

ANTHROPOMORPHIC GOD CONCEPTS ENGENDER MORAL JUDGMENT

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Violations of religious doctrine may not only be perceived to violate the laws of one's religion, but also to be morally wrong. Just as actions considered acceptable outside of social contexts are often considered unacceptable when they affect other people, believers perceiving God in anthropomorphic terms were more likely to judge violations of their religious doctrine to be morally unacceptable than believers not perceiving God in anthropomorphic terms. Devout Christians reported the extent to which they endorsed the Christian theological God concept and an anthropomorphic God concept before rating the extent to which they considered actions prohibited by the Ten Commandments to be theologically and morally wrong. Endorsement of both God concepts influenced the extent to which those acts were perceived to violate the tenets of participants' religion. Only endorsement of the anthropomorphic God concept, however, determined the extent to which those actions were considered morally wrong.

"For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments."
– Exodus 20:5, *New King James Version*

Violations of religious laws and theories invoke moral judgment in ways that violations of secular laws and scientific theories do not. People are more likely to protest over school prayer than school taxes. Many religious believers consider it morally reprehensible to question religious explanations of events, but few scientists (or be-

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lievers) consider it reprehensible to question scientific theories. Even the most innocuous secular and religious violations are considered differently—using obscene language is considered morally acceptable by many who consider it morally unacceptable to take the name of God in vain. Why are religious laws so likely to have moral implications? Although social norms and other causes undoubtedly influence which issues religious believers and nonbelievers consider moral issues, an important determinant of religious believers' conception of morality may be whether or not they anthropomorphize God. When religious believers conceive of God in a human-like manner, they may perceive religious doctrines as promises made to God rather than as abstract rules of conduct, and consequently perceive actions prohibited by their religion to be morally wrong. In this paper we report one test of this theory among devout Christians.

Modern Christians appear to conceptualize God in two distinct ways. Explicitly, most Christians endorse the *theological* concept of God described by the Bible—an entity that is omniscient, omnipresent, and capable of any action. Implicitly, many Christians also endorse an *anthropomorphic* concept of God—an entity possessing beliefs, desires, and emotions that behaves like human beings. People report perceiving God as an entity possessing agency as well as phenomenal experiences such as feelings and desires (Demoulin, Saroglou, & Van Pachterbeke, 2008, this issue; Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007; Rossano, 2006). Recollections and descriptions of God's behavior portray an entity subject to many physical constraints that affect human beings (Barrett & Keil, 1996). The nature of relationships people report having with God often mirror the nature of relationships people report having with their parents (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992), and people report strengthening their attachment to God when other social attachments are absent (Kirkpatrick, 1998). Furthermore, many consider their relationships with supernatural agents such as God to be subject to the same norms of reciprocal altruism as their social relationships with other human beings (Bering, 2006; Johnson & Krüger, 2004).

Endorsing an anthropomorphic God concept—thinking of God as an entity similar to a person—may potently influence the way believers perceive violations of their religious doctrines. Many behaviors that are perfectly acceptable outside of social contexts, such as profit maximizing, appear unjust when interacting with other people (Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1986). This distinction may be best illustrated by noniterative games of strategic interaction. In ultimatum games, two entities try to agree on how to divide a sum of money. The proposer divides the sum and then the responder can accept or reject the proposer's division. If the responder accepts, both players earn the amounts stipulated. If the responder rejects, neither party earns any money. Although offers lower than the modal even split are made by human partners, they are frequently rejected (Henrich, 2000). If proposers are identified as computers or random number generators, however, responders frequently accept divisions offering them markedly lower amounts—even divisions offering responders the minimum amount possible that is greater than zero (Blount, 1995; Sanfey, Rilling, Aronson, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2003). This distinction occurs because responders assume a norm of fairness when interacting with human proposers, and will forgo financial benefits to punish proposers offering "unfair" divisions. Responders do not assume a norm of fairness when interacting with non-human proposers, however, and are willing to accept any division that financially benefits them (Rabin, 1993). Just as people are expected to behave fairly, unlike non-social agents, they are treated according to norms of fairness. Merely

priming or suggesting another agent's presence, for example, invokes norms of equity and trust in dictator games—games in which an “allocator” is given a sum of money and anonymously divides the money however she would like to between herself and a similarly anonymous stranger (Bering, McLeod, & Shackelford, 2005; Haley & Fessler, 2005). In short, being treated by or treating other humans with inequity is considered unacceptable and punishable, but being treated by, or treating non-human entities with inequity is considered perfectly acceptable.

