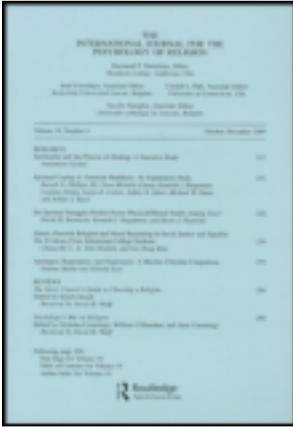


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### Differences in Attitudes Toward Outgroups in Religious and Nonreligious Contexts in a Multinational Sample: A Situational Context Priming Study

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## RESEARCH

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# Differences in Attitudes Toward Outgroups in Religious and Nonreligious Contexts in a Multinational Sample: A Situational Context Priming Study

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Researchers in the psychology of religion have begun utilizing priming methods to investigate the effects of the salience of religious concepts. These tightly controlled laboratory studies have demonstrated that priming religion may increase intergroup bias in both religious and nonreligious persons. The present study examined this possibility in a religiously and culturally diverse population using ecologically valid methods. Participants were recruited as they passed by either a religious or nonreligious structure in Western Europe. Participants in the religious context self-reported more negative attitudes toward non-Christian groups, more conservative political attitudes, and more personal religiousness and spirituality regardless of their personal belief in God. Results are discussed in terms of intergroup bias and salience of religious norms and stereotypes across cultures.

A sizable portion of the empirical work in the science of religiousness has focused on understanding the relationship between religiousness and prejudice. Early studies (e.g., Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Stanford, 1950) have been reviewed several times in the

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literature (see Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Hunsberger, 1995; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005) and focus on the positive relationships between various approaches to religiousness and increased prejudiced attitudes. Recent meta-analyses have further supported these findings. A recent analysis of 55 studies demonstrated that greater religiousness significantly predicted negative attitudes toward racial outgroups (Hall, Matz, & Wood, 2010). Further, a meta-analysis of 64 studies of religiousness and attitudes toward gay men and lesbian women demonstrated that nearly all measures of religiousness were negatively associated with attitudes toward homosexual persons (Whitley, 2009). Given that nearly every world religion contains some encouragement to include others and treat others as one wishes to be treated, these findings seem paradoxical.

This paradox could be partially explained by intergroup bias (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). Religious intergroup bias has been shown to take two forms: (a) *ingroup favoritism*, in which religious individuals show favor toward their own ingroup members (Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999), and (b) *outgroup derogation*, in which religious individuals show disfavor toward outgroup members (Harper, 2007). Religious intergroup bias exists among multiple religious groups, including non-Christians (Islam & Hewstone, 1993) and is suggested to underlie the *group* component of religion. The *group* component represents religion as a social identity or category and has goals associated with protecting and cooperating with the ingroup (Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010). Other traits that serve to protect the ingroup are associated with religiosity as well, such as traditionalism (Inglehart & Baker, 2000) and political conservatism (Roccas, 2005). In contrast to the *group* component, the *supernatural* component of religion represents the virtue or morality associated with religiosity (e.g., Biblical teachings). Whereas the supernatural component of religion promotes tolerance toward outgroups, the group component of religion promotes intolerance toward outgroups (Preston et al., 2010). This dualistic nature of religiosity may help explain the paradox of religiosity and attitudes toward others.

## PRIMING METHODS IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

The link between religion and intergroup bias extends to findings in priming research. For instance, when primed with religious concepts, individuals have shown increases in both racial prejudice (Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2010a; Preston & Ritter, 2011) and value-violating prejudice (e.g., gay men/lesbian women, Muslims, atheists; Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2010b). These increases in prejudice occur despite preexisting levels of religiosity (Johnson et al., 2010b). Further, McKay, Efferson, and Fehr (2009) found that activating religious concepts subliminally may increase the probability of altruistic punishment of in-group defectors. Altruistic punishment has been suggested as a mechanism for human cooperation (Bernhard, Fehr, & Fischbacher, 2006) and thus could indicate an increase in favoritism or protection of the ingroup when religiousness is activated. Further, Shariff (2009) demonstrated that religious concept activation resulted in allocation of more money to ingroup members than to outgroup members in an anonymous dictator task.

Johnson et al. (2010a) recently investigated negative attitudes toward African Americans as a possible outcome of activation of religious concepts. In a series of studies, participants completed a lexical decision task that subliminally presented Christian words (e.g., *Bible*,

*Jesus, heaven*) or neutral words (e.g., *shirt, butter, hammer*) as priming stimuli. Regardless of the preexisting religiousness of the participant, activation of religious concepts significantly increased both negative affect toward African Americans and covert prejudice toward African Americans. These findings indicate that the activation of religious concepts in a laboratory setting may increase both ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation.

