

# Good for God? Religious Motivation Reduces Perceived Responsibility for and Morality of Good Deeds

Will M. Gervais  
University of Kentucky

Many people view religion as a crucial source of morality. However, 6 experiments (total  $N = 1,078$ ) revealed that good deeds are perceived as less moral if they are performed for religious reasons. Religiously motivated acts were seen as less moral than the exact same acts performed for other reasons (Experiments 1–2 and 6). Religious motivations also reduced attributions of intention and responsibility (Experiments 3–6), an effect that fully mediated the effect of religious motivations on perceived morality (Experiment 6). The effects were not explained by different perceptions of motivation orientation (i.e., intrinsic vs. extrinsic) across conditions (Experiment 4) and also were evident when religious upbringing led to an intuitive moral response (Experiment 5). Effects generalized across religious and nonreligious participants. When viewing a religiously motivated good deed, people infer that actually helping others is, in part, a side effect of other motivations rather than an end in itself. Thus, religiously motivated actors are seen as less responsible than secular actors for their good deeds, and their helping behavior is viewed as less moral than identical good deeds performed for either unclear or secular motivations.

*Keywords:* religion, morality, intentionality, folk psychology, person perception

Is that which is pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?

—Socrates, in Plato's *Euthyphro*, 10a

Russell's walk home is interrupted by a hungry beggar. Russell thinks for a minute and then decides to buy the beggar a warm meal. Russell seems like a nice guy; after all, most of the Russells of the world would probably ignore the beggar. But does the morality of Russell's generosity depend on what he thought about before helping the beggar?

In this article, I test the hypothesis that—although many people view religion as central to morality—religious motivations might actually undermine the perceived morality of good deeds. Many people view religion and morality as intimately connected, almost synonymous. And in recent years, a fair amount of research has explored the ways in which religion might actually help motivate prosocial behavior among individuals (e.g., Brooks, 2007; Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). Yet there is a dearth of research into moral perceptions of religiously motivated actions.

Socrates asked Euthyphro whether things are good because the gods are pleased by them or whether the gods are pleased by things that are intrinsically good. The answer to this puzzle is well beyond the scope of experimental psychology. But experimental psychology can explore instead a related question of how religious motivation affects perceived morality: If people perform good deeds to please the gods, are they still behaving morally?

## Religious Halos and Atheistic Horns

On the one hand, religious motivations might have little effect at all on moral judgments. After all, many people view morality as arising from religious beliefs in the first place. According to a 2002 Pew poll, most Americans view belief in God as a prerequisite for moral behavior and report that a religious upbringing helps children develop into moral adults. On the other hand, those without religious beliefs are excluded from both public and private spheres (e.g., Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006) and viewed as morally suspect. For example, given a description of a moral transgressor, participants readily and intuitively assume that the transgressor is an atheist, not Christian, Muslim, or Jewish (Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011). This effect persists even for moral transgressions ranging into the bizarre and severe (e.g., serial murder, consensual incest, cannibalism; Gervais, in press).

To an observer who thinks that morality derives primarily from religion (perhaps mistakenly; Bloom, 2012), there is little reason to expect that religious motivations would affect perceptions of morality. Indeed, for many people, religious motivations might be seen as necessary precursors to moral behavior and, given a description of moral behavior, many observers might infer religious motivations.

## Intentionality, Responsibility, and Religion

An intuitive perceived connection between religion and morality would likely predict that religious motivations would little affect the perceived morality of good deeds. However, two classic lines of research suggest instead that religious motivations might somewhat tarnish the perceived morality of good deeds.

First, classic research in social psychology has long focused on the nature of altruism (e.g., Batson, 1991; Baumann, Cialdini, & Kenrick, 1981). Can an act still be considered altruistic if the actor

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Will M. Gervais, Department of Psychology, University of Kentucky, Kastle Hall, Lexington, KY 40506. E-mail: [will.gervais@uky.edu](mailto:will.gervais@uky.edu)

is perceived to receive some benefit from the action (e.g., Batson & Shaw, 1991; Baumann et al., 1981)? Although much of this classic research focuses specifically on the true nature of altruism, similar considerations likely affect lay perceptions of morality. Indeed, recent research reveals altruistic actions that also yield personal gain are seen as even less moral than similarly self-beneficial actions that do not include an altruistic outcome (Newman & Cain, 2014). In light of these insights, it is possible that people doing good deeds because they are religiously motivated might be seen as pursuing a goal distinct from purely helping others: They might be seen as trying to curry favor with a god, or to make a favorable impression on coreligionists. To put this possibility in Euthyphroian terms, is it still moral to merely do what one thinks the gods would like?

Second, research from social, developmental, and moral psychology, as well as from philosophy and neuroscience, converges on the notion that perceptions of intentionality and responsibility are central to moral judgment (e.g., Berndt & Berndt, 1975; Cushman, 2008; K. Gray, Young, & Waytz, 2012; Guglielmo, Monroe, & Malle, 2009; Malle, 2006; Young & Saxe, 2008). A woman who intentionally drowns her toddler is a villain; a woman who accidentally lets her toddler drown is a tragic figure. A man who gives a winning lottery ticket to an orphanage is heroic; a man who accidentally drops his winning lottery ticket in front of the orphanage is merely clumsy. For an act to be considered good, it must be seen as freely chosen, with the good outcome as its intended goal.

Observers are sensitive to actors' intended goals when rendering moral judgments. Further, observers can reliably distinguish between an actor's intended goal and other side effects that may result (e.g., Leslie, Knobe, & Cohen, 2006). In addition, people's moral judgments are sensitive to considerations of actors' norms and obligations (e.g., Guglielmo et al., 2009). It is possible that if somebody acts altruistically because it is important to his or her religious beliefs, observers might infer that satisfying religious obligations is the intended goal and the actual help offered to another is a mere side effect.

Combined, these classic perspectives make two perhaps counterintuitive suggestions about how religious motivations might affect the perceived morality of good deeds. First, they suggest that religious motivations might confuse perceivers regarding whether providing benefits to others (vs., e.g., fulfilling religious obligations or pleasing a deity) is seen as the primary intended goal of a good deed, perhaps reducing the perceived morality of that deed. Second, they may muddle inferences regarding the degree to which a religiously motivated good deed is a freely chosen individual act to help another or merely a person acting out religious obligation for which he or she is not directly responsible. In both of these cases, classic research in moral psychology suggests that religious motivations would complicate inferences about goals and responsibility, leading to reduced perceptions of morality for good deeds.

