn the chance to actually help. Unlike people with an intrinsic or extrinsic approach to religion, their motives seemed genuinely altruistic.

This doesn't mean that a search for religious truths always goes hand-in-hand with altruism. For one thing, there is some evidence of a slight negative relationship between the quest orientation and empathy. (Are such people more committed to principles than to people? It's hard to say.) For another thing, the quest dimension is constructed so that anyone, including atheists, will score high if he or she continues to struggle with the Big Questions about human existence.

The only thing that does seem clear from the research is that no version of religious belief offers an ironclad guarantee of following the Golden Rule.

### RESOURCES:

Bertrand Russell: *Why I Am Not a Christian*, p. 20.

Episcopalian study: Charles Y. Glock, et al., *To Comfort and to Challenge*, pp. 182-83.

College student study: Robert Friedrichs, "Alter vs. Ego," *American Sociological Review*, 25, 1960, p. 505.

1965 study: Victor Cline and James Richards, "A Factor-Analysis Study of Religious Belief and Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1, 1965, p. 577.

Neighborhood study: Sharon Georgianna, "Is a Religious Neighborhood a Good Neighborhood?," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 11, 1984, pp. 1-16.

Rescuers of Jews: S.P. and P.M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality*, p. 156.

Religion and prejudice: Gordon Allport and Michael Ross, "Personal Religious Orientation and Prejudice," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 5, 1967, pp. 432, 433, 441.

Seminary student study: Darley and Batson, "From Jerusalem to Jericho," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 27, 1973, pp. 100-108, esp. p. 106.

Batson's quest orientation: personal communication.

Batson's study on religious style and altruism: C.D. Batson et al., "Religious Prosocial Motivation: Is It Altruistic or Egoistic?," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57, 1989, pp. 873-84.

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