

The Social Cost of Atheism: How Perceived Religiosity Influences Moral Appraisal

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Abstract

Social psychologists have found that stereotypes correlate with moral judgments about agents and actions. The most commonly studied stereotypes are race/ethnicity and gender. But atheists compose another stereotype, one with its own ignominious history in the Western world, and yet, one about which very little is known. This project endeavored to further our understanding of atheism as a social stereotype. Specifically, we tested whether people with non-religious commitments were stereotypically viewed as less moral than people with religious commitments. We found that participants' (both Christian and atheist) moral appraisals of atheists were more negative than those of Christians who performed the same moral and immoral actions. They also reported immoral behavior as more (internally and externally) consistent for atheists, and moral behavior more consistent for Christians. The results contribute to research at the intersection of moral theory, moral psychology, and psychology of religion.

Keywords

Moral judgments – prejudice – stereotypes – religiosity – atheism

Introduction

The history of religion is a history of in-group/out-group conflict. Given the evolutionary psychological reasons for religious group formation, religion being a species-wide phenomenon, it is no surprise that the contents of sacred religious texts frequently advocate violence against religious (and non-religious) out-groups (Teehan, 2010). Religious violence continues throughout the world, but just because it is absent in some parts of the world does not imply that the underlying evolved mechanisms for in-group/out-group boundary maintenance are not active. While a group practicing the prescriptions for in-group altruism found in the Gospels will out-compete a group of non-altruists, altruists are especially vulnerable to problems of free-riding and defection. So, how can the boundary be maintained, especially in pluralistic, democratic societies?

Boundary maintenance is especially important for groups of Christians, contemporary Christians in the North America in particular, because they display few overtly group-identifying characteristics. Christians of the same denomination do not live together; do not signal membership through somatic marking; do not have their own language or idiolect; practice very few shared rituals; et cetera. This has become an age of non-denominational Christianity, with some churches and Christian groups explicitly presented as non-denominational. The present situation can be understood as the natural progression of the history of Christianity, a religion distinguished for its remarkable – even stunning – openness to members of varieties of out-groups from its earliest days in the Roman Empire. During epidemics in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, non-Christians with means to do so often fled cities like Antioch so as not to risk contamination. According to sociologist Rodney Stark, self-sacrificial behavior of early Christians caring for diseased non-Christians during these epidemics is an important cause of Christianity's successful spread across the Middle East and Europe (Stark, 1997, from p. 73). A principal means by which Christians then and now maintain their in-group boundary is through promulgation of moral norms and behaviors that are meant to distinguish the Christian from the non-Christian.

In the United States, with its exceedingly high rates of religiosity, this means that the atheist plays the goat, being universally denominated as a member of the out-group. Though there may be little ritual to bind together Christians of different groups, all Christian groups share a common history, share the same sacred text (or large parts of it), and share the same moral foundations. Moslems and Jews share in this as well. But atheists are widely regarded as

different from theists, the only group without any sacred text or recognizable set of moral norms that binds them together.

Social psychologists have shown that stereotypes differentially influence people's moral judgments about in-group vs. out-group members and their actions. These data arise from studies about racial and ethnic stereotypes (Hogan and Dickstein, 1972; Swim et al., 1995, 2001; Shelton and Stewart, 2004; Petersen and Dietz, 2005; Stewart et al., 2009; Uhlmann et al., 2010). But atheists compose another stereotype, one with its own ignominious history in the Western world, and yet, one about which very little is known (Goodman and Mueller, 2009). Atheists are commonly stereotyped as persons whose lives are less meaningful and who lack a moral compass (Baker and Smith, 2009). Atheists are socially marked by moral and symbolic means as less worthy of trust than members of any other group in a long list of religious, ethnic and racial groups (Edgell et al., 2006). Atheists are believed by many US citizens to be unworthy of full civic inclusion (Alexander, 1992). Prominent Christian thinkers throughout history have reached this same conclusion. Even during the Enlightenment Christian judgments about atheists were harsh, including John Locke's in his *First Letter on Toleration*. Locke argued for toleration of many dissenting Protestant sects but he could not allow toleration of atheists in a civil society based on market capitalism and a need for trust. While Christians may have become much more tolerant of other religions, Christians appear little more willing to trust atheists than they were 300 years ago.

This project endeavors to further our understanding of atheism as a social stereotype. It involves two studies in which we investigate the influence of the stereotype on people's moral appraisal of others' immoral and moral behaviors. Specifically, we test whether people with non-religious commitments are stereotypically thought to be less moral than people with religious commitments – that is, whether there is a social cost to being an atheist. The results contribute to research at the intersection of moral theory, moral psychology, and psychology of religion.

Research on Religion and Morality

Our hypotheses concern variance in participants' moral appraisals of Christians and atheists (specifically, secular humanists): namely, that people (both religious and non-religious) will condemn the immoral behavior of secular humanists more forcefully than the immoral behavior of Christians, even when members of the two groups perform identical immoral actions. Likewise,

we hypothesize that people will praise the moral behavior of secular humanists less than they praise the moral behavior of Christians, even when members of the two groups perform identical moral actions.

This is particularly important, given that we have no good empirical reason to believe that religious individuals are genuinely more moral than atheists. On one hand, some research suggests that religious subjects (as identified by scales of intrinsic or extrinsic religiosity) display certain forms of moral behavior more often than non-religious subjects. On the other, religious subjects have also been found to display certain forms of immoral behavior more than non-religious subjects.

Regarding correlations between religiosity and in-group morality, religiosity has been positively correlated with a reduction in argumentative behavior and with an indirect reduction in the likelihood of fighting (Kerley, 2006). A fascinating set of experiments reveal a complex set of positive correlations between prosociality, better anger management, empathy, and willingness to help with measures of religiosity (Saroglou et al., 2005). Church involvement by African American men is positively correlated with likelihood of volunteering and also with hours volunteered (Mattis et al., 2004). Religious participation or religious priming has been shown to facilitate pro-social behavior in donations to charity (Pichon et al., 2007), cooperation in economic games (Shariff and Norenzayan, 2007), and honesty (Randolph-Seng and Nielsen, 2007), each of which can be regarded as morally virtuous behavior.

