

THE EFFECT OF RELIGIOUS REFERENCES ON IDENTITY SALIENCE
AND SOCIAL BEHAVIORS

JESSICA MARIE SHENBERGER-TRUJILLO

Department of Psychology

APPROVED:

Michael Zárate, Ph.D., Chair

Lawrence Cohn, Ph.D.

Penelope Espinoza, Ph.D.

Daniel Jones, Ph.D.

James Wood, Ph.D.

Bess Sirmon-Taylor, Ph.D.
Interim Dean of the Graduate School

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Jessica Marie Shenberger-Trujillo

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Dedication

For my parents, Tom and Kate Shenberger. With your unconditional support and love, all things are possible.

PREVIEW

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AND SOCIAL BEHAVIORS

by

JESSICA MARIE SHENBERGER-TRUJILLO, M.A.

DISSERTATION

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PREVIEW

Abstract

In the aftermath of 9/11 and other terrorist attacks on U.S. soil (e.g., the Boston bombings) researchers began to empirically investigate the conditions under which religion can lead to supporting or committing violence. The contradictory findings for the effects of religious references on both positive and negative behavior call for a closer examination of individual or contextual factors that influence the effect of religion on social behaviors. To address these contradictory findings and to identify the underlying mechanism involved, Study 1 examined the extent to which god-related or church-related religious references impact the salience of individual or group identities. Study 2 served two goals: (1) to test the extent exposure to religious references increases self-ratings of attitude certainty and ratings of the extent to which one's stance is the correct stance (2) to test under what conditions the influence of religious references will lead to increased support for collective action or over-claiming of religious knowledge. Results suggest that religious references, in general, produce greater group identity salience. The current research develops our understanding of how religion influences individuals' engagement in social behaviors. Specifically, we have now identified group identity salience as one mechanism through which religion may influence social behaviors.

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PREVIEW

Introduction

In recent decades the world has witnessed instances of religious-based violence. Events such as 9/11 are extreme examples of religious based terrorism. In the aftermath of 9/11 and other tragic terrorist attacks on U.S. soil (e.g., the Boston bombings) researchers began investigating the conditions under which religion leads to supporting or committing violence (Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, & Busath, 2007; Saroglou, Corneille, & Van Cappellen, 2009). In the past decade, the field of Social Psychology has placed an increased attention on the investigation of how religion leads to either prosocial behaviors or conflict.

To date, the literature on religious references and social behaviors points to two discrepant findings. On the one hand, research has demonstrated that under certain conditions, religious references can lead to increased positive social behavior. For example, Pichon, Boccato, and Saroglou (2007) found that individuals primed with religious references displayed more charitable intentions than those primed with non-religious references. Similarly, Shariff and Norenzayan (2007) found that individuals who primed with religious references behaved more generously than did those individuals who were primed with neutral references. These findings in the literature support the hypothesis that under certain circumstances religious references have positive influences on social behaviors (e.g., Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004; Sosis & Ruffle, 2004). Intuitively, many individuals would expect exposure to religious references would lead to increased positive behaviors.

On the other hand, research also demonstrates that under certain conditions religious references can lead to negative social behaviors. Bushman et al. (2007) found that individuals who read a passage said to be from a religious text that called for punishment behaved more consistently with the passage by increasing punishment towards others, as compared to