### Present Research

Although many people view religion as the very source of morality, it is possible that religious motivations reduce the perceived morality of good deeds. In six experiments, I tested two primary predictions: (a) that religious motivations reduce the perceived morality of good deeds, because (b) religious motivations

reduce the degree to which altruism is viewed as a goal rather than a side effect, thus reducing perceived responsibility for the good deed. Across experiments, situations where actions were explained by religious motivations were compared with situations in which no explicit motive was provided (Experiments 1–6) and in which a protagonist's secular worldview served as a motivation (Experiments 2–5). Experiments 1–2 tested the initial question of whether religious motivations reduce the perceived morality of good deeds. Experiments 3–6 delved into the mechanisms that may explain this effect by testing whether religious motivations reduce perceived responsibility of good deeds and whether this, in turn, mediates the effect of religious motivations on perceived morality (Experiment 6). Along the way, individual experiments also test a number of potential alternative explanations for the present effects.

### Experiment 1

Experiment 1 tested whether religious motivation reduces the perceived morality of actions. Further, Experiment 1 sought to evaluate the real-world relevance of this effect by investigating reactions to both (a) a plausible and morally positive response to a recent tragic event that is (b) potentially religiously motivated in a way that directly follows from real-world campaigns to remind people to consider their religious beliefs when deciding how to behave. Specifically, Experiment 1 tested moral perceptions of a person giving money to charitable aid organizations in response to a recent tsunami in the Philippines. The protagonist in Experiment 1 either simply gave money to charity or asked himself, "What would Jesus do?" before giving money to the charity. This manipulation was directly inspired by the popularity of WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) campaigns, which aim to give people potent situational reminders (often in the form of a bracelet inscribed with the letters WWJD) to act in accordance with their faith. I hypothesized that participants would rate the exact same good deed as less moral when the actor considered his faith before performing it.

### Method

**Participants.** To obtain at least 50 participants per cell, I recruited 118 American adults from Amazon Mechanical Turk (<http://www.mturk.com>), an online labor market commonly used in psychological research. Of this sample, three participants were excluded for failing to follow instructions on an instrumental manipulation check (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009). All analyses thus focused on data from 115 participants (54 men, 58 women, three no response;  $M_{\text{age}} = 32.3$  years,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.2$ ).

**Procedure.** Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two vignettes depicting a character, Brad, who gives \$500 to charitable aid organizations after the recent Philippine tsunami. The vignette read, "Recently, a typhoon struck in the Philippines. Brad was reading about the typhoon in the newspaper. He stopped for a minute [to think about it/and asked himself, "What would Jesus do?"]. Brad then decided to give \$500 to charitable relief organizations." All manipulations were between subjects. Fifty-six participants read the version without the religious content included, whereas 59 read the version including religious content.

After reading the vignette, participants answered two questions assessing perceived morality ("To what degree is Brad acting morally?" and "To what degree does Brad deserve praise?"), on a

scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*completely*). I created a composite dependent variable of morality by averaging participants' ratings to the two items ( $r = .28, p = .002$ ).<sup>1</sup> After rating the two vignettes, participants provided information about age, gender, and home location.

## Results and Discussion

I predicted that religious motivation (asking oneself, "What would Jesus do?") would reduce the perceived morality of charity following a tragic tsunami. An independent sample *t* test revealed that, as predicted, participants rated charity as more moral when no motivation was provided than when the protagonist was religiously motivated,  $t(112) = 2.23, p = .03, d = 0.42$  (see Figure 1A).<sup>2</sup> Experiment 1 found, using poignant real-world examples, that religious motivations reduce the perceived morality of good deeds. Subsequent experiments explore this finding in more detail, testing the impact of different types of good deeds and also exploring underlying psychological mechanisms.

### Experiment 2

Experiment 1 demonstrated that even rather strong examples of good deeds are seen as less moral when religiously motivated. In Experiment 2, I sought to extend this finding by exploring a wider range of positive actions. In addition, Experiment 2 included measures of participant religiosity to test for possible moderating effects. Finally, Experiment 1 was limited because it only compared religious motivations and unclear motivations. Perhaps knowing anything direct about a protagonist's motives tarnishes the perceived morality of good deeds. I addressed this possibility by including in Experiment 2 a second secular motivation control condition.

In Experiment 2, participants rated the degree to which either two positive or two neutral actions were moral. In the focal experimental conditions, the protagonist was described as having religious motivations for performing the actions. In two control conditions, the protagonist's motivations were either not given or described as secular in nature. The secular motivation condition was included as a second control so that—rather than receiving no information about a protagonist's motives—participants could learn something of the protagonist's motives, but the motives were not derived from a communally shared belief system replete with easily inferred prosocial obligations and norms of the sort predicted to reduce the perceived intentionality of good deeds.<sup>3</sup> I predicted that religious motivations would reduce perceived morality relative to both control conditions.

## Method

**Participants.** To obtain at least 50 participants per cell, I recruited 337 American adults from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Of this sample, three participants were excluded for failing to follow instructions on an instrumental manipulation check. All analyses thus focused on data from 334 participants (demographics were highly similar across studies, and Table 1 presents full demographics for Experiments 2–6).

**Procedure.** Participants were randomly assigned to read two vignettes that varied in their motivation (control, religious, secular)

and outcome (positive, neutral). All manipulations were between subjects. So, for example, a given participant might read two vignettes depicting religiously motivated neutral acts or two vignettes depicting secularly motivated positive acts (see Figure 2 for full stimuli). Participants rated how moral or immoral they found the actions depicted in each vignette on a scale from  $-4$  (*very immoral*) to  $4$  (*very moral*). I created a composite dependent variable of morality by averaging participants' morality ratings to the two vignettes ( $r = .47, p < .001$ ). After rating the two vignettes, participants completed measures of basic demographics and religious affiliation.

## Results and Discussion

Religious affiliation (comparing atheists, agnostics, and "nones" with those of all other affiliations) did not moderate any reported effects (affiliation interaction *p* values ranged from .14–.80, and main effects of motivation held up controlling for religiosity), so I collapsed across religion for subsequent analyses. A 3 (motivation: control, religious, secular)  $\times$  2 (outcome: positive, neutral) analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed the predicted main effect of motivation,  $F(2, 328) = 7.85, p = .0004, \eta^2_G = .05$  (see Figure 1B), as well as the unsurprising main effect of outcome valence,  $F(1, 328) = 710.78, p < .00001, \eta^2_G = .68$ . There was no significant motivation by outcome interaction,  $F(2, 328) = 0.29, p = .75, \eta^2_G = .002$ .