A meta-analysis of 60 studies shows a moderate correlation between religious behavior and belief and the deterrence of crimes (Baier, 2001). One recent study introduced innovations in the experimental setting by varying the context of the economic game so as occasionally to inform the truster and the trustee of the others' religiosity and by assessing individuals' levels of intrinsic religiosity (Tan and Vogel, 2008). A key feature of this study, trusters sent more money to partners perceived to be religious; highly religious trusters sent significantly more money to partners perceived to be religious; and highly religious trustees reciprocated truster's offers more often than less religious trustees did.

Data from the psychology of religion, however, also suggest negative correlations between measures of religiosity and moral behavior. Levels of public religiosity correlate with levels of social dysfunction (Paul, 2005). Certain religions are correlated with high rates of homicide, and others with low rates (Jensen, 2006). Religious participation or priming has been shown to facilitate anti-social behavior in the forms of being aggressive (Bushman et al., 2007) and being prejudiced (Hunsberger and Jackson, 2005; see Saroglou et al., 2009). In a recent meta-analysis of data concerning positive correlations between

religiosity and religious participation with racism, the authors conclude that “a strong religious in-group identity was associated with derogation of racial out-groups. Other races might be treated as out-groups because religion is practiced largely within race, because training in a religious in-group identity promotes general ethnocentrism, and because different others appear to be in competition for resource” (Hall et al., 2010: p. 126). These authors also show that religious agnosticism is correlated with non-racism. A focused study of correlations between denominational membership and racism concludes that religiousness is positively correlated with racism for Catholics and Protestants, but that for members of the Church of Latter Day Saints religiousness and racism were negatively correlated (Jacobson, 1998).

The findings summarized thus far yield a pressing question: Why the mixture of correlations between religiosity and moral behavior? Data from the psychology of, social psychology of, and the behavioral economics of religion (above) are infrequently put into contact with data from evolutionary psychology of religion. Doing so is important for understanding the motivation for our hypothesis that atheists will be singled out for especially significant negative moral judgments by (religious and non-religious) participants, and answering this question. Thankfully this in-group/out-group characterization of the correlation between religiosity and ‘morality’ has itself been the subject of analysis and experimentation within evolutionary psychology of religion. The mind sciences are beginning to explain this pattern of correlations in terms of law-like generalizations from cognitive science of religion and from evolutionary psychology of religion. Developments in the cognitive science of religion (CSR) reveal several modules suitable for encoding religious beliefs, religious dispositions, and religious action. One component of CSR, Supernatural Punishment Theory (Johnson and Kruger, 2004), has found that priming with supernatural agency concepts (a ‘supernatural agency’ for present purposes is a supernatural person to whom is attributed strategic knowledge and power) correlates with an increase in moral behavior towards one’s in-group. Advocates of Supernatural Punishment Theory have gathered data of two kinds on behalf of the hypothesis that supernatural priming correlates with increases in moral behavior. Priming with supernatural agency concepts is correlated with increased rates of cooperation with fellow members of one’s in-group (Johnson and Kruger, 2004; Johnson and Bering, 2006; Shariff et al., 2009). Supernatural agency priming correlates with increased cooperation, according to the hypothesis, because of the advantages this cooperation gave groups with gods in ancestral between-group competition. These advantages closely relate to the development of a functional moral system, and include increased conformity and social control, decreased rates of first-order cooperation

free-ridership and second-order punishment free-ridership (Schloss, 2008), and 'reverse dominance' in which a group enforces forms of fairness against powerful individuals attempting to assert dominance (see Boehm, 1993).

Early studies that tested the Supernatural Punishment Theory found that participants primed with a supernatural agency concept exhibit increases in in-group morality at greater rates than participants in the control groups lacking a supernatural agency prime (Bering and Parker, 2006). Second, hypotheses from Supernatural Punishment Theory tested against ethnographic databases, including the Human Relations Area Files, revealed that the presence of 'high gods' in a culture was highly correlated with a range of culturally endorsed moral behaviors toward the in-group that are absent in cultures without high gods (Johnson, 2005). These findings suggest that religious individuals who worship high gods, like Christians, would be more likely to possess positive moral traits at higher rates and degrees than would non-religious individuals. We use 'moral' and its cognates loosely here. If a believer is motivated to cheat less frequently because he imagines a supernatural agency watching him, ready to punish him, then his behavior is prudential rather than moral, at least according to several ethical theories.

Developments in evolutionary psychology of religion also indicate that religious individuals may be more likely to cooperate with their in-group than non-religious individuals. Wilson (2003) argues for an organismic account in which religion evolved because it generates in-group affinities suited for enhancing one's group's chances of winning between-group conflict, and because religion enables members of the in-group to reduce internal conflict, punish free-riders and provide functional solutions to problems of social living. Calvinism represents Wilson's example of the former benefit conveyed by religion to members of the in-group. Calvinism's fierce policing of the in-group/out-group boundary allowed remarkable degrees and forms of cooperation within the fold (Wilson, 2002: p. 86). The water-temples on Bali serve as an example of the latter benefit outside Christianity. Their presence and the devotion that each temple's god receives enables members of a 'subak', a group of the size of a hunter-gatherer band, to resolve conflict over water access (Wilson, 2002: p. 126).

Two key facts emerge from this and related research for the present study. First, this body of research suggests that religious persons (as well as people primed with religious primes) exhibit higher levels of in-group moral behavior, but also of out-group immoral behavior, than non-religious persons. These findings taken together reinforce the hypothesis that these norms (and people's adherence to them) function to identify fellow group members, to protect/maintain group boundaries against out-group members (such as atheists), and to punish those out-group members.

Accordingly, we hypothesized that participants in our study would regard religious agents as more moral than non-religious agents and non-religious agents – in this case, secular humanists – as less moral than religious agents. Indeed, we expected that persons who are considered to belong to no religious in-group at all will be judged quite harshly in contrast to persons who belong to a religious group.

