

A LINE ON LIFE

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Religion and Helping Others *

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Helping others seems to be a major part of most organized religions. Therefore, we expect that religious people would be more prosocial and altruistic. **Prosocial behavior** benefits others or leads to positive social consequences. **Altruism** does the same, but it is done without any intention of receiving any personal benefit. Are religious people also more altruistic?

From self-reports, this seems to be true. In a 1974 survey, of those who reported going to church at least once in the last week, 59.7% indicated that they "*almost always*" tried to help others. In contrast, only 31.4% of others reported the same level of helping. Later self-report studies indicate the same tendency. How do their reports match up with their actual behavior? Does this behavior depend on their religious orientation?



Religious orientation is not the specific religion – Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim and so on. Orientation refers to the underlying reasons or motivation that each person has for being religious. For example, those with an **end orientation** perceive religion intrinsically – these people enjoy their role or image of being religious. In contrast, those with **quest orientation** use religion as a way "*to achieve personal awareness, reexamine values, and satisfy personal doubts....*"

In 1973, John Darley and Daniel Batson compared the helping behavior of people with these orientations. With the quest orientation, helping was "*tentative and incomplete*" – they were hesitant in helping. When the sufferers had received adequate help, those with quest orientation no longer attempted to help.

In contrast, those with end orientation persisted in helping – even after sufferers indicated that conditions were satisfactory. Even if subjects preferred to be left alone, those motivated by end orientation continued their efforts to help.

Do we help others in their need, or are we merely fulfilling our needs?

Those motivated by end orientation – rather than basing their help on the needs of other people – helped because they had a "*need to be helpful*." They keep trying to help – whether others want help or not. In contrast, those with quest orientation offer help based on the needs of others.

Initially, people with end orientation seem more altruistic. They are more insistent in offering help to others. Rather than altruistic, this indicates an **egoistic** motive for helping. They are more concerned with their self-image than with the welfare of others. In essence, they are saying, "*If I don't help (even if the other person doesn't want help), I'll feel bad and violate my view of myself as a religious, helping person.*"

In contrast to this self-centered motive, those with quest orientation seemed to be more altruistic and empathetic. Their own need to help is not important. They emphasize the needs of others.

Of course, religion influences helping in other ways. Religious people are more likely to volunteer for church-related activities than less religious people. (It sounds logical, doesn't it?) However, these religious individuals are less likely to come forward for helping activities, if the activities are not related to the church.

Altruism is more related to how people interpret their religion than it is to attending services. During World War II, Christians – who risked their lives to help Jews escape from the Nazis – had no strong relation between being a rescuer and church attendance. Rescuers tended to view their religion in a unique way. They had an independent way of interpreting religious doctrine. They did not emphasize the welfare of only those who shared their religion. They adapted their religious doctrine to emphasize helping all people in need – regardless of religion, race or ethnic group.

Of course, situational variables can modify helping behavior – even among those who are very altruistic. A classic 1973 study of seminary students by Darley and Batson discovered this. The seminary students were asked to give a talk on either the "*Good Samaritan*" or finding jobs. They were told that they were (1) late, (2) on time or (3) early for the talk. On the way to the talk at a nearby building, they all passed a confederate who was slumped in the doorway, coughing and moaning. Although the topic of their talk did not influence their helping behavior, the time pressure did. Of those who were early, 65% offered help. Offers of help dropped to 45% for the on-time group and to only 10% with the late group. While concentrating on their own obligations, people – even seminary students – are less likely to notice those in need. Thus they are less likely to help.

Merely being religious does not necessarily make us more altruistic. The factors that influence helping others are varied and complex – including our religious orientation, the type of help needed and many other situational factors.

* Adapted from Irwin A. Horowitz and Kenneth S. Bordens, *Social Psychology*, Mayfield Publishing, 1995, pages 544-545.