To clarify the main effect of motivation, I first compared the control condition and the religious motivation condition using a regression model predicting perceived morality scores from experimental condition (religious = 1, control = 0) and outcome valence (merely included to control for the substantial main effect of valence). Relative to the control condition, religious motivation significantly reduced perceived morality,  $\beta = -.52, p = .0003$ . Identical analyses on all other pairwise contrasts revealed that religious motivation also reduced perceived morality, relative to secular motivation,  $\beta = -.33, p = .02$ , but the control and secular conditions did not significantly differ,  $\beta = -.19, p = .13$ . See Table 2 for descriptive statistics.

Participants rated actions as significantly less moral if an actor performed them because it was important to his or her religious beliefs. This effect did not generalize to actions performed because they were important to secular beliefs. In sum, religious motivation reduced the perceived morality of actions. It is interesting that this effect did not vary depending on whether the action was positive or neutral in its outcome. However, because the primary focus of this article is on perceptions of good deeds, Experiments 3–6 omitted the neutral actions.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, I use multiple such composite variables. In all cases, I also tried an alternative analytic approach where instead of using composites, I tested the same hypotheses in a mixed factorial design treating the two ratings as a within-subject variable. This approach, in all cases, yielded the same conclusions.

<sup>2</sup> All statistical analyses were conducted using the R programming language and environment (R Development Core Team, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> In a pilot study, participants ( $N = 186$ ) rated the degree to which they found different types of beliefs either individually idiosyncratic or communally shared in nature. Participants rated a secular worldview as significantly less communal than they rated religious beliefs, paired  $t(185) = 2.68, p = .008$ .

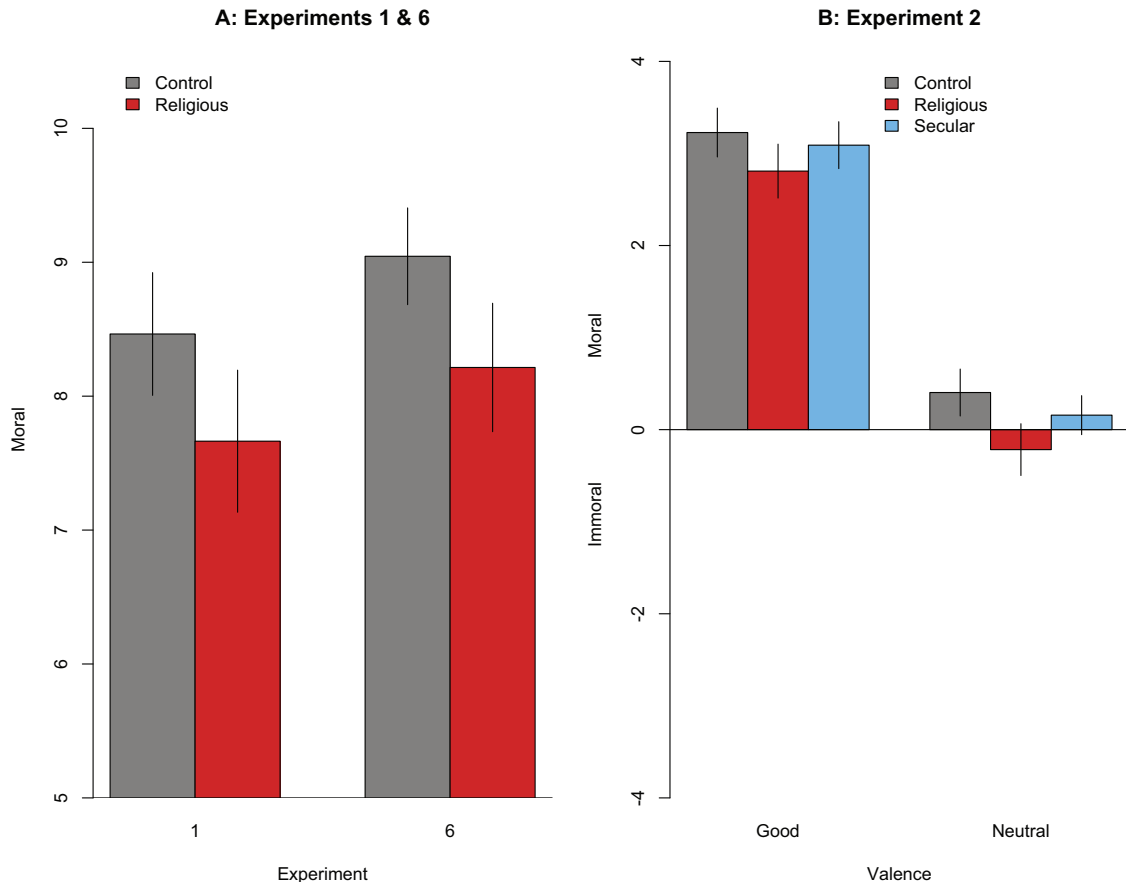


Figure 1. Religious motivation reduces the perceived morality of good deeds. A: Experiments 1 and 6. B: Experiment 2. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Actual response options ranged from 0 to 10 in Experiments 1 and 6. Figure appears in color online.

### Experiment 3

Experiments 1–2 revealed that religious motivations reduced the perceived morality of both good deeds and neutral acts. In Experiment 2, I explored underlying mechanisms by testing whether religious motivation (a) changes the degree to which altruism is viewed as an intended goal or a side effect and (b) reduces the perception of a person’s responsibility for his actions, relative to the same act performed either for perceived secular motivations or when no motivation was explicitly provided. In addition, Experiment 3 introduced a manipulation of motivation more subtle than that used in Experiments 1–2.

### Method

**Participants.** To obtain at least 50 participants per cell, I recruited a sample of 168 American adults from Amazon Mechanical Turk. No participants failed an instrumental manipulation check (Oppenheimer et al., 2009).