In this paper we examined these correlations from the point of view of a spectator. That is, rather than assessing whether highly religious individuals are more or less moral than non-religious individuals, we investigated how people who are told of an agent's moral and immoral actions appraise the morality of the action and agent when also informed that the agent is either a committed Christian or a committed secular humanist. We investigated the hypothesis that people in the United States would be likely to exhibit a moral bias for Christians and against atheists. The studies reported below investigated the extent to which an agent's religious or non-religious beliefs influenced others' internal and external judgments about the moral status of that agent's actions.

Our primary hypothesis was that an agent's action would elicit different moral responses when that agent was perceived as religious than when perceived as non-religious. For example, when reading about immoral behavior, we hypothesized that participants' moral appraisal of non-religious atheists would involve attributions of less guilt and shame, along with more moral vice than their moral appraisal of religious theists. When reading about moral behavior, we hypothesized that participants' moral appraisal of atheists would involve less attribution of generosity and moral virtue than their moral appraisal of theists.

Study 1

Methods

Participants. We had 385 undergraduate participants in this study, 311 from the College of Charleston (239 female; 79% Caucasian, 3% African-American, 4% Asian-American, and 2% Hispanic) and 74 from California State University at Fullerton (55 female; 27% Caucasian, 5% African-American, 19% Asian-American, and 37% Hispanic).

Surveys. Participants were presented cases to evaluate that varied along three dimensions: agent's religiosity (devout Christian vs. atheist), action duration (short-term vs. long-term), and action valence (immoral vs. moral), leading to eight cases overall. The order in which the cases were presented was

counterbalanced. For the immoral action cases they read [* being filled in with different names for different cases]:

* is a devout Christian who believes in God. * and his wife have regularly attended church for years. They are both active in church life, and * has given invited lectures about his faith to community groups.

In the short-term case, they then read: “Recently * attended a conference for work in another city. While at the conference hotel, * *had an affair with a woman who was also attending the conference.*” In the long-term case, they read instead that. “For the last two years * *has been engaged in an affair with *, a woman who works at his office.*”

For the moral action cases, after being introduced to the agent, in short-term case, they then read: “One afternoon, * is walking home from work and he comes across a homeless family in the alley near his office. *This sight motivates him to make a one-time donation of half of his annual salary to a local homeless shelter. But, after making the donation, * doesn’t involve himself with the shelter at all.*” And in the long-term case they read: “One afternoon, * is walking home from work and he comes across a homeless family in the alley near his office. *This sight motivates him to donate half of his annual salary to a local homeless shelter. And, after making the donation, * becomes an active volunteer at the shelter for many years.*”

For the atheist versions of the cases, the following was substituted in: “* is an atheist who does not believe in God. * and his wife have regularly attended their *local secular humanist chapter* for years. They are both active in *chapter* life, and * has given invited lectures *about his non-faith* to community groups.”

After reading each immoral case, participants were asked the following questions: (1) How ashamed for his behavior do you think * [* being filled in with the specific names from the cases] is?, (2) How motivated do you think * would be to right the wrong?, (3) How motivated do you think * is to confess his wrong to a fellow member of his church [chapter]?, (4) How motivated do you think * would be to confess his behavior to his wife?, (5) How guilty do you think * feels for his behavior?, (6) How bad was *’s behavior?, (7) How much should * be blamed for his behavior?, (8) How wrong was *’s behavior?, (9) How upset do you think *’s should be with her husband’s behavior?, (10) How likely do you think it is that *’s church [chapter] will shun * in light of his behavior?, (11) How consistent with *’s belief in God [non-belief in God] is his behavior?, (12) How likely do you think it is that * really believes in God [does not believe in God]?, (13) Assuming that the Christian God exists, how harshly do you think God will punish *?, (14) How representative of *’s community is *?

After reading each moral case, participants were asked a similar set of questions: (1) How proud do you think * feels for his behavior?, (2) How motivated do you think * would be to engage in other good actions?, (3) How motivated do you think * is to mention his good action to a fellow member of his church [chapter]?, (4) How motivated do you think * would be to mention his good action to his family?, (5) How happy do you think * feels about his behavior?, (6) How good was *s behavior?, (7) How much should * be praised for his behavior?, (8) How right was *s behavior?, (9) How generous do you think * is?, (10) How grateful should the homeless shelter be for * donation?, (11) How consistent with *s belief in God [non-belief in God] is his behavior?, (12) How likely do you think it is that * really believes in God [does not believe in God]?, (13) Assuming that the Christian God exists, how much do you think God will reward *?, (14) How representative of *s community is *?

Reliability analyses revealed that questions 1–5 for both types of cases and 6–9 for the immoral cases and 6–10 for the moral cases could be collapsed together (questions 1–5 $\alpha = 0.83$ – 0.88 ; questions 6–9 $\alpha = 0.91$ – 0.94 ; questions 6–10 $\alpha = 0.86$ – 0.89), creating an internal states composite (questions 1–5) and a moral status composite (questions immoral 6–9, moral 6–10). The remaining questions did not hang together, and so were evaluated individually.

Results

First, a repeated measures ANOVA for the immoral action cases with agents' religiosity, action duration, and question type (internal state vs. moral status) entered as within-participants variables was conducted, revealing a main effect for all three: agents' religiosity, $F(1,336) = 91.2$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.21$; action duration, $F(1,336) = 245.7$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.42$, and question type, $F(1,336) = 1559.9$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.82$. Specifically, the atheists were viewed more harshly, and were reported to feel less badly about their immoral actions than their religious counterparts ($M = 5.1$ vs. 5.4 , $SE = 0.04$). Both were rated less negatively when their actions were short-term (one-term) than when they were long-term ($M = 5.5$ vs. 4.9 , $SE = 0.04$), and participants rated the moral status of both agents (and their actions) more negatively than they rated the internal states those agents themselves would feel ($M = 6.7$ vs. 3.8 , $SE = 0.06$ – 0.04).

