

World Conference on Psychology and Sociology 2012

## Religiosity and Prosociality

Klearhos K. Stamatoulakis <sup>a\*</sup>

---

<sup>a</sup> City College- The international faculty of the university of Sheffield, 24, Pr. Koromila Str., 54622 Thessaloniki, Greece

---

### Abstract

Religion is a phenomenon evident in every culture. Different types of religion exist depending on the group of believers, the number of gods worshiped and the representations of these gods. However, one commonality the three largest religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) share is prosociality. They all are based on the notion of sharing, donating and helping others. In some of them, there is actually a prerequisite to support the image of the righteous. The purpose of this study is to investigate if religiosity predicts prosociality through a structured literature review. The key-words used were “religion”, “religiosity”, “prosociality”, “prosocial behaviour”, “blood donation” and other words related to these issues. The studies retrieved are dated from 2005 to 2010. The databases used were EBSCO, Sheffield University, PUBMED, and others of psychological and sociological interest. The main hypothesis of the study is that religiosity is positively correlated with prosociality. Secondary hypothesis is that religious priming, both subliminal and direct, will affect religious and, also, non-religious individuals in promoting and enhancing prosocial behaviour. Our conclusions are that (a) religiosity predicts prosociality and (b) priming affects both groups for different reasons.

© 2013 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).  
Selection and peer review under the responsibility of Prof. Dr. Kobus Maree, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

*Keywords:* Religion, Religiosity, Prosociality, Prosocial Behaviour, Blood Donation

---

### 1. Introduction

Religion is a phenomenon evident in every culture. Different types of religion exist depending on the group of believers, the number of gods worshiped, and the representations of these gods. One commonality most religions share is the prosocial behaviour believers are asked to express. One of the questions raised is whether prosociality has intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, if it is done to please the deity and gain rewards. Moreover, whether believers and religious people are more prosocial than non-believers or atheists or not is another issue in the field and it is the main issue tackled in this paper. The relationship between religiosity and prosociality is the main axis of this systematic literature review.

Previous studies have mostly used economical games and situations such as dictator’s game, to explore whether religious people are more willing to donate money to strangers, hence they are more prosocial. However, in the main body of research real life prosocial events, such as invitations to blood donation or charity, were not used as often. Yet there are other researchers that used imagined scenarios- these cases have a problematic side,

---

\* Corresponding author: Klearhos K. Stamatoulakis  
E-mail address: [kstamatoulakis@city.academic.gr](mailto:kstamatoulakis@city.academic.gr)

concerning the distance between intentions and actions. Some of the gaps that are identified in this research area are the focus on the major religions and their doctrines and the problems in defying religiosity. This study is to investigate if religiosity predicts prosociality, through a structured literature review that summarizes the experiments, studies and findings of the field, making it easier to identify the gaps in the literature. The main hypothesis of the study is that religiosity is positively correlated with prosociality. Secondary hypothesis is that religious priming, both subliminal and direct, will affect religious and, also, non-religious individuals in promoting and enhancing prosocial behaviour.

## 2. Method

A literature search of papers was carried out on the relation between religiosity and prosociality, using three electronic databases EBSCO, Star and Pubmed, between the period January 2005 to December 2011. The keywords used were: “religion”, “religiousness”, “prosociality”, “prosocial behaviour”, “blood donation”. The focus was mostly on research based on religious priming and its effect on prosociality. Systematic reviews and PhD dissertations were also including , since they offered useful information on the topic.

Papers published before January of 2005 were excluded, in order to keep the research up to date, including only recent results and theories. Moreover, only experimental papers and reviews were included, since the interest of this paper lays on more practical issues and not on the theoretical aspects. The keywords used were chosen in order to identify articles purely related to prosociality and not similar concepts, such as empathy, that are not of interest in this project.

## 3. Results

1	Saroglou et. al 2005	Prosocial behaviour and religion: New evidence based on projective measures and peer ratings	a)religiousness negatively associated with indirect non-physical aggression. B)religiousness positively associated with willingness to help family and close relations. c,d) confirmation of prosociality of religious targets by peers.	a) 106 participants, Rosenszweig Test. B) 111 participants, 8-item scale Hazan & Shaver's. c) altruism scale of Rusthon. D) 250 participants. Empathy: Davis, Honesty: HEXAGO, Religiousness: as study 2	a)confirmed b) confirmed for close targets. C,d ) confirmed.	These results suggest that prosociality is related with religiousness but only when it comes to family or friends, but not in strangers.
2	Pichon et. al, 2006	Non-conscious influences of religion on prosociality: a priming study	a)The impact of subliminal messaging of religion on prosociality. b) The effect of subliminal activation of religion on prosociality.	a) 91 psychology students. 2x2 between subjects. Linguistic task, take pamphlets about prosocial event. b)57 participants, word search puzzle with 4 conditions. Lexical decisions tasks	a)Confirmed only for words with positive meaning . b) Neutral religious priming was used as neutral but with positive religious priming there was faster recognition of prosocial words.	There might be indications of intrinsic motivation in this research, since the positive words enhanced prosociality and not neutral or negative ones.