**Procedure.** Participants were randomly assigned to read a vignette depicting a good deed. Between subjects, I varied the motivation provided for the action (control, religious, secular; see Figure 2). In Experiments 1–2, the motivation manipulation was rather overt, directly telling participants that the action was per-

formed because it was important to the protagonists’ beliefs. In Experiment 3, motivation was manipulated more subtly by merely indicating that the protagonist (Brad) in each vignette stopped a moment to think before engaging in the act. Brad either simply thought (control), thought about his religious beliefs (religious), or thought about his secular worldview (secular) before performing the good deed.

After reading the vignette, participants answered three different questions about Brad’s intentions. First, participants were instructed to think about the difference between people’s intended goals and the side effects of their actions. Then they were asked the following question: “For Brad, was helping the homeless man Brad’s intent, or a side effect of some other motivation?” on a scale ranging from  $-3$  (*complete side effect*) to  $3$  (*complete intent*). Second, participants answered two questions about the degree to which Brad was responsible for his actions: (a) “To what degree was Brad personally responsible for his actions?” (b) “To what degree did Brad choose for himself how to act?” Both items used a rating scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*completely*). I created a composite dependent variable of responsibility by averaging participants’ ratings of responsibility and choice ( $r = .64, p < .001$ ). Finally, participants completed measures of basic demographics and religious affiliation.

Table 1  
Participant Demographics Across Experiments 2–6

Variable	Experiment					Total
	2	3	4	5	6	
Age (years)						
<i>M</i>	30.85	32.33	32.33	32.90	30.79	31.73
<i>SD</i>	10.79	11.07	10.93	11.40	10.64	10.98
Politics						
<i>M</i>	3.15	3.34	3.19	2.94	3.12	3.15
<i>SD</i>	1.56	1.67	1.63	1.58	1.52	1.59
Socioeconomic status						
<i>M</i>	5.99	5.84	6.07	6.33	6.01	6.04
<i>SD</i>	1.66	1.86	1.53	1.60	1.61	1.66
Gender (%)						
Female	47.9	39.9	48.2	43.1	39.3	44.6
Male	52.1	60.1	51.8	56.9	60.7	55.4
Ethnicity (%)						
White	77.7	80.4	76.0	82.8	74.1	78.4
Hispanic	5.2	3.0	12.0	3.9	6.3	5.9
Black	4.3	3.6	3.0	5.0	5.4	4.2
American Indian	0.3	0.6	1.8	0	0.9	0.6
Asian	9.8	8.3	6.0	5.6	8.9	8.0
Mixed or other	2.7	4.2	1.2	2.7	4.5	2.9
Religion (%)						
Catholic	14.4	15.2	17.9	13.9	14.4	15.0
Baptist	6.1	6.7	12.5	5.6	9.0	7.6
Other Protestant	18.3	18.2	13.1	17.8	20.7	17.6
Buddhist	3.4	2.4	2.4	1.7	2.7	2.6
Muslim	0.3	0	0	1.1	0.9	0.4
Jewish	1.2	0.6	3.0	1.7	2.7	1.7
None	10.4	11.5	4.8	8.3	14.4	9.7
Atheist	27.5	21.2	26.8	20.6	12.6	23.2
Agnostic	15.6	20.0	16.1	24.4	18.9	18.5
Other	2.8	4.2	3.6	5.0	3.6	3.7

Note. Politics were assessed on a scale from 1 (*very liberal*) to 7 (*very conservative*). Subjective socioeconomic status was assessed using a ladder technique (e.g., Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000), from 0 (*lowest*) to 10 (*highest*).

## Results and Discussion

Religious affiliation (comparing atheists, agnostics, and “nones” with those of all other affiliations) did not moderate any reported effects (affiliation interaction  $p$  values ranged from .1 to  $-.45$ , and main effects of motivation held up controlling for religiosity), so I collapsed across religion for subsequent analyses. A one-way ANOVA revealed that perceptions of intent and side effect significantly differed across the three motivation conditions,  $F(2, 165) = 6.99, p = .001, \eta^2 = .08$  (see Figure 3A). To clarify this effect, I ran separate pairwise  $t$  tests comparing the three conditions. Religious motivation reduced the degree to which helping the homeless man was viewed as intentional rather than a side effect, relative to both the control and the secular motivation conditions (albeit marginally),  $t(101.42) = 3.84, p = .0002, d = 0.75$ , and  $t(113) = 1.89, p = .06, d = 0.35$ , respectively.<sup>4</sup> The secular condition was viewed as marginally less intentional than the control condition,  $t(113) = 1.95, p = .053, d = 0.36$ . Finally, I evaluated whether participants viewed helping the homeless man in each condition as more of an intentional goal or a side effect. Because the zero point of the intentionality–side effect scale reflects participants feeling that an action was equally an intentional goal and a side effect, I performed separate one-sample  $t$  tests (test

value = 0) within each condition. Participants felt that helping the homeless man was significantly more intentional than a side effect in the control and secular motivation conditions but not in the religious motivation condition,  $t(52) = 7.75, p < .00001$ ;  $t(61) = 4.48, p = .00003$ ; and  $t(52) = 1.56, p = .12$ , respectively.

Next, I performed identical analyses on perceptions of responsibility, which significantly differed across the three motivation conditions,  $F(2, 165) = 5.85, p = .003, \eta^2 = .07$  (see Figure 3B). Religious motivation reduced the degree to which the protagonist was viewed as responsible for helping the homeless man, relative to both the control and the secular motivation conditions,  $t(98.29) = 2.90, p = .004, d = 0.56$ , and  $t(91.45) = 2.67, p = .009, d = 0.50$ , respectively. Responsibility did not differ between the control and secular motivation conditions,  $t(113) = 0.49, p = .62, d = 0.09$ .

Experiment 3 presented a vignette in which a man paused to think before offering a homeless person aid. If the man thought about his religious beliefs, participants viewed his benevolent actions as less of an intended goal and viewed him as less responsible for his good deeds compared with if he simply thought or thought about his secular worldview. Indeed, good deeds performed after contemplating religion were viewed equally as intentional goals and side effects, whereas helping behaviors in other experimental conditions were strongly viewed as intentional goals.