These main effects were qualified by a marginal 3-way interaction, $F(1,336) = 3.6$, $p = 0.06$, $\eta^2 = 0.011$. Paired-sample t -tests revealed that when it came to the evaluation of the agents' internal states, participants judged the atheists more harshly than the religious agents (in the sense that they judged that the religious agents would feel worse about their behavior and be more motivated to right their wrongs) in the short-term case, $t(367) = 7.5$, $p < 0.001$, than in the long-term case, $t(367) = 7.1$, $p < 0.001$. On the other hand, in the case of

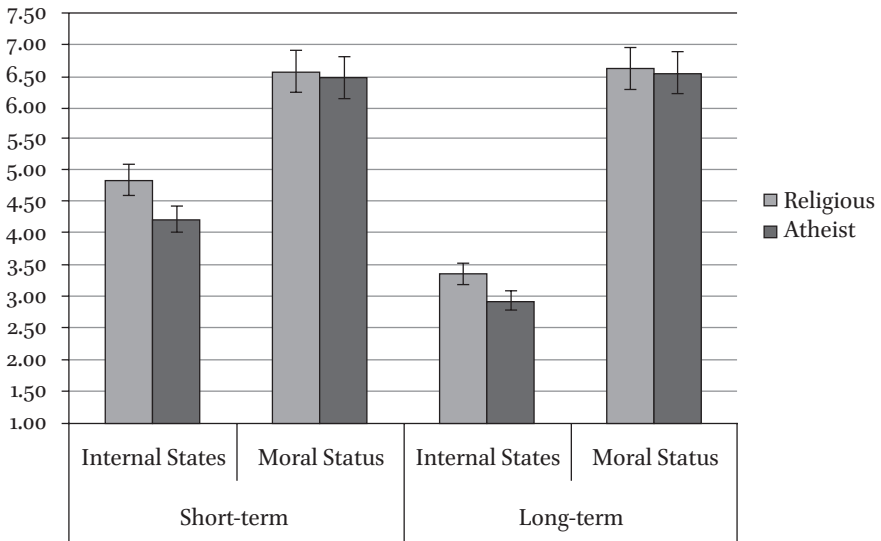


FIGURE 1 Study 1, participants' internal state and moral status judgments for immoral behavior.

the moral status of the agents/actions, participants judged the atheists more harshly than the religious agents (in the sense that they judged the actions themselves as more wrong and the agents as more blameworthy) in the long-term case, $t(367) = 2.7, p = 0.007$, than in the short-term one, $t(367) = 2.3, p = 0.019$ (see Figure 1).

We next examined questions 10-14 individually. Paired-sample t -tests revealed that participants judged the religious agents to be more likely to be shunned by their group for both their short-term and long-term behaviors, $t(378) = 5.7$ and $9.5, p < 0.001$. They also viewed the religious agents' short-term and long-term behaviors as being less consistent with their beliefs, $t(378) = 9.7$ and $14.7, p < 0.001$, and less representative of their community, $t(378) = 7.9$ and $6.2, p < 0.001$, than the atheists'. Finally, when both engaged in long-term immoral behaviors, they viewed the religious agents to be less likely to really believe in God than the atheists were to really *not* believe in God, $t(378) = 4.6, p < 0.001$ (see Figure 2).

After this, we turned to the moral action cases. A repeated measures ANOVA for the moral action cases with agents' religiosity, action duration, and question type (internal state vs. moral status) entered as within-participants variables was conducted, revealing a main effect for all three: agents' religiosity, $F(1,331) = 15.5, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.05$; action duration, $F(1,331) = 393.6, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.56$, and question type, $F(1,331) = 36.7, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.10$. Specifically, once again, the atheists were viewed more harshly, and reported to feel *less* good about their positive moral actions than their religious counterparts ($M = 5.9$

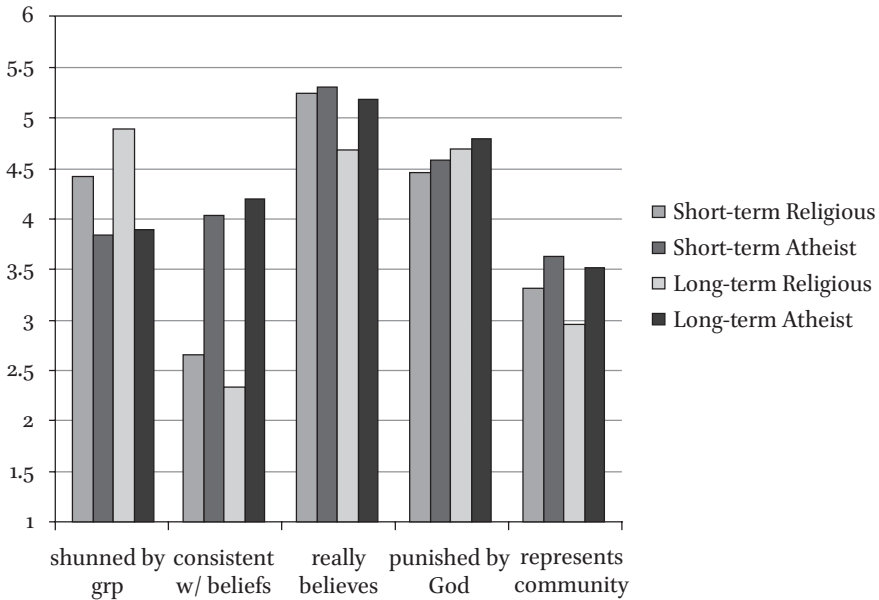


FIGURE 2 Study 1, differences in judgments for immoral behavior.

vs. 6.1, SE = 0.04). Both agents' actions were viewed more positively when they were long-term than when they were short-term ($M = 6.4$ vs. 5.6 , SE = 0.05). And finally, once again, participants rated the moral status of both types of agents more highly than their rating of the agents' internal states reflected ($M = 6.1$ vs. 5.8 , SE = 0.05).