3	Gillume & Masters, 2010	Religiousness and blood donation. Findings from a national survey.	Prediction of blood donation by religion raised-in, church attendance, importance of religion in daily life	Survey analysis, 03/02-02/03 in USA, 15-44 years old, 7643 females, 4928 males	Females: low blood donation in non-catholic raised. Highest in protestants. Lower in those attending more. Males: non-significant religious reason only after 40 years old. 35-44 years old lower in non-religious. Importance not associated. Failed to consistently support hypothesis.	The issue of definition of religiosity can be found here, since religiosity is explored through church attendance, importance in daily life and whether or not one was raised in religious environment. Need of a broadened definition. These might be the reasons why the hypothesis were not consistently support.
4	Ahmed & Salas, 2008	In the back of your mind: Subliminal influences of religious concepts on prosocial behaviour	Enhancement of prosocial behaviour due to religion.	224 undergraduate students. a)scrambled sentence task, b)dictator's game, c) prisoner's dilemma game, d) survey measuring religiosity.	Priming religious concepts increases prosocial behaviour. Subliminal influences of religious concepts affect both those who identify themselves as religious and non-religious.	Divine figures and religion related primes, may work as purely moral guidelines, not actually related to religion.
5	Shariff & Norenzayan, 2006	God is watching you: Priming God concepts increases prosocial behavior in an anonymous economic game	The effect of religion on the prosocial behavior in the dictator's game.	Experimental design. A)50 subjects (different religions and atheists) 50% primed-scrambled-sentence paradigm, Scrull & Wyer, '79), 50% no prime. Both Dictator's game. B) 75 participants. Same process, additional priming.	Subjects allocated more money to anonymous strangers when god concepts were implicitly activated than when neutral or no concepts were activated.	Raises the question whether if not religious people, once primed with god concepts, will act as religious and if this reaction is due to a metaphysical fear of punishment.
6	Ahmed, 2009	Are religious people more prosocial? A quasi-experimental study with madrasah pupils in a rural community in	The relationship of religious studies and prosocial behavior.	102 male participants in India, in 3/06. 42 madrasah students-imams to be. 60 of social studies. Average age 17. Dictator's game	Religious students contributed more and donated more. There were no differences in between groups in non-zero	Possibility of in-group bias, therefore unknown if the hypothesis would be confirmed with total strangers.

India	and public good game.	contributions and donations.
-------	-----------------------	------------------------------

#### 4. Discussion

The aim of the current literature review is to summarize research and findings in the field of prosociality and religiosity. The result is that religious people tend to express more prosocial behaviour. According to Saroglou et al. (2005), most of psychological theories conclude that religion contributes to prosociality. In their paper they present four studies they conducted, confirming that (a) religiousness is negatively associated with indirect non-physical aggression, (b) that religious people are willing to help close family and close relatives and that they tend to have more secure attachments, (c) and (d) gave confirmation of the prosocial behaviour from participants' close family and peers. Along with Saroglou et al. (2005), Pichon, Boccato and Saroglou, (2006), Ahmed and Salas, (2008), and Shariff and Norenzayan, (2006) confirm that religiosity effects prosocial behaviour. What is more interesting in the study of Saroglou et. al (2005) is that they present religious people to perceive themselves as altruist while reality is much different. Yet, when people are indeed religious they tend to engage in prosocial behaviors since they are more empathetic and willing to follow the moral guidelines set by their religious.