## Experiment 4

Experiment 3 revealed that religious motivations reduced the degree to which religiously motivated actors are viewed as responsible for their good deeds. In Experiment 4, I attempted to test one possible explanation for this effect. Namely, it was not the case that participants perceived actors with any provided motivation as less responsible, because religiously motivated good deeds significantly differed from secularly motivated good deeds in perceived responsibility. This may have resulted from differing perceptions of the orientation of religious and secular motivations, respectively. When intrinsically motivated, people perform an act for its own sake; when extrinsically motivated, people perform an act to achieve some other end (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000). Participants may have perceived religious motivation as an extrinsic motivation but secular motivations as more intrinsic, leading to different perceptions of intention and responsibility. Experiment 4 thus included both an exact replication of the responsibility effect from Experiment 3 and also a measure of the degree to which participants viewed each motivation as intrinsic or extrinsic in nature.

## Method

**Participants.** To obtain at least 50 participants per cell, I recruited a sample of 171 American adults from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Three participants failed an instrumental manipulation check (Oppenheimer et al., 2009) and were excluded from subsequent analyses, yielding a final sample size of 168.

<sup>4</sup> Noninteger degrees of freedom reflect analyses correcting for unequal variance across conditions.

Study	Vignette	Motivation [M]	Outcome [O]
2	<b>Russell:</b> Russell is on his way home from work one day. He sees a homeless man begging for money for food. [M] [O]	<b>Control:</b>	<b>Positive Russell:</b> Russell takes the homeless man to a café and buys him a sandwich and a bowl of soup.
		<b>Religious:</b> Because it is important to [his/her] religious worldview,	<b>Neutral Russell:</b> Russell simply walks past the homeless man.
	<b>Lesley:</b> [M] Lesley decides to write an opinion piece for the local newspaper. [O]	<b>Secular:</b> Because it is important to [his/her] secular worldview,	<b>Positive Lesley:</b> she argues that humans are not superior to animals and people need to treat animals with more compassion. She also spends a day volunteering at a local animal shelter.
			<b>Neutral Lesley:</b> she writes about different dress codes around the world.
3-4	<b>Brad:</b> Brad is on his way home from work one day. He sees a homeless man begging for money for food. Brad pauses and takes a minute to think [M] [O]	<b>Control:</b>	then takes the homeless man to a café and buys him a sandwich and a bowl of soup.
		<b>Religious:</b> about his personal religious beliefs,	
		<b>Secular:</b> about his personal secular worldview,	
6	<b>Russell:</b> Russell is on his way home from work one day. He sees a homeless man begging for money for food. [M] [O]	<b>Control:</b>	Russell takes the homeless man to a café and buys him a sandwich and a bowl of soup.
		<b>Religious:</b> Because it is important to his religious worldview,	

Figure 2. Summary of vignettes used across experiments.

**Procedure.** The procedure in Experiment 4 was identical to that used in Experiment 3, with a few minor changes. Before reading the vignette, participants read an explanation of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (they were termed *internal* and *external* motivations, for ease of participant comprehension). Then, for practice applying these terms, participants rated the degree to which six different motivations were either internally or externally oriented, from 1 (*fully internal*) to 7 (*fully external*). Following this training, participants read one of three versions (manipulated between subjects) of the Brad vignette used in Experiment 2. Finally, participants completed three measures. As with the training trials, participants rated Brad's motivation on a scale from 1 (*fully internal*) to 7 (*fully external*). Then they completed the same two responsibility measures used in Experiment 2. The two were averaged ( $r = .57, p < .001$ ) to again form a composite responsibility index. Finally, participants completed measures of basic demographics and religious affiliation.

## Results and Discussion

Religious affiliation (comparing atheists, agnostics, and "nones" with those of all other affiliations) did not moderate any reported effects (affiliation interaction  $p$  values ranged from .53 to .74, and main effects of motivation held up controlling for religiosity), so I collapsed across religion for subsequent analyses. A one-way ANOVA revealed that perceptions of responsibility significantly differed across the three motivation conditions,  $F(2, 165) = 4.75, p = .01, \eta^2_G = .05$  (see Figure 3B). To clarify this effect, I ran separate pairwise  $t$  tests comparing the three conditions. Replicating Experiment 3, religious motivation reduced the degree to which the protagonist was viewed as responsible for helping the homeless man, relative to both the control and the secular motivation conditions,  $t(105.359) = 1.95, p = .054, d = 0.37$ , and  $t(95.44) = 3.03, p = .003, d = 0.58$ , respectively. Responsibility

did not differ between the control and secular motivation conditions,  $t(113) = 0.98, p = .33, d = 0.18$ .

Were these differences explained by perceptions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation orientation? A one-way ANOVA revealed that perceptions of motivation orientation did not significantly differ across the three motivation conditions,  $F(2, 163) = 0.86, p = .42, \eta^2_G = .01$ . Notably, the difference in perceived responsibility between the religious and secular motivation conditions was not explained by perceived motivation orientation, as these two conditions did not significantly differ in this regard,  $t(109) = 1.25, p = .21, d = 0.24$ . In sum, motivation orientation is typically seen as integral to moral judgments. Good deeds tend to be seen as moral only inasmuch as they are driven by a genuine desire to help others rather than driven by some other self-interested motive (e.g., Baumann et al., 1981). Presumably, if the protagonist was described as acting specifically because of his religious (or secular) motivations as in Experiments 1–2, this may have influenced perceptions of motivation orientation. However, the manipulation used in Experiments 3–4—merely introducing a protagonist thinking about different beliefs before acting—did not have any apparent effect on perceived motivation orientation, relative to baseline. Thus, motivation orientation, although a factor that influences moral judgment, appears insufficient to explain the present effects.

In sum, Experiment 4 exactly replicated the finding that religiously motivated actors are perceived as less responsible for their good deeds. As in Experiment 3, this is apparent even when motivation was manipulated quite subtly. This did not happen simply because the religious motivation condition gave participants some information about motivation, as perceived responsibility differed between secular and religious motivations. The difference in these two conditions, in turn, was not explained by differing perceptions of motivation orientation between secular and religious motivations. This suggests that the effects of religious motivation on perceived responsibility are not applicable to

Table 2  
*Summary of Descriptive Statistics Across Experiments*

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Experiment 1			
Religious	59	7.66	2.06
Control	56	8.46	1.75
Experiment 2			
Good			
Religious	60	2.81	1.16
Control	55	3.23	1.00
Secular	50	3.09	0.92
Neutral			
Religious	53	-0.22	1.04
Control	62	0.40	1.02
Secular	54	0.16	0.79
Experiment 3			
Intention–side effect			
Religious	53	0.40	1.85
Control	53	1.68	1.58
Secular	62	1.05	1.84
Responsibility			
Religious	53	8.04	2.05
Control	53	9.08	1.61
Secular	62	8.94	1.45
Experiment 4			
Extrinsic motivation			
Religious	53	2.81	1.88
Control	55	2.62	1.51
Secular	58	2.40	1.60
Responsibility			
Religious	53	8.66	1.51
Control	57	9.20	1.39
Secular	58	9.43	1.12
Experiment 5			
Religious	63	8.86	1.73
Control	61	9.39	1.08
Secular	57	9.49	.92
Experiment 6			
Responsibility			
Religious	56	8.16	2.09
Control	56	9.39	1.37
Morality			
Religious	56	8.21	1.83
Control	56	9.04	1.38

all motivations seen as similarly oriented in an intrinsic–extrinsic dimension.