Religious concepts appear to elicit norms of fairness similar to those elicited by social interaction. Religious primes increase generosity among dictator game participants (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007) and decrease cheating (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2007). Perhaps these effects are due to the anthropomorphic God concepts that religious primes evoke. Religious believers who conceptualize God in human-like terms may perceive violations of their religious code to be offensive to God, because those violations defy the explicit requests of an entity akin to another person rather than simply breach an abstract honor code to which they have agreed to adhere. As actions that cause offense to other people are perceived to be severer moral violations than identical actions that do not (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Knobe, 2003; Mikula, Scherer, & Athenstaedt, 1998), believers endorsing an anthropomorphic God concept may perceive violations of their religious doctrine as severer moral violations than believers who do not endorse an anthropomorphic God concept.

We propose that anthropomorphic and theological God concepts should differently affect religious believers' perception of the extent to which violations of their religious doctrine are morally and theologically wrong. Religious believers who endorse an anthropomorphic God concept should perceive actions prohibited by their religion to be severer moral violations than religious believers who do not, as the former are more likely to perceive those actions to offend God. Endorsement of an anthropomorphic God concept, however, should not wholly determine which actions believers consider violations of their religious doctrine. Such judgments should be largely contingent on the extent to which believers endorse the basic tenets of their religion, and thus, the extent to which believers endorse the theological God concept of their religion. The experiment that follows tested these predictions among a population of devout Christians.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Forty-three attendees at Christian youth group meetings in Boston, MA (16 females; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.4$, $SD = 3.3$) volunteered or were paid \$5 to complete a questionnaire. The groups were composed of undergraduate students at Harvard University. Participants were recruited at the meetings, and completed the questionnaire either in person or on the internet by following a hyperlink included in a flyer that was disseminated at meetings. The sample varied moderately with respect to denomination of Christianity: Of those listing a specific denomination, 14.0% were Protestant, 7.0% Catholic, 7.0% Evangelical, 4.7% Presbyterian, 4.7% Baptist, 4.7% Episcopalians, 4.7% Methodist, 4.7% Lutheran, 14.0% belonged to other Christian denominations, and 39.5% listed no specific denomination but self-identified as Christians. Frequency of attendance at formal religious services

also varied: 81.4% reported attending once or more a week, 7.0% reported attending monthly, 2.3% reported attending only on religious holidays, and 7.0% reported never attending formal religious services (one participant declined to answer). The majority of participants reported being raised as Christians (84.0%); 14.0% reported being “born-again” Christians. Additionally, the majority reported that prayer is an important part of their life (88.4%), that they had apologized directly to God through prayer (88.4%), and had felt the presence of “the Holy Spirit” (88.4%).

PROCEDURE

In a “Religious Beliefs Survey,” participants first reported their religious denomination, how frequently they attended religious services, whether or not they prayed to God, considered prayer important, and whether or not they had felt the presence of God (i.e., “the Holy Spirit”). Next, as an explicit measure of participants’ *Theological God Concept* (adapted from Barrett & Keil, 1996), participants reported the extent to which they considered God to be free of human-like constraints and adhere to the Christian Biblical depiction of God (e.g., “God can occupy space without in any way distorting it” “God can do any number of things at the same time.”, “God knows everything” “God can read minds”), on ten-point scales marked at endpoints, *Completely Disagree* (1) and *Completely Agree* (10). As a measure of their Anthropomorphic God Concept, participants reported the extent to which they considered 13 human-like personality traits to be descriptive of God (i.e., accepting, caring, comforting, controlling, distant (reverse scored), forgiving, judging, loving, impersonal (reversed scored), responsive, unavailable (reversed scored), and wrathful) on 9-point Likert scales marked at endpoints, *Not at all* (1) and *Very Much* (9).

Finally, participants assessed ten vignettes, each describing an instance in which a person performed an action prohibited by one of the Ten Commandments, (i.e., committing adultery, bearing false witness, committing blasphemy, coveting their neighbor’s wife, dishonoring their parents, committing idolatry, committing murder, stealing, working on the Sabbath, and worshipping another god). Three examples appear below.

“Paul has a golden idol in the shape of a small man that he keeps on the mantel in his living room at home. Each day after work, Paul makes the idol an offering of brandy and prays to it, thanking the idol for good fortune and spiritual guidance.”