The dictator's game was used by Shariff and Norenzayan (2006) in order to examine if religiosity increases prosociality. They confirmed their hypothesis with participants distributing more money to strangers when primed with god-related concepts. They also tried to explain the reason why religious primes affect not only prosociality, but moral intuitions, teleological reasoning and prejudice, in terms of primes working as reminders of exemplar religious figures and of a supernatural agent constantly watching us over. Ahmed and Salas (2008), used both economic games mentioned previously to address and confirm the same issue, religiosity and prosociality. They found that the subliminal influences of priming, affected also, those who view themselves as non-religious. They attribute these results to the role of religion in developing norms and laws that exceed the limits of religiosity. Moreover, in their research they explain the reasons why some studies contradict each other on whether religion promotes altruism and constrains egoistic behaviour. One reason is the way religiosity is measured, a person may not be attending church regularly but still be religious- some surveys fail to cover that aspect. In addition, a causal link between the two is not fully supported by the evidence- it can be prosociality leading to religiosity.

Another research on subliminal priming and prosociality was carried out by Pichon, Boccato and Saroglou (2006). They found that religious words with positive religious meaning, such as communion, pilgrimage and faith, had more impact on the participants, when after having engaged in a lexical task, they were asked to take as many free pamphlets on prosocial action as they wanted. Words with neutral religious meaning, such as apostle, disciple and incense, had the same impact as the neutral words like stairs, hammer and office, did. Moreover, positive religious words, were identified faster than the neutral ones. One of the few studies made on a specific prosocial behaviour was conducted by (Gillum & Masters, 2010). However, it was not an experiment but an analysis of a survey distributed in the USA between March, 2002 and February, 2003. They hypothesized that religious upbringing, importance of religion in life and currently church attendance can be indicators of blood donation. Their hypothesis was not confirmed; however, it is unknown whether the participants engaged in other prosocial behaviour besides blood donation.

#### 5. Conclusions

Based on these evidence, it is safe to say that there is a connection between religiosity and prosociality. However, there are also some issues in the interpretation of this relationship; is religiosity affects prosociality or the other way around? Moreover, there is the question of whether this relation has to do with perceiving god as a divine agent or as a moral guide. In addition, some of these experiments used different kinds of self-evaluations that are problematic, like self-serving bias. Finally, there is a difficulty in the terminology of what religiosity is

and how we define it; for example, is church attendance is a major indicator of religiosity. In any case, future research should consider examining prosociality and religiosity in a wider range of religions, since until now, mostly the major religions and doctrines were examined. Furthermore, a standardized terminology is needed.

## References

- Ahmed, A. M., & Salas, O. (2008). *In the back of your mind: Subliminal influences of religious concepts on prosocial behavior* (Doctoral dissertation, Goteborgs Universitet). Retrieved from [https://gupea.ub.gu.se/dspace/bitstream/2077/18838/4/gupea\\_2077\\_18838\\_4.pdf](https://gupea.ub.gu.se/dspace/bitstream/2077/18838/4/gupea_2077_18838_4.pdf)
- Ahmed, A. M. (2009). Are religious people more prosocial? A quasi-experimental study with Madrasah pupils in a rural community in India. *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion*, 48 (2), 368-374.
- Gillum, F., & Masters, K. S. (2010). Religiousness and blood donation. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 15, 163-172. doi: 10.1177/1359105309345171
- Godin, G., Sheeran, P., Corner, M., & Germain, M. (2008). Asking questions changes behavior: Mere measurement effects on frequency of blood donation. *Health Psychology*, 27, 179-184. doi: 10.1037/0278-6133.27.2.179
- Lind, K., Link, M., & Oldendick, R. (2000). A comparison of the accuracy of the last birthday versus the next birthday methods for random selection of household respondents. *Age : Journal of the American Aging Association*, 231, 16.
- Pallant, J. (2005). T-tests. In *SPSS survival manual: A step by step guide to data analysis using SPSS* (2nd ed., pp. 205-209). London: Open University Press.
- Pichon, I., Boccato, G., & Saroglou, V. (2007). Nonconscious influences of religion on prosociality: a priming study. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, doi: 10.1002/ejsp.416
- Saroglou, V., Pichon, I., Trompette, L., Verschuere, M., & Dernelle, R. (2005). Prosocial behavior and religion: New evidence based on projective measures and peer ratings. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 44, 323-348. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-5906.2005.00289.x
- Seng, B. R. (2007). *The automatic consequences of religious priming* (Doctoral dissertation). Texas Tech University. Retrieved from <http://webpages.acs.ttu.edu/brandolp/Thesis%20Final%20--%20Religious%20Priming.pdf>
- Shariff, A. F., & Norenzayan, A. (2006). God is watching you. Priming god concepts increases prosocial behavior in an anonymous economic game. *Psychological Science*, 18, 803-809. Retrieved from <http://pss.sagepub.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/content/18/9/803.full.pdf+html>