### Experiment 5

Experiments 3–4 found that religious motivations reduce the degree to which actors are seen as responsible for their good deeds, an effect not apparently driven by different perceptions of motivation orientation. In Experiment 5, I sought to test another possible explanation for these results. Namely, all stimuli used thus far in this article imply that religiously motivated people act out of an explicit religious drive. In all experiments, the religiously motivated actor sees someone in need and then needs to stop to think about religion before administering aid.<sup>5</sup> Even if, across experiments, participants still viewed religion as a likely source of morality, it is possible that they judge a character who needs religious motivation to help others as less moral than someone who just instinctively and intuitively helps (e.g., Williams, 1981).

To address this possibility, I designed Experiment 5 so that the source of the character’s religious motivation was divorced from the immediate moment’s helping decision to test whether someone with a religious upbringing who nonetheless helps others intuitively—without needing to pause to think about religion—would still be perceived as less moral than a protagonist who is not portrayed as having religious origins for morality. To do so, Experiment 5 described, across conditions, a character seeing someone in need and then quickly (without sparing a thought) and intuitively helping. The crucial manipulation instead focused on a description of the protagonist’s religious (vs. secular vs. no information given) upbringing. Thus, Experiment 5 tested whether even implicit—rather than explicit—religious motivations still reduce attributions of responsibility for good deeds.

### Method

**Participants.** To obtain at least 50 participants per cell, I recruited a sample of 183 American adults from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Two participants were omitted for failing to follow instructions on an instrumental manipulation check (Oppenheimer et al., 2009), yielding a sample of 181 participants.

**Procedure.** As in previous experiments, participants read a vignette about a character buying food for a homeless man. In contrast to previous experiments, however, in all experimental conditions, the vignette stressed that the protagonist helped on instinct:

Russell is on his way home from work one day. He sees a homeless man begging for money for food. Without even stopping to think, Russell takes him to a café and buys him a sandwich and a bowl of soup.

Prior to this part of the vignette, however, the religious and secular motivation conditions included more information about the character’s background:

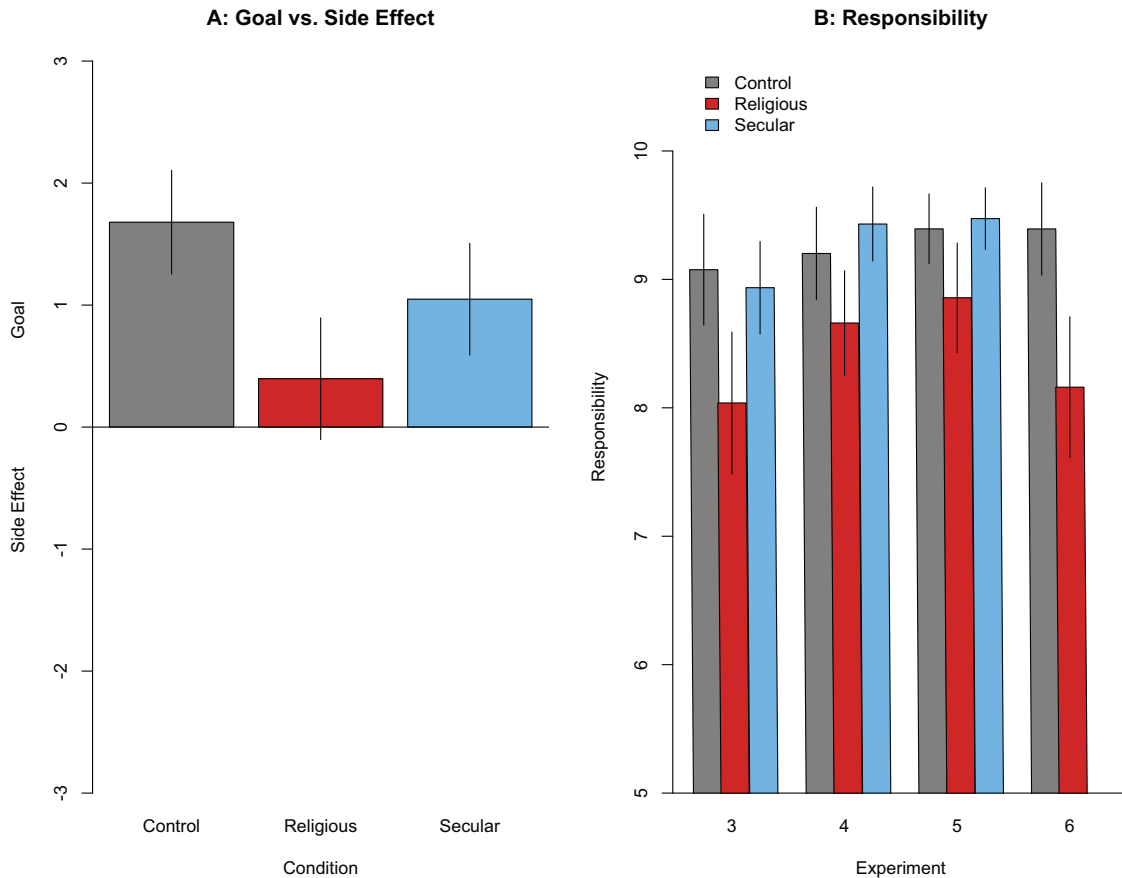
Russell was raised in a [religious/secular (nonreligious)] family, as part of a [religious/secular] community. He really adopted a [religious/secular] worldview, and found it to be a useful guide in his life. He especially appreciated [religious/secular] teachings that emphasized the need for people to be good to each other.

