



## When and why does belief in a controlling God strengthen goal commitment?



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### ABSTRACT

The perception that God controls one's life can bolster motivation to pursue personal goals, but it can also have no impact and even squelch motivation. To better understand how religious beliefs impact self-regulation, the current research built on Compensatory Control Theory's claim that perceiving the environment as predictable (vs. unpredictable) strengthens commitment to long-term goals. Perceiving God's intervention as following an understandable logic, which implies a predictable environment, increased self-reported and behavioral commitment to save money (Studies 1–3), excel academically (Study 4), and improve physical health (Study 5). In contrast, perceiving God as intervening in mysterious ways, which implies that worldly affairs are under control yet unpredictable, did not increase goal commitment. Exploratory mediational analyses focused on self-efficacy, response efficacy, and confidence in God's control. A meta-analysis (Study 6) yielded a reliable effect whereby belief in divine control supports goal pursuit specifically when it signals the predictability of one's environment.

### 1. Introduction

Religion is central to the lives of individuals and societies. Eighty-five percent of people worldwide subscribe to a formalized religion (Zuckerman, 2005) and the large majority of Americans believe in God (Gallup Poll, 2008), even by conservative estimates (Gervais & Najle, 2017). It is for good reason, then, that psychologists are increasingly interested in religion's impact on psychological functioning (Pargament, 2013). This work has deepened our understanding of social behavior and shed new light on basic psychological processes (Barrett, 2000; Norenzayan & Gervais, 2013; Waytz, Gray, Epley, & Wegner, 2010).

Within this scope lie important questions about when and why belief in supernatural causation affects self-regulation—the processes through which one alters responses or behavior in a goal-directed manner (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007). Does believing that God controls one's life support everyday goal pursuit? Or does it inhibit motivation or simply not make a difference?

Prior theory offers conflicting answers. Classic theorists (Durkheim, 1912/1954; James, 1902/2002) and contemporary researchers (McGregor, Nash, & Prentice, 2010; Soenke, Landau, & Greenberg, 2013) contend that belief in divine control supports goal pursuit by

assuaging anxiety and feelings of uncertainty. Yet, other theorists claim that believing in God's intervention causes people to relinquish autonomous control over their life to a higher power, thus stifling individual ambition (Freud, 1927/1961; Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982).

Empirical evidence is scarce and paints a similarly murky picture. On the one hand, studies show that religiosity is positively associated with temptation resistance and self-control (Koole, McCullough, Kuhl, & Roelofsma, 2010; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). Also, neurophysiological evidence shows that greater belief in God is marked by reduced activity in the anterior cingulate cortex—a cortical alarm system triggered by the detection of error and the experience of uncertainty—and hence may signal confident goal-directed action (Inzlicht, McGregor, Hirsh, & Nash, 2009). On the other hand, perceiving God as in control can have no impact and even deflate motivation. In one set of studies, participants experimentally reminded of a controlling God became less willing to expend effort or make sacrifices to pursue long-term goals (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012).

The question remains when (and why) belief in God's control does and does not help people engage in such everyday goals as eating healthier and advancing their career.

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### 1.1. Compensatory Control Theory: predictability matters

Recent insights into the beliefs that underpin goal pursuit are useful here. Building on prior theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Lerner, 1980), Compensatory Control Theory (CCT) posits that people's confidence they are in control of their lives rests on a view of the external world as structured as opposed to disordered (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Landau, Kay, & Whitson, 2015). This view is sustained by a broad network of beliefs that includes perceived regularities in the properties of stimuli and the time course of events. Believing that their social and physical environments are sufficiently structured, people can confidently predict the consequences of action, and are therefore likely to exploit that structure to pursue goals. If, in contrast, predictable structure seems lacking—for example, if stimuli appear difficult to place into dependable causal relations—then people lose confidence in their ability to achieve their goals. In short, CCT posits that beliefs implying a predictably structured world are cornerstones of the cognitive infrastructure underlying a confident sense of personal control.

This perspective yields the hypothesis that activating sources of *predictable* structure, in particular, will increase perceived personal control, even when those sources are superficially unrelated to the domain in which control is assessed. Supporting studies show that people feel more in control if given the opportunity to attribute seemingly random hazards and risks in their lives to the machinations of a cunning enemy—an effect mediated by reduced perceptions of randomness in the environment (Sullivan, Landau & Rothschild, 2010). Converging findings in organizational contexts show that priming people to view their workplace as characterized by a specifically predictable hierarchy increased self-reported control (Friesen, Kay, Eibach, & Galinsky, 2014).