These main effects were qualified by a significant 3-way interaction, $F(1,331) = 12.9, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.04$. Paired-sample t -tests revealed that when it came to their evaluation of the agents' internal states, participants judged the atheists more harshly than the religious agents (in the sense that the religious agents would feel less good about their behaviors and be less motivated to engage in future moral actions) in the long-term case, $t(370) = 3.1, p = 0.002$, than in the short-term case, $t(365) = 5.3, p < 0.001$. This is the opposite of what we found for the immoral behavior. Unlike the immoral action, however, there was no difference in participants' judgments of moral status in either the short-term or the long-term cases, $t(376) = 1.6-0.8, ns$ (see Figure 3).

We then examined the effects of questions 11-14 individually. Paired-sample t -tests revealed that participants judged the religious agents' short-term and long-term behaviors as being more consistent with their beliefs, $t(376) = 6.9$ and $15.9, p < 0.001$, and more representative of their community, $t(375) = 6.9$ and $2.8, p < 0.001$ and 0.006 , than the atheists'. They believed the religious agents to be more likely to be rewarded by God for their short-term and long-term

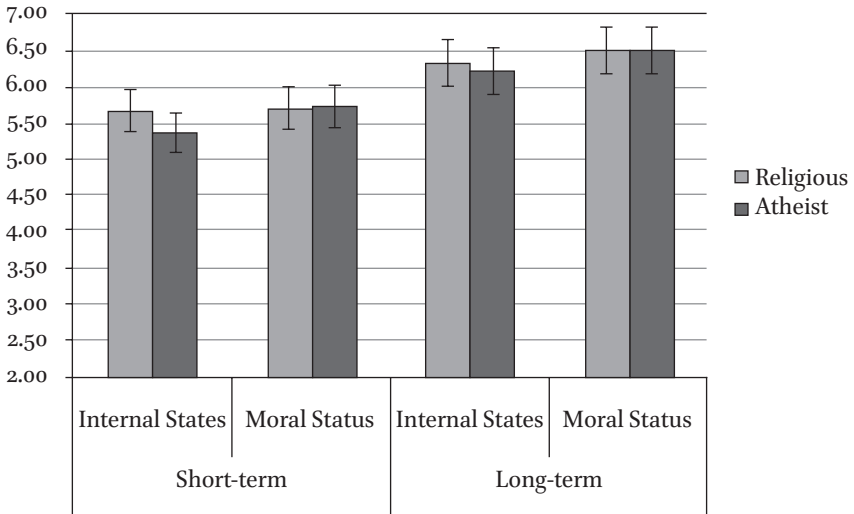


FIGURE 3 Study 1, participants' internal state and moral status judgments for moral behavior.

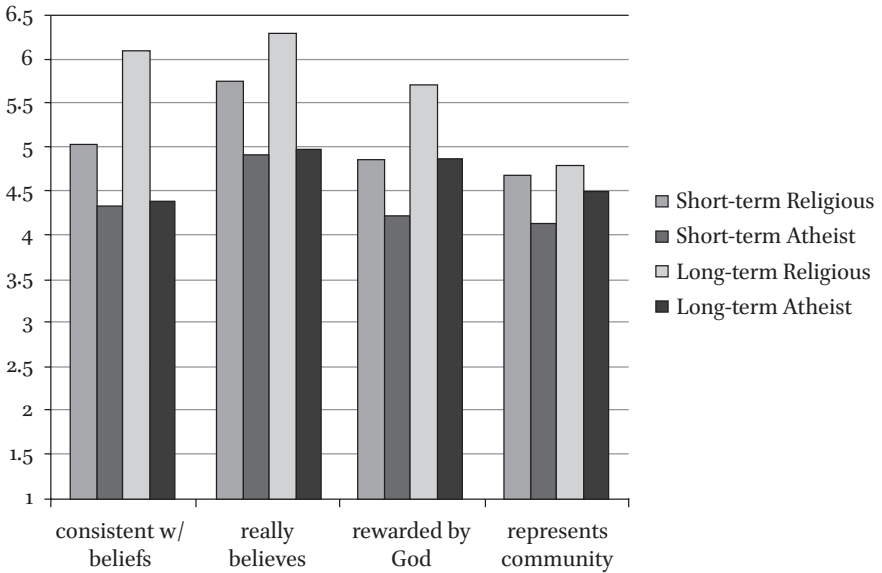


FIGURE 4 Study 1, differences in judgments for moral behavior.

moral actions than the atheists, $t(375) = 7.9$ and 10.4 , $p < 0.001$. And, finally, they viewed the atheists to be less likely to really *not* believe in God than the religious agents were to really believe in God when both engaged in both short-term and long-term moral behavior, $t(375) = 8.3$ and 13.6 , $p < 0.001$ (see Figure 4).

Discussion

Study 1 revealed that an agent's status as an atheist had a clear negative influence on people's moral judgments about both the agent's moral and immoral behavior. People judged atheists to feel both less bad (i.e., less guilty, less shameful, less motivated to right the wrong) about their immoral behavior and less good (i.e., less proud, less motivated to engage in future good behaviors) about their moral behavior. What is more, atheists' immoral behaviors were viewed as more consistent internally, with their general belief-system, and externally, with their community (and its values) – their moral behaviors viewed as *less* consistent with their beliefs and with their community. And, in line with the research discussed at the outset (namely, that people expect religions to involve moral systems to which their followers are expected to adhere) participants judged the religious agents' long-term immoral behavior as being morally worse than the atheists'.

Of course, this effect was found for only for one set of behaviors, behaviors that arguably may have a special connection to Christianity. Being the stronghold for both family values (which, among other things, extol the virtue of long-term monogamous relationships) and having a long-standing commitment to caring for those less fortunate, one might naturally assume that members of a Christian church should be held to higher standards in these regards than non-members, atheist or not. Thus, our findings might be less a reflection of people's stereotypic attitudes towards atheists and more an assumption about what to expect from people of the Christian faith. Given this, Study 2 mimics the structure of Study 1, but includes a new set of immoral and moral behaviors, behaviors less specifically representative of Christian values.

