Differential Impacts of God and Religion on Prosocial Intentions

Mustafa Karatas, Koc University, Turkey
Zeynep Gürhan-Canli, Koc University, Turkey

We show in one field data and four experiments that activating thoughts about God (vs. religion) leads to higher (vs. lower) thinking abstraction, and increases compliance with abstractly (vs. concretely) framed messages or prosocial tendencies toward distant (vs. close) targets. This effect is mediated by "feeling right" experience under fit.

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Mustafa Karatas, Koç University, Turkey
Zeynep Gürhan-Canli, Koç University, Turkey

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Religious organizations get the lion’s share of charitable giving. In US, faith-based organizations collected almost one-third of all monetary donations and volunteer services in 2014. Considering the monetary and timely value of faith-based charitable giving, it is of significant theoretical and practical importance to determine the most effective ways for fundraising when appeals involve religious reminders. However, past empirical research is inconclusive regarding the role of religious reminders on prosocial behavior and yields mixed results.

Early studies which were largely correlational suggested a positive link by evincing that higher frequency of religious practices leads to higher self-reported prosocial intentions (Brooks 2006). Later studies investigated the causal link between religion and prosociality through experimental methodology. This stream of research reported contradictory findings. While some studies found prosocial effects of religious primes (Pichon, Boccato and Saroglou 2007), others reported antisocial effects like increased prejudice (Johnson, Rowatt and LaBouff 2010).

We argue that one reason of these mixed results is that “religion” has been used as an umbrella term in past research and priming procedures involved various concepts, which might have divergent cognitive corollaries. More specifically, we predict that the concept of God, which is a multi-faceted abstract concept across all religions and cultures, is likely to induce an abstraction in thinking, whereas religion, which is construed in terms of more concrete practices, is likely to result in a concrete mind-set. Based on fit effect (Lee, Keller and Sterntahl 2010), which posits that compliance with messages increases when level of abstraction of different factors in the decision context fit, we further predict that reminding God (vs. religion) increases prosocial tendencies when the message is construed abstractly (vs. concretely). We tested, and found support for, these predictions in one field and four experiments.

In study 1, we analyzed donation data obtained from a mosque in a small town in a predominantly Muslim country. The data involved the donation amount collected after the Friday prayer during 60 weeks and the target of donation. Three coders coded each week’s sermon on a 5-point scale (1: “induces predominantly religion-specific thoughts”; 5: “induces predominantly God-related thoughts”). We coded the abstraction of each week’s donation target based on (1) how far the target is, and (2) whether the target is a specific target (e.g., a specific mosque in some neighborhood) or a general target (e.g., people in need of help in some neighborhood) on a 7-point scale. Regression analysis yielded a significant interaction ($p < .01$). At 1 s.d. below the mean of the sermon reminder scale (i.e., when the sermon gave mainly religion-specific messages), people donated more money (converted to USD) to concrete targets ($M_{religion-concrete} = $139, $M_{religion-abstract} = $102; p < .02). At 1 s.d. above the mean (i.e., when the sermon gave mainly God-related messages), donations to distant mosques were marginally significantly higher ($M_{God-concrete} = $82, $M_{God-abstract} = $121; p < .02).

In study 2A, 60 US participants (34 female; $M_{age} = 34$) were asked to write the thoughts that come to their mind when they see the word “God” or “Christianity.” A one-way ANOVA yielded that participants use a more abstract language while describing their thoughts about God ($M_{God} = 3.02, M_{religion} = 2.69; p < .01), an indication that God (vs. religion) induces a more abstract (vs. concrete) thinking.

In study 2B, we randomly assigned participants ($N = 100$; 68 female; $M_{age} = 21$) from a predominantly Muslim population to either religion or God reminder condition, as in study 2A. Next, they filled the Behavioral Identification Form which is a 25-item dichotomous questionnaire that measures whether people identify actions at higher or lower level (and, a higher score indicates higher abstraction). Participants in the God prime condition used a more abstract language ($M_{God} = 2.79, M_{religion} = 2.49; p < .01$). Moreover, God prime led to more abstract description of actions ($M_{God} = 17.16, M_{religion} = 14.40; p < .01$).

Study 3 tested our fit prediction that activating God (vs. religion) thoughts increases compliance with an abstractly (vs. concretely) framed message. 111 participants (77 female; $M_{age} = 21.5$) participated in a 2 (concept: God vs. religion) x 2 (message: abstract vs. concrete) between-subjects design, and were given the same manipulation as in study 2B. Next, they saw an abstract or concrete description of a student club. They were asked to state their intentions (in minutes) to volunteer for the student club during weekend. We log-transformed their responses in order to meet the linearity assumption, and found a significant interaction ($p < .05$). Those who thought about God reported a significantly higher intention to volunteer when the message was abstract ($M_{abstract} = 3.94, M_{concrete} = 3.28; p = .04$). This effect directionally reversed when participants were reminded of religion ($M_{abstract} = 4.05, M_{concrete} = 3.71; p < .15$).

Finally, in study 4, we tested the mediating mechanism. The fit effect—intensified evaluations against a target when multiple factors in the decision context fit each other—is suggested to occur since fit increases engagement, and engagement makes people “feel right” about the decision. 98 US participants ($M_{age} = 36.4, 51$ female) participated in a similar study design as in study 3. Religious concept was manipulated through a sentence unscrambling task. Next, participants indicated their likelihood of compliance with one of two UNICEF (concrete or abstract) messages. They also indicated how right they felt about their response. A significant interaction was found ($p < .001$). In God-prime, intentions to comply with an abstract request was significantly higher ($M_{abstract} = 4.88, M_{concrete} = 3.25; p = .002$). The reverse was true under religion prime ($M_{abstract} = 4.58, M_{concrete} = 3.58; p = .05$). We further found that “feeling right” mediates the effect at both religion-concept ($CI_{95\%} = [-.7956,.0362]$) and God-concept ($CI_{95\%} = [.1962, 1.4447]$) conditions.

Taken together, this research suggests that different religious concepts have different cognitive corollaries, which influence people’s compliance with donation appeals depending on the level of abstraction implied by other factors in the decision context. From a theoretical perspective, this research helps reconcile some mixed findings in past research on the link between religious thoughts and prosocial behavior by separating impacts of two most frequently exposed religious concepts: God and religion. From a practical perspective, it provides insights for charity organizations for effective use of different religious reminders in fundraising and influencing consumers’ expenditure decisions on prosocial causes.

REFERENCES