A related hypothesis is that activating sources of predictable structure will promote commitment to personal goals. Supporting studies show that exposure to subtle reminders of orderly patterns in the natural environment made people more willing and likely to take action to pursue long-term goals (Kay, Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Landau, 2014). For example, priming predictable patterns in the placement of leaves on trees, or stars in the night sky, increased effortful pursuit of goals that bore no superficial relation to those patterns. Other research finds that subtly introducing disorder in the physical environment, in this case with askew wall décor and desktop clutter, undermined participants' ability to regulate their behavior (Chae & Zhu, 2014). Likewise, portraying corporations as agents that will intervene in people's lives in predictable ways buffered the loss of motivation that normally occurs when a salient goal seems overly demanding (Khenfer, Laurin, Tafani, Roux, & Kay, 2017). Attesting to the unique role of predictability, this effect disappeared when corporations were portrayed as benevolent but not capable of predictably influencing one's life. Collectively, these prior findings suggest that affirming sources of structure offering little predictability will *not* encourage goal pursuit.

### 1.2. Comparing popular conceptions of divine control

Applying evidence of predictability's motivating impact to the current question, we observe that popular conceptions of God's control differ in their implications for predictability. Acknowledging these differences may be crucial for understanding when and why religious beliefs affect goal pursuit. Indeed, other relevant studies show that activating and measuring different conceptions of God's control (e.g., omniscient vs. omnipotent) predict unique downstream effects on self-regulation (Laurin, Kay, et al., 2012).

One popular conception portrays God as a consistent implementer of rules who intervenes in worldly affairs according to a formal system of moral principles and codes, such as need and merit, that *humans can understand* (e.g., Psalm 33:11 “But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations”). This conception implies that, by virtue of God's transparent control, one's

environment is not only structured but also predictable—a place where goal-directed actions are likely to produce desired outcomes. Thus, based on CCT, we hypothesized that belief in and exposure to this conception of God's control would strengthen commitment to personal goals.

Another popular but contrasting conception emphasizes a mysterious mode of divine causation, epitomized in the common expression “God works in mysterious ways” and reiterated throughout religious texts (Romans 11:33 “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!”). In this conception, God effects change in the world according to rules, codes, and plans that are *unknowable by humans*. This implies an unpredictable world in which one continually confronts events and circumstances that appear unjust, random, and even absurd.

It is notable that construing supernatural intervention as inherently mysterious has captivated people across cultures and historical eras (Howard-Snyder & Moser, 2002). What is the appeal? One answer is that it solves the problem of *theodicy*, reconciling God's alleged benevolence and omnipotence with the reality of evil and misfortune (Berger, 1967; Sullivan, 2016). It implies that seemingly undeserved suffering and arbitrary tragedies (e.g., genocides, natural disasters) are all part of God's broader, benevolent plan. It is futile to question His motives because they are unknowable.

The utility of this perceived unpredictability is evidenced in how people prefer to characterize other humans' influence on their lives. Sullivan et al. (2010) showed that people preferred to see personal enemies as having vague, mysterious abilities and motives (vs. explicitly known powers) because that conception enables them to attribute a wide range of seemingly random outcomes to a single source of control. These findings suggest that conceiving of God's control as profoundly mysterious helps people make sense of why bad things happen to good people.

The “mysterious ways” conception may also support faith in the efficacy of petitionary prayer and the existence of God. For example, approximately 40% of Americans solicit God to improve their health (e.g., being cured from disease; Barnes, Powell-Griner, McFann, & Nahin, 2004). Those who believe God intervenes in a straightforward, transparent manner will be repeatedly disappointed when their requests appear to go unanswered or denied (disease persists or worsens). Believing in a mysterious mode of supernatural causation is more accommodating, allowing for the possibility that an apparently unanswered prayer may be approved on a secret timetable or denied for a good reason that cannot be fathomed (Barrett, 2001, 2004; Boudry & Braeckman, 2012; Boudry & De Smedt, 2011; Humphrey, 1995). In this view, failed prayers rarely call God's benevolent control into question, creating the type of unfalsifiable ideology that many people find compelling and consoling (Friesen, Campbell, & Kay, 2015).

Complementing these insights, CCT suggests that, despite its other benefits, construing God's control as mysterious is unlikely to support goal pursuit. Believing that God could intervene at any moment for unknowable and seemingly absurd purposes casts doubt on any reliable link between current goal-directed action and future outcomes. Based on this analysis, we hypothesized that belief in and exposure to this conception would *not* increase goal commitment, and may decrease it.

Indirect support for this hypothesis comes from evidence for the specific importance of predictability in the appeal of structure. Tullett, Kay, and Inzlicht (2014) showed that reminders of order (vs. randomness) decreased self-reported anxiety and performance monitoring, but not if the order was described as beyond comprehension. Still, these prior studies did not focus on the potential impact of priming different conceptions of God's control.

In sum, viewing God as controlling one's life may not be enough to help people pursue their goals. Based on CCT, we proposed that a key difference lies in how people represent God's *modus operandi*. People will commit to their goals particularly when God seems to govern the

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