Study 2

Methods

Participants. 192 undergraduate students from the College of Charleston (141 females, 87% Caucasian, 6% African-American, 2% Asian-American, 3% Hispanic) participated in this study for research credit. None were dropped from the analysis.

Surveys. In order to test whether this negative bias against atheists generalized to other immoral and moral behaviors, in this study we gave participants vignettes with a different set of behaviors – stealing from your place of work and saving people from burning buildings.

Specifically, for the short-term and long-term immoral cases people read [* being substituted with different names for each case], “Unbeknownst to his wife, over the last two years, * had once [for the long-term case, “once” was replaced with “regularly”] stolen money from the company he works for in order to buy things for her that he knew she wanted.” And for the moral action, people read, “One afternoon, * is walking home from work and sees that a building has caught fire and that there is someone inside the building. Without thinking, * runs in and, risking his life, he finds the woman who is trapped and helps her escape from the building. [inserted for the long-term case: He feels so good about being able to help the woman that he becomes a volunteer firefighter, helping to save many other people’s lives.]” The order in which the cases were presented was counterbalanced and the questions asked after each case were the same, with the exception of Q10 for the moral cases, which was dropped.

Once again, reliability analyses revealed that the composite variables of internal states (questions 1–5 for both cases, $\alpha = 0.85\text{--}0.92$) and moral status (questions 6–9 for both cases, $\alpha = 0.83\text{--}0.91$) were warranted. The remaining questions were evaluated individually.

Results

Mirroring Study 1, we first conducted a repeated measures ANOVA for the immoral action cases with agents’ religiosity, action duration, and question type (internal state vs. moral status) entered as within-participants variables, revealing a main effect for all three: agents’ religiosity, $F(1,157) = 97.7, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.38$; action duration, $F(1,157) = 6.1, p = 0.015, \eta^2 = 0.04$, and question type, $F(1,157) = 366.1, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.70$. Specifically, the atheists were once again viewed more harshly, reported to feel *less* bad about their immoral actions than their religious counterparts ($M = 4.7$ vs. $5.2, SE = 0.06$), both agents were viewed slightly more negatively when the action was short-term (one-time) than when it was long-term ($M = 5.1$ vs. $4.9, SE = 0.05$), and participants more harshly rated the moral status of both types of agents (and their actions) than they did the internal states those agents themselves would feel ($M = 6.0$ vs. $3.9, SE = 0.07$).

These main effects were qualified by a marginal 3-way interaction, $F(1,157) = 3.6, p = 0.06, \eta^2 = 0.022$. Paired-sample *t*-tests revealed that when it came to their evaluation of the agents’ internal states, participants once again

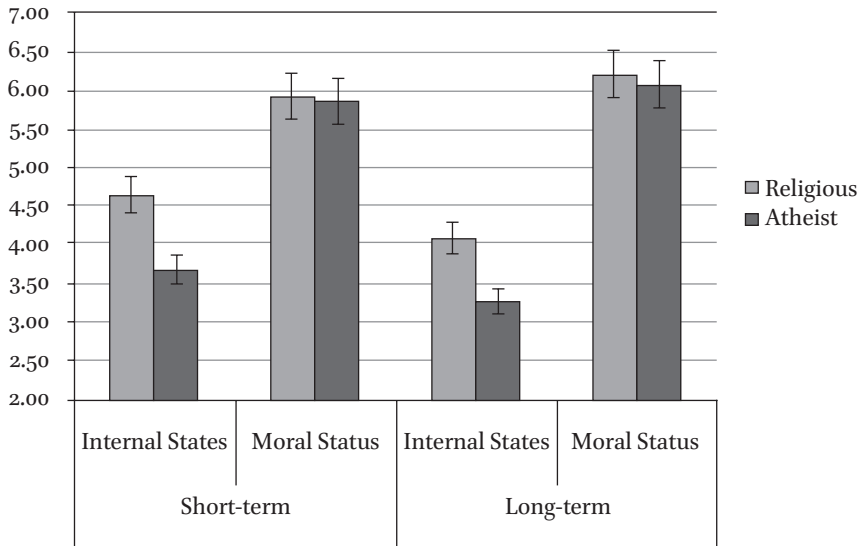


FIGURE 5 Study 2, participants' internal state and moral status judgments for immoral behavior.

judged the atheists slightly more harshly than the religious agents (in the sense that the religious agent was reported to feel worse about his behavior and be more motivated to right the wrong) in the short-term case, $t(182) = 9.2$, $p < 0.001$, than in the long-term case, $t(184) = 8.1$, $p < 0.001$. On the other hand, in the case of the moral status of the agent/action, participants judged the atheists more harshly than the religious agents (in the sense that the actions themselves were more wrong and the agents more blameworthy) in the long-term case, $t(179) = 3.4$, $p = 0.001$, than in the short-term case, $t(180) = 1.3$, ns (see Figure 5).

We next examined the effects of questions 10-14 individually. Paired-sample t -tests revealed that participants judged the religious agents to be more likely to be shunned by their group for both their short-term and long-term behaviors (more for the long-term behaviors), $t(188) = 1.8$ and 2.8 , $p = 0.086$ and $.006$. They also viewed the religious agents' short-term and long-term behaviors as being less consistent with their beliefs, $t(186) = 11.5$ and 10.9 , $p < 0.001$, but, unlike Study 1, not less representative of their community, $t(187) = 1.4$ and 0.58 , ns. Finally, they viewed the religious agents to be less likely to really believe in God than the atheists were to really not believe in God – but this time, only when engaging in the short-term immoral behavior, $t(187) = 2.3$, $p = 0.022$ (see Figure 6).