Thus, Experiment 5 still included a control versus religious versus secular between-subjects manipulation, but it also made it clear to participants that the act of helping was committed intuitively, without consideration of religious or secular beliefs. After reading one of the three versions of the vignette, participants completed the same two responsibility measures used in Experiments 3–4. The two were averaged ( $r = .55, p < .001$ ) to again form a composite responsibility index. Finally, participants completed measures of basic demographics and religious affiliation.

### Results and Discussion

Religious affiliation (comparing atheists, agnostics, and “nones” with those of all other affiliations) did not moderate any reported effects (affiliation interaction  $p = .19$ , and main effects of moti-

<sup>5</sup> Of course, this objection applies equally to protagonists in the secular motivation conditions.



*Figure 3.* Religious motivation reduces (A) the perception of good deeds as intended goals (Experiment 3) and (B) the protagonist's perceived responsibility for good deeds (Experiments 3–6). Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Actual response options in Experiments 3–6 ranged from 0–10. Figure appears in color online.

vation held up controlling for religiosity), so I collapsed across religion for subsequent analyses. A one-way ANOVA revealed that perceptions of responsibility significantly differed across the three motivation conditions,  $F(2, 178) = 4.03, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .04$  (see Figure 3B). To clarify this effect, I ran separate pairwise  $t$  tests comparing the three conditions. Replicating Experiments 3–4, religious motivation reduced the degree to which the protagonist was viewed as responsible for helping the homeless man, relative to both the control and the secular motivation conditions,  $t(104.77) = 2.08, p = .04, d = 0.37$ , and  $t(96.62) = 2.46, p = .02, d = 0.45$ , respectively. Responsibility did not differ between the control and secular motivation conditions,  $t(116) = 0.43, p = .67, d = 0.08$ .

Closely replicating the results of Experiments 3–4, Experiment 5 revealed again that religiously motivated actors are seen as less responsible for their good deeds than are actors performing the identical good deeds for other reasons. Crucially, however, Experiment 5 found that the effects even occurred when the motivations of the actor were made implicit. This implies that even if an individual deeply internalizes his or her religious norms—to the point that he or she acts on them without even pausing to think—the actor is still seen as slightly less responsible for the good deed.

## Experiment 6

Experiments 1–2 revealed that religious motivations reduce the perceived morality of actions. Experiments 3–5 suggested a possible mechanism, as religious motivations also decreased perceptions of agents' responsibility for good deeds. Experiment 6 combined these two sets of findings and tested whether the effect of religious motivation on perceived morality is mediated by a reduction in perceived responsibility.

## Method

**Participants.** To obtain at least 50 participants per cell, I recruited a sample of 114 American adults from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Two participants were omitted for failing to follow instructions on an instrumental manipulation check (Oppenheimer et al., 2009), yielding a sample of 112 participants.

**Procedure.** Participants read a vignette depicting a character, Russell, perform a good deed. Across participants, I manipulated whether Russell was religiously motivated to perform the good deed, omitting the secular condition used in previous experiments (see Figure 2). After reading the vignette, participants answered the same two responsibility questions used in Experiments 3–5,



followed by two questions assessing perceived morality (“To what degree is Russell acting morally?” “To what degree does Russell deserve praise?”), using the same rating scale (ranging from 0–10). As in Experiments 3–5, I averaged two items to create a composite variable of responsibility ( $r = .76, p < .001$ ). In addition, I averaged the moral and praise items to create a composite variable of morality ( $r = .45, p < .001$ ). Finally, participants completed measures of basic demographics and religious affiliation.

## Results and Discussion

Religious affiliation (comparing atheists, agnostics, and “nones” with those of all other affiliations) did not moderate any reported effects (affiliation interaction  $p$  values ranged from .57 to .83, and main effects of motivation held up controlling for religiosity), so I collapsed across religion for subsequent analyses. First, I tested whether Experiment 6 replicated both the morality effect from Experiments 1–2 and the responsibility effect from Experiments 3–5. Indeed, religious motivation reduced the perceived responsibility for and morality of a good deed,  $t(94.97) = 3.68, p = .0003, d = 0.70$  (see Figure 1A), and  $t(102.212) = 2.71, p = .008, d = 0.51$  (see Figure 3B), respectively. Next, I tested whether responsibility mediated the effect of religious motivation on morality (see Figure 4). Consistent with this hypothesis, in a regression model with experimental condition (control = 0, religious = 1) and responsibility predicting judgments of morality (both standardized), responsibility significantly predicted morality,  $\beta = .55, p < .000001$ , but experimental condition did not,  $b = -0.13, p = .42$ . Bootstrapping (10,000 samples) revealed a significant indirect effect whereby religious motivation reduced perceived responsibility for good deeds and, therefore, the perceived morality of those deeds, indirect effect  $b = -0.36, 95\%$  confidence interval  $[-.56, -.18]$ .

Experiment 6 replicated the effects observed in Experiments 1–5. In addition, perceptions of responsibility fully and significantly mediated the relationship between religious motivation and reduced morality of good deeds. This suggests that religious motivations reduce the perceived morality of good deeds by reducing observers’ attributions of responsibility to individuals who perform good deeds for religious reasons.

## General Discussion

Many people view religion as a unique source of morality, yet people perceive good deeds as less moral if they are motivated by religious beliefs (Experiments 1–2 and 6). Attributions of intended goals and responsibility play a key role: Although good deeds were typically viewed more as intended goals than as side effects, this was not the case for the same good deeds performed after a protagonist contemplated his religious beliefs (Experiment 3). In addition, agents were seen as less responsible for their good deeds when motivated by religion (Experiments 3–6), a difference that fully mediated the effect of religious motivation on perceived morality (Experiment 6). The effects of religious motivation on perceived responsibility were not attributable to differing perceptions of motivation orientation (Experiment 4). Further, the effects of religious motivation on perceived responsibility persisted even when the religious motivation was implicit and intuitive (Experiment 5). Combined, these experiments provide an initial, yet consistent, exploration of people’s perceptions of the morality of religiously motivated actions.

