Does religion make us moral?

June 12, 2012 by Connor Wood

The scriptures of the world's great religious traditions are chock-full of moral teachings. Believers are encouraged to treat each other as neighbors, to be kind to strangers, and to help the poor. But religious people aren't always more moral or righteous than nonbelievers – indeed, religions have inspired wars, inquisitions, and seemingly endless prejudice. So is religion morally good or bad? Yale psychologist Paul Bloom thinks the answer is both. And the moral effects of religion stem from what religious people do together…not necessarily what they believe.

Paul Bloom is a noted cognitive scientist whose work has focused on morality, the development of social abilities in children, and the evolution of religion. In 2005 he published a well-received article in *The Atlantic* that suggested that belief in God and other supernatural spirits was the accidental by-product of cognitive predispositions to see order and purpose in the world. Bloom asserts that people basically come hardwired to sense invisible presences and spirits in their environment. So he's not exactly a raging Bible-thumper – in fact, he's a self-described atheist.

It might seem surprising, then, that Bloom has recently published a paper in the *Annual Review of Psychology* detailing, in part, all the good that religion can do. Religion, Bloom points out, does actually seem to make people more altruistic and generous. Religious people give more to charities than non-religious people, including secular charities. And IRS tax receipts show that states where people are more religious have much higher rates of charitable giving than less religious states. Meanwhile, lab experiments show that participating in religious rituals primes people to be more generous and caring toward one another.

The benefits of religion don't stop there. Actively religious people are much more likely to say they are "very happy" with their lives than their secular counterparts, according to a 2004 study cited by Bloom. And non-religious people are proportionately more like to express that they feel like failures.

But as always – at least when it comes to religion – the positives are balanced nearly evenly by the negatives, and this is Bloom's point. For example, religious participation also often inspires people to be prejudiced against outsiders and minorities. In a 1950s study, the psychologist Gordon Allport showed that religious people were much more prejudiced against minority groups and foreigners than non-religious people. And in perhaps the most disconcerting study cited by Bloom, a research team recently found that exposing subjects to religiously themed words actually increased their levels of prejudice against African-Americans.

So is religion good for us or not? As an atheistic scientist, Bloom's answer is a deliciously ambiguous "yes and no." Religion, he believes, is simply a tool. It evolved to help humans solve the "free rider" problem of communal social life. When a social group depends on the efforts of all its members for success, free riders – people who accept help and resources from the group, but don't give much back in return – can pose a serious threat to the entire collective. This threat

is especially dire for human beings, since we depend almost entirely on our social abilities to survive.

According to Bloom, that's where religion comes in. By demanding that people participate in costly, often painful rituals, religious groups ensure that their members have a strong motivation to stay involved and contribute economic and social resources to the group. It's a bit like investing with friends – the more money you've put into the shared investment, the more motivated you are to make sure that investment pays off.

This evolutionary perspective on religion helps explain one of the most perplexing findings Bloom highlights: the moral effects of religion, both good and bad, are predicted by what sorts of religious behaviors people partake in, *not* whether or not they believe in God or an afterlife. In fact, private religious behaviors of all kinds don't seem to make much difference when it comes to people's ethical actions. For instance, among Palestinian Muslims attending mosque services often was associated with support of suicide bombings against Israelis, while individual prayer had no such association.

These findings back up a growing chorus of scholars in the religious studies world who insist that religion is essentially about *action*, not abstract beliefs and propositions. If Bloom is right, then participating regularly in group-oriented religious activities ought to make most people more generous, happy, and altruistic…as well as more suspicious of outsiders, prejudiced, and defensive of their in-groups. Like a cancer treatment with profoundly unpleasant side effects, religion inspires the best in human nature even while it trots out the worst.

But, Bloom points out, there's reason to be optimistic. First, the association between religion and racial prejudice has declined – at least in America – since the mid-1960s. Secondly, Allport's research also showed that only certain kinds of religiosity seemed to inspire prejudice. Religiosity that emphasized external rewards and social acceptance was associated with negative feelings toward members of other races, while religiousness that was focused on internal, subjective goals wasn't.

The relationship between morality and religion is a difficult one. Calvinist Christian theologians like Karl Barth have argued that human morality has nothing to do with God's sense of right and wrong, and that salvation can only come from God's inscrutable decision. And, as other writers have pointed out, profound religious or mystical experiences often seem to blur the lines between good and evil, making the basic nature of the universe seem neither good nor bad. Meanwhile, figures such as the 16th-century Spanish nun Teresa of Avila make the opposite claim:

A single [religious experience] may be sufficient to abolish at a stroke certain imperfections of which the soul during its whole life had vainly tried to rid itself, and to leave it adorned with virtues and loaded with supernatural gifts. A single one of these intoxicating consolations may reward it for all the labors undergone in its life.

One thing is for sure: religions certainly play a major role in how people think about morality. In fact, religion undergirds such a vast portion of human society that it's difficult to even imagine how we'd formulate our questions about ethics outside of religious frameworks. (Even modern

secular cultures are still deeply informed by Christian language and themes.) Thorny questions like the relationship of religion and morality do accomplish one thing, though: they show that we need to understand religion if we want to understand ourselves, including our moral behavior. Bloom's most important message, then, is not that religion is good, bad, or deluded. It's that it would be, in Bloom's words, "impossible to make sense of most of human existence, including law, morality, war, and culture, without some appreciation of religion and how it works."