After this, we turned to the moral action cases. We ran a repeated measures ANOVA for the moral action cases with agents' religiosity, action duration,

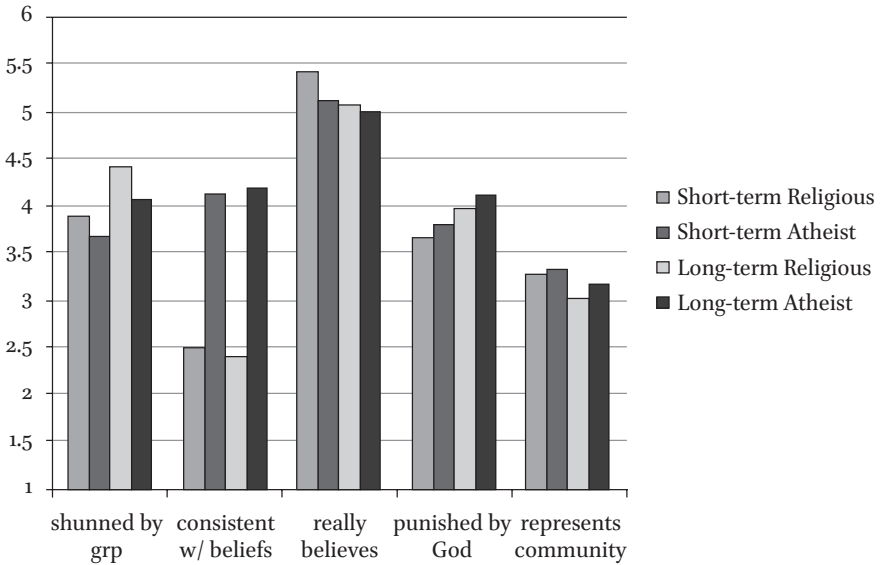


FIGURE 6 Study 2, differences in judgments for immoral behavior.

and question type (internal state vs. moral status) entered as within-participants variables, revealing a main effect for all three: agents' religiosity, $F(1,159) = 9.8, p = 0.002, \eta^2 = 0.06$ and action duration, $F(1,159) = 10.5, p = 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.06$, along a marginal effect for question type, $F(1,159) = 3.6, p = 0.06, \eta^2 = 0.02$. Once again, the atheists were viewed more harshly than the religious agents, and reported to feel less good about their moral actions than their religious counterparts ($M = 6.0$ and $6.2, SE = 0.06$). Both agents' actions are viewed more positively when they were long-term than when they were short-term ($M = 6.2$ and $6.0, SE = 0.06$). And finally, once again, participants rated the moral status of both agents slightly more highly than their rating of the agents' internal states reflected ($M = 6.2$ and $6.1, SE = 0.07$).

These main effects were qualified by a significant 2-way interaction between the agents' religiosity and the question type, $F(1,159) = 6.2, p = 0.014, \eta^2 = 0.04$. Paired-sample *t*-tests revealed that in the long-term – but not the short-term cases – participants judged the atheists more harshly than the religious agents. This judgment was in respect to both atheists' internal states (in the sense that the religious agents would feel better about their behavior and be more motivated to engage in future moral actions) and the moral status of their actions. This effect was stronger in the case of judgments about agent actions (see Figure 7).

We then examined the effects of questions 11–14 individually. Paired-sample *t*-tests revealed that participants judged the religious agents' short-term and

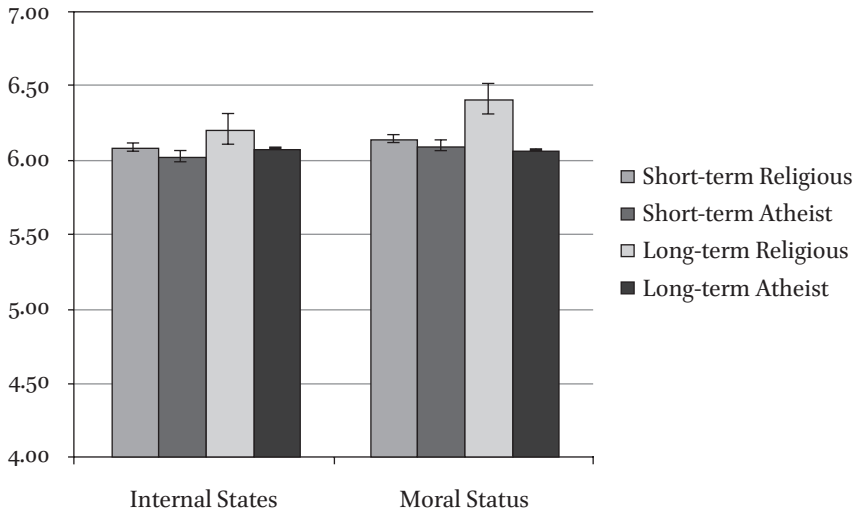


FIGURE 7 Study 2, participants' internal state and moral status judgments for moral behavior.

long-term behaviors as being more consistent with their beliefs, $t(180) = 5.6$, and 4.7 $p < 0.001$, and less representative of their community (but only in the short-term case), $t(185) = 4.4$, $p < 0.001$, than the atheists'. They believed the religious agents to be more likely to be rewarded by God for their short-term and long-term moral actions than the atheists, $t(183) = 4.4$ and 4.9 , $p < 0.001$. And, finally, they viewed the atheists to be less likely to really not believe in God than the religious agents were to really believe in God when they engaged in both short-term and long-term moral behavior, $t(188) = 2.9$ and 3.0 , $p = 0.004$ (see Figure 8).