### Ecological Validity of Priming

Rarely, however, are people confronted with carefully controlled subtle stimuli outside of a laboratory. The more specific and intricate priming methods become in the psychology of religion, the less likely they are to emulate activation that might occur spontaneously in everyday life. Nisbett (2003) suggested that everyday human life is full of constant contexts in which a variety of constructs might be activated depending on attention, salience, previous experience, and a multitude of other factors. Bargh (2006) discussed this as the reduction problem of priming methodology. Psychologists of religion, as well as almost any scientist pursuing priming methods in social psychology, are guilty of “running where we don’t know yet how to walk” and missing the possibility of examining how religious concept activation might function in daily life (Bargh, 2006, p. 148).

A handful of studies have indicated that subtle presentations of seemingly irrelevant stimuli in a broad context can function as an effective concept prime. For instance, the presence of briefcases rather than backpacks increased the likelihood of competitive behavior and attributions (Kay, Wheeler, Bargh, & Ross, 2004). Persons voting in a church were more likely to endorse conservative candidates and policies, and those primed with religion were less supportive of value-violating outgroup members (Rutchick, 2010). Persons who voted in a school were more likely to support school funding initiatives than persons voting in other buildings (Berger, Meredith, & Wheeler, 2008). Presenting a sports drink rather than a bottle of water resulted in the construal of challenge as positive and resulted in increased endurance on physical tasks (Friedman & Elliot, 2007). And supermarket shoppers were more likely to purchase French wine when French (rather than German) music played nearby (North, Hargreaves, & McKendrick, 1999).

### Priming Religion With Situational Context

A few studies have demonstrated the possibility of activating religious concepts using religious contexts. Participants in Belgium were more likely to help a homeless person rather than an immigrant when the person in need of help was presented outside a church rather than outside a civic building (Pichon & Saroglou, 2009). Given the reviewed research, it appears that the situational context prime may have been effective in influencing attitudes and behavior in the direction of religious norms and stereotype attitudes that a religious person may possess (Pichon, Bocatto, & Saroglou, 2007).

Similar methods have indicated that situational context primes may be effective in altering attitudes toward outgroups. The presentation of an African American face with an urban or blank background significantly increased the speed of categorizing negative African American stereotypes relative to the presentation of an African American face in a religious background (i.e., a church; Barden, Maddux, Petty, & Brewer, 2004; Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 2001).

One limitation of these studies is that they use images of religious contexts instead of more ecologically valid presentations of religious stimuli. Considering the complexity of the stimuli that might be encountered in everyday life, it is worth investigating the relationships between presence in a natural religious context and attitudes toward outgroups relevant to a particular culture, particularly in a sample outside the North American Protestant “box” (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009).

The primary goal of the present study was to examine the effects of religious or nonreligious contexts on self-reported attitudes toward various groups. Given research demonstrating that laboratory-based priming methods increase intergroup bias, it is reasonable to assume that the presence of a genuine religious context may effectively prime religious norms and thus ingroup defense even in a multinational, multicultural sample.

The following hypotheses are examined:

- H1: The presence or absence of a religious physical context will be associated with differences in self-reported religiousness. Constructs associated with religiousness (e.g., self-reported general religiousness and spirituality, political conservatism) will be significantly higher when tested in a religious context (i.e., a churchyard) than when tested in a nonreligious context (i.e., a town square).
- H2: Participant ratings of attitudes toward target outgroups will reflect increased negativity toward outgroups. Multicultural participants will self-report significantly stronger negative attitudes toward a variety of outgroups in a religious context than in a nonreligious context.

## METHODS

### Participants

Ninety-nine adults (48 men, 51 women;  $M$  age = 32 years,  $SD$  = 13) were recruited for this study as they were walking by either a religious or nonreligious landmark in Maastricht, the Netherlands, or London, England. Participants were diverse in both religious affiliation (39% no affiliation, 28% Catholic, 23% Protestant, 3% Muslim, 2% Jewish, 1% Buddhist, and 2% “other”) and nationality (28% Dutch; 12% American; 12% British; 5% German; 4% Belgian; 4% Canadian; 3% Italian; 2% each Indian, Polish, Irish, Spanish, and Australian; 1% each Hungarian, Romanian, Japanese, Chinese, Greek, New Zealander, Ethiopian, Brazilian, and Welsh). More than 94% of participants self-reported English language proficiency at “average” or higher.

