

Even if you don't believe in God, religion may shape your subconscious thinking

Sick of tinsel, carols and talk of virgin birth?

In New Zealand, Australia and many other countries, it's hard to escape Christmas in December.

But even if you don't believe in Christ or a God, religion can still be a powerful force. Research shows that even nonreligious people may hold unconscious beliefs linked to religion that can affect their psychology.

By many measures, religion in [Australia](#), [New Zealand](#) and the [USA](#) is declining – but [Christianity still shapes the culture and politics of these societies](#), from the holidays celebrated to values officially endorsed.

It's not that surprising that religious symbols and traditions remain in secularised societies. What is surprising is how religious beliefs may remain in and affect the minds of secular people.

Subconscious responses to God

A study in [Finland](#) explored how religious and non-religious people responded to the idea of God.

The researchers used electrodes to measure how much sweat people produced while reading statements like “I dare God to make my parents drown” or “I dare God to make me die of cancer”. Unexpectedly, when nonbelievers read the statements, they produced as much sweat as believers — suggesting they
ices of their dares.



And that's not simply because nonbelievers didn't want to wish

harm on others. A [companion study](#) showed that similar dares that did not involve God (such as, “I wish my parents would drown”) did not produce comparable increases in sweat levels. Together, then, these findings suggest that despite denying that God exists, nonbelievers behaved as though God did exist.

Does this mean that nonbelievers are lying when they say they reject God? Not exactly. Rather, these contradictory behaviours probably arise in part due to living in a theistic culture that hammers home the idea that God exists. Perhaps this leads nonbelievers to form “implicit” attitudes that are at odds with their “explicit” ones.

Explicit and implicit attitudes

Explicit attitudes are those people can call to mind consciously and can report when asked: for example “carrots are good for me” or “God does not exist”.

By contrast, people have little or no awareness of their implicit attitudes — the learned associations between ideas in their minds, such as how easily the concept “carrot” brings to mind another concept like “bland,” or how easily the word “God” brings to mind “existence”.

As these examples illustrate, implicit and explicit attitudes can clash. It’s possible for a person to say they “love carrots” while unconsciously bringing negative associations to mind about them. Or, to say “God does not exist” while unconsciously bringing to mind ideas of God’s existence.

In this way, it makes sense for nonbelievers to get nervous at the thought of daring God to do harm.

How attitudes shape health

The idea that mismatches between explicit and implicit attitudes can create conflict is consistent with the theory of [cognitive dissonance](#).

[Studies](#) exploring this psychological phenomenon [found that](#) conflict between your behaviour (for example, meeting parental expectations of being a submissive daughter) and your own perception of who you are (for example, being an independent woman) [was associated with](#) relatively high scores on measures of neuroticism and depression, and low scores on measures of self-esteem, compared to people whose behaviours and self-perceptions better align.

Likewise, people whose implicit and explicit attitudes about their self-esteem are misaligned (those who report high self-esteem, but hold negative unconscious associations about the self, or vice versa) suffer negative outcomes. They are more likely to become [defensive in response to negative feedback](#), to suppress their [anger](#) and to [take days off of work](#) for health reasons.

Might cognitive dissonance also be at play in the context of religion?

Religion and health

Cognitive dissonance, and the degree of alignment of implicit and explicit beliefs might help us understand relationships between religion and health. Indeed, positive outcomes of religious belief could help explain why implicit beliefs persist in nonbelievers.

A [study of over 400 white American men](#) showed that those who attended church had lower blood pressure, and a separate study found having a religious affiliation is [associated with](#) a greater sense of well-being. Tweets [posted by Christians](#) have been interpreted to reflect greater happiness and social connectivity than those from atheists, and believers in God are [reported to be](#) less anxious about their

eventual death, and more certain about the meaning of their existence.

But things aren't so simple when religious belief is less robust. People with moderate religious beliefs [report lower well-being](#) than those with very strong or very weak beliefs. Many factors will be at work here, but one to consider is that moderate believers are more likely to hold conflicting implicit and explicit beliefs.

This might be particularly true if that group includes people who developed strong links between God and concepts of existence during their religious upbringing, but who have [begun explicitly doubting those ideas](#).

If you are a nonbeliever then, you may have lingering beliefs in God that put you at risk of, at best, amusing self-contradictions, and at worst, poorer well-being.

At this point, you're probably wondering what you can do to reduce that risk. Unfortunately we can't offer much advice until more is understood about the links between religious beliefs and well-being.

For now, it is safe to assume that if you are a staunch (explicit) nonbeliever, then putting yourself in situations that reinforce your implicit religious beliefs (by, for example, attending church services at Christmas) may exacerbate your internal conflict.

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A version of this article was originally published on the Conversation's website as "[Religion may alter your psychology, even if you're a non-believer](#)" and has been republished here with permission.