It is interesting that the negative effect of religious motivation on perceived morality was not moderated by participant religion (Experiments 2–6). That is, atheists and believers alike viewed religiously motivated benevolence as less moral. Future large-scale studies could productively explore the possibility that religious belief or affiliation could moderate moral perceptions of religiously motivated good deeds in other samples. In addition, the present experiments all relied on participants from Mechanical Turk. Although Mechanical Turk samples are increasingly common in social scientific research and tend to be both more diverse and more representative of the general population than student samples are (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011), it would be well worth investigating the present findings in diverse international and cross-cultural settings.

Beyond cultural and religious differences, future research could also pursue other possible moderators. On the one hand, manipulations that emphasize the putatively intuitive nature of morality (e.g., Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007; Hamlin, Wynn, Bloom, & Mahajan, 2011) might eliminate the effect of religious motivation on perceived morality. After all, if moral instincts are seen as reliably developing human universals that are not dependent on religious input, then religious motivation might have less effect on

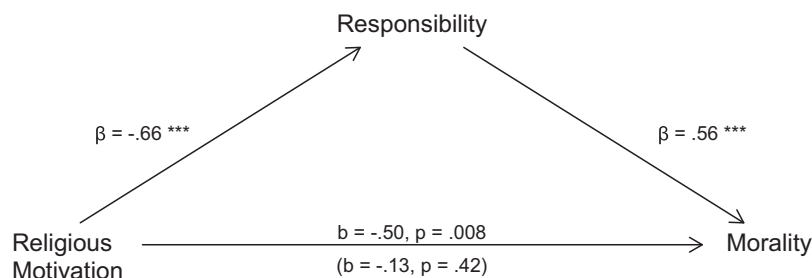


Figure 4. Perceived responsibility fully and significantly mediates the relationship between religious motivation and perceived morality. Motivation coded (religious = 1, control = 0), all other variables are standardized. Values in parentheses reflect the nonsignificant direct effect of motivation on morality, controlling for responsibility, in Experiment 4.

perceived morality. On the other hand, because considerations of intended goals and responsibility were key to perceived morality, changing views of the intuitive nature of moral judgment might have little or no effect. In addition, future research could test the degree to which religious motivations affect the perceived morality of a wider range of good deeds, as well as testing whether religious motivations affect perceptions of responsibility, blame, and immorality of bad deeds.

### Religious and Secular Motivations

Across studies, participants consistently judged secularly motivated good deeds as more moral than religiously motivated good deeds. Although this contrast was not a central focus of the present article, future researchers can consider a number of alternative and complementary explanations for this finding. Although I used secular worldviews in these experiments as an alternative motivation not derived from a communal set of beliefs and obligations, other differences may also contribute. I offer two suggestions for future research in this domain.

First, people may perceive prosocial intentions as inherent to religious but not secular worldviews. In this view, someone may be perceived as performing a good deed because of a religious worldview but in spite of a secular worldview. Consistent with this approach, people intuitively view immorality as representative of atheists (Gervais, *in press*). Perhaps people simply expect good deeds from religious actors (and thus do not award the religious actors any moral bonus points for their good deeds) but are actually surprised to see someone behaving well without religious motivations.

Second, although both religious beliefs and secular institutions can similarly serve as sources of control in the world (e.g., Kay, Moscovitch, & Laurin, 2010; Kay, Shepherd, Blatz, Chua, & Galinsky, 2010) religious beliefs—but not secular beliefs—center on intentional agents (e.g., gods) who can be targets for social interaction (e.g., Gervais, 2013b). Perhaps religious motivation is viewed as someone performing a good deed to curry favor with his or her god (or coreligionists) rather than as someone performing a good deed primarily to help others. This view would be consistent with previous research arguing that good deeds that bring good outcomes to the hero might not even be productively considered true examples of altruism (e.g., Batson & Shaw, 1991; Baumann et al., 1981). Partially (and speculatively) speaking against this possibility, however, participants did not evaluate religiously motivated good deeds as more extrinsically motivated than secularly motivated good deeds (Experiment 4).

These two possibilities are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive, and future researchers should directly tackle the question of why religious motivations seem less moral than secular motivations. Unfortunately, such a comprehensive analysis of this question is beyond the scope of the present article, which focused specifically on moral perceptions of religiously motivated actions.

### Religious Morality, Trust, and Minds

Given the perception of an intimate relationship between religion and morality, it is somewhat surprising that religious motivations reduced perceived morality. This pattern of results suggests an interesting and initially puzzling dynamic. Religious

belief in others promotes trust (e.g., Tan & Vogel, 2008), and atheists are acutely distrusted (Gervais et al., 2011) in the absence of institutions that keep people honest (Gervais, 2013a; Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012; Norenzayan & Gervais, 2013). If religious motivations reduce the perceived morality of good deeds, why are religious people preferentially trusted? Experiments 3–6 suggest one possible solution, as attributions of intentionality and responsibility were instrumental to judgments of morality. In the domain of trust, it may matter little whether another individual reciprocates because he is intrinsically moral or because he is simply adhering to his religion's prosocial norms and obligations; predictability could be more important than motive in promoting trust. Religious motivations reduce perceived intentionality and morality but evidently do not tarnish perceived trustworthiness.

The finding that religious motivations reduce perceived intentionality and responsibility may also suggest an intriguing possibility regarding the perception of religious believers' minds. People perceive different minds in the world along two dimensions: agency and experience (H. M. Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007). These different dimensions map neatly onto moral typecasts, in which people tend to classify the social world as consisting of moral agents—those who act on the world in morally relevant ways—and moral patients—those who are on the receiving end of morally relevant acts (K. Gray & Wegner, 2009). When agency is emphasized, actors are seen as less able to experience moral patiency and vice versa. Because religious motivations reduced perceptions of an agent's responsibility for good deeds (an element of agency), it is possible that they would lead religiously motivated actors to be viewed as moral patients, more vulnerable to having moral and immoral acts inflicted on them. People may view God as an ultimate moral agent (e.g., K. Gray & Wegner, 2010) who is the one responsible for religiously motivated good deeds, whereas the humans who perform those good deeds are mere patients.

### Coda

In conclusion, many people view religion as a (if not the) source of morality. Yet, paradoxically, people who perform good deeds for religious reasons are seen as less moral than others who perform the very same actions for other reasons. These findings help further basic research into the perceived nature of morality and also represent a potentially important application of research on attributions of intentionality and morality to a deeply affecting real-world phenomenon: religious belief. These findings suggest that religion can affect attributions of responsibility for actions and may have important implications for overall perceptions of people who use gods to further good.

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