### Measures and Procedures

*Context condition.* Pretesting for appropriate context locations in Maastricht, the Netherlands, was conducted to locate two sites that produced similar ratings of beauty, familiarity, and pedestrian traffic density, where one contained wholly religious architecture and the other contained civic buildings. Researchers selected only participants who were passing by the structures. At no time during data collection did any participant enter or leave either building.

Researchers randomly determined in which context data would be collected each day and then utilized a table of random numbers to approach the  $n$ th adult who passed by a particular location. Participants were asked (in English) if they were willing to complete a short survey (also in English) about their attitudes and opinions, and after agreeing were presented with an informed consent form detailing the procedure and their rights as a participant. When participants were approached, the researcher stood in a particular location to ensure the participants' visual field included the religious ( $n = 39$ ) or nonreligious ( $n = 60$ ) context. To examine possible influences of language barriers or local culture, some data were collected at religious (Westminster Abbey) and nonreligious (Parliament) sites in London, England ( $n = 19$ ). For each data collection session, the researchers collected information regarding the weather, temperature, and time of day.<sup>1</sup>

*Self-report measures.* After a participant agreed to participate, he or she was provided with a two-page survey. The survey first included items measuring several demographic variables (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, English language proficiency, religious affiliation), followed by several attitude thermometer items designed to measure general psychological warmth or coldness toward the following groups (0 = very cold; 10 = very warm): Africans, Asians, Europeans, Arabic persons, foreigners, rich, poor, Christians, Jews, Muslims, gay men, and lesbian women<sup>2</sup>; and finally items designed to assess self-reported religiousness, spirituality, belief in God, and religious importance measured through single-item measures (e.g., "To what extent do you consider yourself a RELIGIOUS person?" 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; "How important is religion to you?" 1 = *not at all important*, 7 = *extremely important*; "Do you believe in God?" *yes, no, uncertain*), and a single item measure of political conservatism/liberalism (1 = *extremely conservative*, 7 = *extremely liberal*).

## RESULTS

Self-reported belief in God did not differ between or across conditions. In the religious context condition, 54% of participants indicated they believed in God, whereas 46% indicated they did not believe in God or were uncertain. In the control condition, 42% indicated belief, whereas 58% did not believe or were uncertain,  $\chi^2 = 1.58$ , *ns*.

Self-reported religiousness and spirituality differed between groups. Scores on a single item measure of religiousness were higher in the religious ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) than the control condition ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ),  $F(1, 97) = 5.34$ ,  $p < .05$ . Scores on a single-item measure of spirituality were also higher in the religious ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) than the control condition ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ),  $F(1, 96) = 4.77$ ,  $p < .05$ .

There was a significant difference between context conditions for self-reported political conservatism/liberalism. Participants in a religious context expressed significantly more con-

<sup>1</sup>There were no significant differences between nationalities of participants, countries of collection, weather conditions, or times of day.

<sup>2</sup>Given the expected diversity of the sample, target groups were selected to represent attitudes toward a wide variety of groups unrelated to the religious context. Groups were selected to represent religious outgroups, religious value violating outgroups, racial outgroups, and social status outgroups.

TABLE 1  
Mean Differences (and Standard Deviations) Between Religious and Control Conditions on Attitudes Toward Various Groups

Group	Condition		F
	Religious	Control	
African	6.12 (1.93)	7.75 (1.93)	15.98***
Asian	6.24 (2.05)	7.75 (1.96)	12.51***
European	7.16 (2.20)	8.42 (1.60)	10.05**
Arabic	5.67 (2.45)	7.24 (2.25)	9.90**
Foreigners	6.81 (1.70)	7.62 (1.89)	4.37*
Rich	6.35 (1.96)	7.40 (2.10)	5.83*
Poor	6.11 (2.03)	7.49 (1.95)	10.71**
Christian	6.62 (1.93)	7.27 (2.51)	1.77
Jewish	6.46 (2.06)	7.44 (2.21)	4.54*
Muslim	5.81 (2.05)	6.84 (2.37)	4.58*
Gay men	5.78 (1.90)	7.29 (2.39)	10.33**
Lesbian women	5.69 (1.96)	7.24 (2.38)	10.43**

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .005$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

servative attitudes ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) than participants in a control context ( $M = 4.62$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ),  $F(1, 84) = 4.91$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Finally, participants in the religious context self-reported significantly more negative attitudes toward nearly every target group. The only nonsignificant difference between conditions was for attitudes toward Christians.<sup>3</sup> Please see Table 1 for descriptives and one-way analyses of variance for each target group.