General Discussion

The results of Study 1 and Study 2 taken together confirm our primary hypothesis: participants' moral appraisal of immoral and moral behaviors – as well as the agents who engaged in them – were negatively influenced by the agents' religious/non-religious status. This was especially evident in participants' evaluations of the agents' internal states: though there were differences in participants' evaluations of an action's moral status between the religious and non-religious agents, the strongest difference was in their evaluations of the agents' moral appraisals of their own actions. Atheism correlated with a set of attributions about moral motivation and character. Participants believed that atheists care less about, and have less motivation for, behaving morally and refraining from behaving immorally – after all, they are not members of

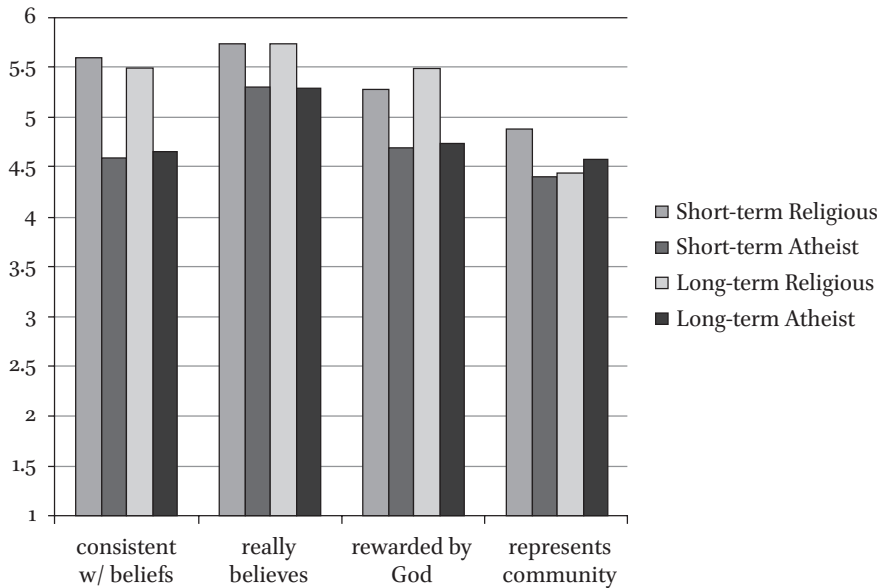


FIGURE 8 Study 2, differences in judgments for moral behavior.

a group with a proscribed a set of moral norms to adhere to. In general, the data suggest that participants both held religious agents to higher standards than non-religious agents and believed that religious agents hold themselves to higher standards than do non-religious agents (Figure 4).

This general sentiment gets reflected even more broadly in people's attitudes about religious and non-religious communities. Participants believed that religious agents were significantly more likely to be shunned by their group (for both short- and long-term behavior) than non-religious agents. And participants viewed the immoral behavior as less representative of the religious agents' community – as well as less consistent with the religious agents' other beliefs. On the flip side, they viewed the moral behavior as more representative of the religious agents' community – and more consistent with their beliefs – than the atheists'. In other words, a non-religious person behaving immorally was regarded as less anomalous – and behaving morally as more anomalous – than a religious person. In addition, people saw the religious community as giving religious agents reason to be moral, and to feel guilt and shame about having done immoral actions, qualities that people did not attribute to the atheists' community. These findings together provide clear support for the hypothesis that religious group boundaries are identified and defended along moral parameters – Christians are members of a group with a shared set of norms, adherence to which their identification as Christians is thought to depend.

This general sentiment was so strong that participants even suspected that religious wrongdoers might not truly believe in God, whereas the non-religious do-gooders must actually believe in God. This suggests that participants attribute some degree of self-deception to religious wrongdoers and non-religious do-gooders about their own beliefs (a finding consistent with cognitive dissonance theory: see Festinger, 1957; Cooper, 2007).

Participants' judgments about God's response to the religious and non-religious agents' behavior was particularly revealing. While participants believed that God would punish long-term wrongdoers of both kinds more harshly than short-term wrongdoers (as one might expect), rather than expecting harsher punishment for the wrongdoings of God's devout followers, instead they judged that both the short-term and long-term religious wrongdoers would be punished *less* harshly than their non-religious counterparts (Figure 2). In addition, rather than expecting God to reward the atheists' display of moral behavior (if for no other reason than as a form of encouragement), they judged that God would be significantly more likely to bestow reward on both short- and long-term religious do-gooders than on their non-religious counterparts, though they had engaged in the same good behaviors. Indeed, God was thought no more likely to reward the long-term non-religious do-gooder than He was the short-term non-religious do-gooder, though this was not the case for the religious do-gooder (Figure 8). In sum, consistent with Supernatural Punishment Theory, participants judged that God would take a particularly punitive stance towards the atheists' behavior, whether moral or immoral.

Importantly, participants' demographic information, including participants' religiosity and participants' politics, did not significantly predict these findings. The stereotypic effect of atheism was the same for both religious and non-religious participants, liberals and conservatives. This is especially interesting, since for the non-religious participants this meant they were engaging in in-group (not out-group) denigration. What would explain this? Studies on racial preferences (Clark and Clark, 1950; Mahan, 1976; Powell-Hopson and Hopson, 1988) and stereotype threat (Ho and Sidanius, 2010; Clark et al., 2011; Rivardo et al., 2011) suggest that stereotypes are internalized by everyone, even members of the stereotyped group, such that they will unconsciously display stereotype-consistent behaviors and will engage in the same stereotypic evaluation of themselves and their behaviors.

Limitations and Future Research

Further research should investigate this effect, possibly by gathering data on participants' intrinsic vs. extrinsic religiosity (along with other social/political measures, such as Social Dominance Orientation; Pratto et al., 1994). Thus

future research should also vary further the types of moral and immoral behaviors, and also the recipients of those behaviors. For example, a further study might vary negative and positive behaviors affecting members of the religious in-group and religious out-group. Also, we began by noting that religious believers exhibit a special bias against atheists that prompts religious people not to trust them like they trust religious people. But it is possible that our data has exposed a bias against secular humanists (and for Christians) in particular, rather than non-religious and religious agents more generally. So, varying the identification of the agents more broadly will also be an important future step.

Concluding Remarks

Though only a first step in the investigation of the influence of the stereotype of atheism, our studies provide clear evidence for the fact that people view atheists with more suspicion than they do individuals who are religious. This suspicion generates not only harsher judgments of specific moral and immoral behaviors, but also carries over into their judgments about the atheists' larger world view and their community as a whole: atheists are not only people who feel less bad about their immoral actions, but they are also people from whom immoral behaviors should be expected, given their beliefs and their shared community values. In short, these studies suggest that people risk paying a clear social cost for being atheists.

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