“One day, on his way home from work, Sam got stuck in a large traffic jam. As he attempted to change lanes, the car behind him pulled out quickly and cut him off. Sam exclaimed loudly, “God!” and proceeded to wait for another opening in the traffic.”

“Molly entered a department store with the hope of buying a new watch. When she realized that she did not have enough money to get the watch she wanted, Molly placed it in her purse and walked out of the store undetected.”

Vignette order was randomly assigned. After reading each vignette, participants rated the extent to which they considered that behavior to “violate the rules of their religion” on ten-point scales marked at endpoints, *Not at all* (1) and *An Extreme Violation* (10), and the extent to which they considered the behavior to be “morally wrong” on ten-point scales marked at endpoints, *Not at all Wrong* (1) and *Extremely Wrong* (10). Upon completion of the questionnaire, participants were debriefed and compensated.

RESULTS

GOD CONCEPT AND VIOLATION SCALES

God Concept Scales. A *Theological God Concept* (TGC) scale was created by averaging responses to the 18 items measuring the extent to which participants endorsed the Christian theological description of God (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$). An *Anthropomorphic God Concept* (AGC) scale was created by averaging responses to the thirteen items measuring the extent to which participants attributed human-like traits to God ($\alpha = .86$).

Violation Scales. A *Moral Violations* scale was created by averaging the extent to which the behaviors described in the vignettes were perceived to be morally wrong by participants ($\alpha = .88$). A *Religious Violations* scale was created by averaging the extent to which the behaviors described in the vignettes were perceived to violate the rules of participants' religion ($\alpha = .93$).

MEDIATION ANALYSES

Moral Violations. When analyzed with regression, endorsement of the Christian TGC significantly predicted the extent to which actions violating the Ten Commandment were considered to be morally wrong in a linear model, $R^2 = .31$, $F(1, 41) = 18.54$, $p < .001$, in which greater TGC predicted greater Moral Violations, $\beta = .56$, $t(42) = 4.31$, $p < .001$. With AGC included in the regression, the model found a significant linear fit, $R^2 = .42$, $F(1, 40) = 14.81$, $p < .001$, but TGC no longer significantly predicted Moral Violations, $\beta = .22$, $t(42) = 1.32$, $p = .19$, whereas AGC did significantly predict Moral Violations, $\beta = .48$, $t(42) = 2.82$, $p = .008$. As these findings met the criteria for a test of mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986), a Sobel test was conducted and confirmed full mediation, $Z = 2.57$, $p = .01$. Apparently, participants' anthropomorphic God concepts rather than theological God concepts led them to consider actions prohibited by the Ten Commandments to be moral violations (see Figure 1).

Religious Violations. Endorsement of the Christian TGC significantly predicted the extent to which actions violating the Ten Commandments were considered to be theologically wrong in a linear model, $R^2 = .52$, $F(1, 41) = 44.18$, $p < .001$, in which greater TGC predicted greater Religious Violations, $\beta = .72$, $t(42) = 6.65$, $p < .001$. When AGC was included in the regression, the model still found a significant linear fit, $R^2 = .60$, $F(1, 40) = 30.48$, $p < .001$, but both TGC and AGC significantly predicted Religious Violations, $\beta = .43$, $t(42) = 3.08$, $p = .004$, and $\beta = .41$, $t(42) = 2.93$, $p = .006$, respectively. As these findings met the criteria for a test of partial mediation (Baron & Kenney, 1986), a Sobel test was conducted and confirmed partial mediation, $Z = 2.66$, $p = .01$. In this case, anthropomorphic God concepts only partially accounted for the influence of theological God concepts on the extent to which participants considered actions prohibited by the Ten Commandments to constitute religious violations (see Figure 1).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

These findings provide preliminary evidence that religious believers consider actions prohibited by their religious doctrine to be severer moral transgressions if they endorse an anthropomorphic God concept. Although endorsement of the Christian theological God concept predicted the extent to which Christians perceived actions prohibited by the Ten Commandments to be theological and moral