## DISCUSSION

Participants in a religious context self-reported higher levels of religiousness and spirituality than persons in a nonreligious context. Both the religious and nonreligious contexts were located along major pedestrian paths, and neither were entered by any participant in the study (i.e., participants were passing by the buildings). Although it could be that people who have higher baseline religiousness may be more likely to pass by a religious context, the random selection of passersby as participants, the heavy pedestrian traffic, and particularly the insignificant difference between proportion of individuals reporting belief in God across conditions help reduce this possibility. The differences observed in these single-item measures could represent increased salience and accessibility of religious concepts and norms, the presumed result of laboratory-based religious priming studies.

Consistent with the theory that ecological priming may increase intergroup bias, participants in a religious context self-reported significantly more negative attitudes toward every non-

<sup>3</sup>All attitude items remained significant when participants from London were removed from analysis except for attitudes toward foreigners ( $p = .12$ ).

Christian group (see Table 1). Most interesting, these more negative attitudes toward non-Christian groups were held by a very diverse (and largely non-Christian) sample.

This finding coincides with the emerging literature on priming religion and prejudice, particularly because the only group that persons in a religious context were not significantly more negative toward was the group represented by the religious context (i.e., Christians) even if they were not themselves members of the group their attitudes may have been defending. Previous research has indicated that religious persons show favoritism in attitudes toward other religious persons but not toward nonreligious groups (Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999). The increased salience and accessibility of religiousness has led to both ingroup favoritism (McKay et al., 2009; Shariff, 2009) and outgroup derogation (Johnson et al., 2010a) in laboratory settings and appears to function similarly with more ecologically valid priming methods. The present study not only adds to the growing body of evidence that religious primes are effective in influencing attitudes toward target groups for both religious and nonreligious persons but also demonstrates that these effects can occur outside of a laboratory in the daily life of persons who pass by religious spaces by choice or by chance. It is possible that these subtle situational context primes may operate through the activation of norms and group stereotypes associated with the context. For example, participants primed with images of a library and the goal to visit the library demonstrated increased concept accessibility of silence and actually spoke more softly in a subsequent task (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003). Because participants did not have extensive experience being in libraries, the authors argued that normative social influence may be responsible for changes in behavior after these subtle presentations. Further, persons voting in religious contexts were more likely to support policies consistent with stereotyped religious opinion (i.e., conservatism, antihomosexual attitudes), and religious participants shown ecclesiastical images were less likely to extend aid to value-violating outgroup members and more likely to extend aid to persons who did not indicate group membership (Rutchick, 2010). Thus, even though participants may not themselves be overtly religious, normative cultural knowledge and the salience of religious concepts may encourage participants to respond more conservatively and negatively toward outgroups when exposed to religious contexts.

### Limitations and Future Directions for Research

The present study was limited by only being able to examine mean differences between groups. The increased generalizability of an ecological and multinational sample came with the consequence of being unable to examine changes in participant attitudes as is often done in laboratory-based studies. Whereas the demonstration that groups did not differ significantly in their belief in God and that no participants actually visited the religious or nonreligious structures helps to mitigate concerns about sampling bias, a demonstration of similar effects that allows for the measurement of preexisting attitudes would be beneficial.

One strength of the studies on situational context primes of religion (including the present study) is that participants come from diverse populations. Because situational context primes may operate on the basis of norm activation, and norms are learned culturally (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003), it is particularly interesting that such a diverse and multicultural sample was consistent with research on priming religion in American undergraduate students. Given that the largest differences between Protestant religious norms across political cultures involve attitudes

toward outgroups and political ideals (e.g., when primed with religiousness, Americans demonstrate more conservatism and work harder at a task than Canadians; Uhlmann, Poehlman, Tannenbaum, & Bargh, 2011), scientists interested in the subtle activation of religious concepts would benefit from a line of research comparing the effects of ecologically valid religious stimuli across religious and political cultures that are even more diverse than the present study. Research investigating the effect of priming dominant and nondominant religions in traditionally non-Christian cultures would help to clarify the possibility of intergroup bias activation as a mechanism for the effects of priming religion across religious and political cultures (Cohen & Hill, 2007; Cohen & Rozin, 2001).

The present study is an important first step toward understanding the effects of religious stimuli in ecologically valid contexts. If the effects of priming religiousness in a laboratory setting are to be understood and applied effectively, researchers must understand how controlled priming methods generalize to everyday life. Given the fact that religious contexts are among the most common political polling places in the United States (Berger et al., 2008) and the present study indicates differences in political and social attitudes associated with those contexts, a clear understanding of these effects could have far-reaching implications even outside the realm of the psychology of religion.

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