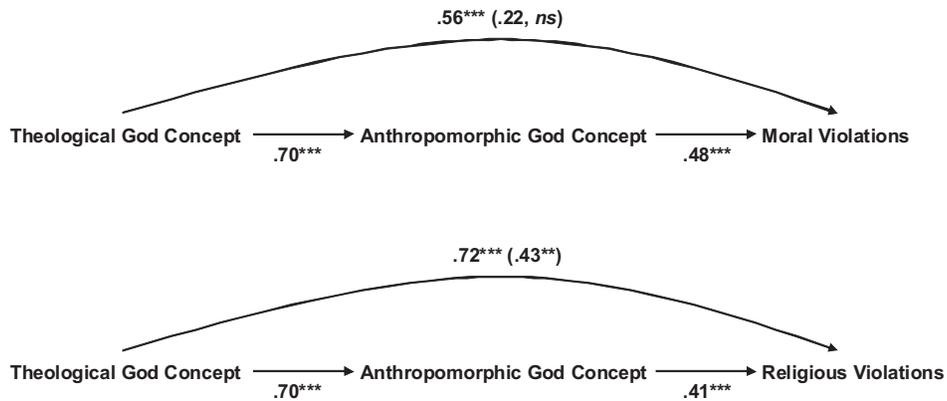


FIGURE 1. Anthropomorphic God concepts mediated the influence of theological God concepts on the extent to which acts violating the Ten Commandments were considered to be moral violations, but only partially mediated the extent to which the same acts were considered violations of participants' religion doctrine. Asterisks indicate significant relationships (** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$).

violations, endorsement of an anthropomorphic God concept fully mediated the influence of their theological God concept on the perceived severity of moral violations. In other words, both theological and anthropomorphic God concepts influenced whether Christians considered acts prohibited by their religious doctrine to be theologically wrong. But anthropomorphic God concepts, not theological God concepts, determined whether Christians considered acts prohibited by their religious doctrine to be morally wrong.

Religious violations perceived to affect a human-like God could be considered moral transgressions because they provoke negative emotions, are considered to cause harm to an individual, or because actors are particularly likely to be attributed responsibility for actions with negative consequences. Unjust acts provoke strong negative emotions (Mikula et al., 1998), which may induce moral evaluation (Greene & Haidt, 2002). Actions that induce feelings of disgust, for example, are judged to be immoral even when people cannot offer a logical explanation for their judgment (Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993). If strong negative emotions are provoked by the feeling that one has caused offense to another person, those emotions may engender the belief that one has committed an immoral behavior. Anthropomorphic God concepts may not engender moral judgment, however, simply because of the strong emotions they provoke. Actions that cause harm to others are considered to be more blameworthy than identical actions that cause no harm (Cushman et al., 2006; Knobe, 2003). More generally, actors are most likely to be attributed responsibility when their actions produce negative outcomes, whether those outcomes were intended or not (Knobe, 2003; Leslie, Knobe, & Cohen, 2006). Whether the present findings can be explained by the strong emotions that injustices provoke, perceptions of personal harm, or more negative outcomes that would result from anthropomorphic conception of God, is an intriguing question left for future research.

Anthropomorphic supernatural agent concepts may have developed as a result or byproduct of evolutionary selection pressures—the fear of omniscient and omnipotent supernatural agents may have been invoked to deter group defectors, particularly in large groups where the rule of law was difficult to enforce (Atran &

Norenzayan, 2004; Bering, 2006; Johnson & Krüger, 2004; Raven, 1999). Indeed, moralizing gods are more likely to be found among large groups with access to significant material resources, and may have been a concept instituted to induce altruism and prevent group fission (Roes & Raymond, 2003). As God concepts differ across theologies and cultures, however, the generalizability of the results of the present research should be assessed among followers of other religions. Religions like Judaism place less of an emphasis on faith as the reason to follow religious tenants than Christianity (Cohen, Siegel, & Rozin, 2003), whereas others such as Islam expressly discourage believers from conceiving of God in human-like terms. In such cases, social norms and relations within religious communities may play a larger role in determining whether religious violations are considered morally wrong.

Of course, these findings may have implications outside of the scope of religion. It is possible that the anthropomorphism of other abstract and group entities such as social movements, nations, corporations, and wilderness areas may lead to the perception that those abstract entities should be treated like human beings. Those who anthropomorphize the Earth, for example, may consider activities such as strip mining to be morally wrong because they “hurt” the Earth, and consequently oppose such activities irrespective of the potential profits, resources, or jobs those activities might produce.

In sum, anthropomorphic God concepts appear to engender moral judgment among devout Christians. Endorsement of both the Christian theological and an anthropomorphic God concept determined the extent to which actions prohibited by the Ten Commandments were considered to violate the tenets of Christianity. Endorsement of an anthropomorphic God concept, however, determined the extent to which those actions were also considered morally wrong. These findings suggest that the commandments of a human-like God are not perceived like secular laws, as an abstract code of conduct, but rather as promises made to an individual and a moral code by which to live.

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