



# Intercultural non-conscious influences: Prosocial effects of Buddhist priming on Westerners of Christian tradition

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## ABSTRACT

Prosocial concepts and behavior are often found to be activated when participants are primed with concepts of their own religious cultural tradition. We investigated whether similar effects can be found when people (Westerners of Christian tradition) are primed with concepts of a different from their own religious cultural tradition (Buddhist and Islamic). Participants (104 young Belgian adults) were randomly assigned to three conditions. They were supraliminally primed with either Buddhist or Islamic images; or they were not primed (control condition). Priming Buddhism increased prosocial intentions (spontaneous sharing of hypothetical gains), and decreased, among participants highly valuing universalism, implicit prejudice toward an ethnic outgroup. Priming Islam had no effect on prosociality or prejudice. The findings suggest that concepts from one religious and cultural context are transposable, under some conditions, to another religious and cultural context and can influence even implicit social cognition.

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## 1. Introduction

Across cultural contexts, religions emphasize prosocial values and ideals (Habito & Inaba, 2006), even if the latter are not purely altruistic (Neusner & Chilton, 2005). Religiosity is related to highly valuing benevolence among Christians, Jews, and Muslims (Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004, for a meta-analysis), as well as Buddhists (Saroglou & Dupuis, 2006). In very recent years, priming experiments have confirmed the hypothesized causal direction in which religious concepts, texts, and places activate prosocial concepts and behaviors such as generosity, cooperation, volunteering, and low retaliation, most often regardless of participants' individual religiosity (Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007; see also Ahmed & Salas, 2011; Pichon & Saroglou, 2009; Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010; Saroglou, Corneille, & Van Cappellen, 2009, Study 1; Sasaki et al., in press; Tsang, Schulwitz, & Carlisle, 2012).

In these studies, participants were primed with concepts of their own (mostly Christian) religious tradition. However, what the effects would be if participants were primed with non-Christian religious primes? In other words, is hetero-religious priming effective at activating prosociality even among believers and non-believers of a different religious/cultural tradition?

This is the question addressed in the present study. Posing this question has implications on at least two theoretical levels. First, is there something culturally universal about religion (i.e., its capacity to activate prosociality) beyond religious and cultural barriers? Or, alternatively, does hetero-religious priming activate mistrust in others, especially outgroup members, and thus decrease prosociality? Second, more broadly, is implicit cognition mainly limited by cultural group barriers? Or,

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alternatively, can cultural concepts (e.g., Eastern Buddhism's tolerance and compassion) transpose on different cultural groups and thus activate, even non-consciously, corresponding attitudes and behaviors in a different than the origin cultural context (e.g., Westerners of Christian tradition)? Below we detail these two theoretical issues and further describe our specific hypotheses and the ways in which we have operationalized them in the present study.

### 1.1. *Consequences of hetero-religious priming*

Little if anything is known regarding whether religion's role with respect to many individual outcomes (well-being, self-control, prosocial tendencies, conservative morality, prejudice toward outgroups; Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009) is due to mechanisms and effects of one's own religious culture or, rather, is due to more universal religious ideas, values, and practices (see for this debate: Belzen, 2010; Saroglou & Cohen, *in press*). Regarding experimental findings in particular, two existing studies seem to provide divergent evidence on this issue.

In the first study, North American participants of Christian tradition who were experimentally reminded of their mortality, expressed stronger beliefs in the power of not only (Christian) God, but also of culturally alien supernatural agents, i.e., Buddha and Shamanic spirits (Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006). Obviously, others' supernatural agents can also be seen as powerful and helpful in difficulties. In the second study, Christians, mostly from the US, who were primed with the Golden Rule attributed to Buddha, showed higher explicit (but not implicit) antigay attitudes (Vilaythong, Lindner, & Nosek, 2010). The authors interpreted their findings as suggesting that "when a tolerance message comes from a religious outgroup figure, it does not increase but instead may decrease tolerance toward another outgroup" (p. 502). Note, however, that in that study even priming participants with the Golden Rule attributed to Jesus did not weaken antigay attitudes, a finding that may call into question the interpretation of the authors based on the in/outgroup distinction. Moreover, homosexuals are known to be a strong target of religious prejudice (Hood et al., 2009) and antigay attitudes may not be an optimal way to test the hetero-religious priming-prosociality hypothesis.

Very likely, the effects of a religious culture that is different from one's own may importantly depend on the nature of the domain concerned. As far as prosocial tendencies in general are concerned, given the universality of various religions in promoting prosocial and compassionate values (Habito & Inaba, 2006), we postulated that priming participants (Westerners of Christian tradition) with religious elements from other religions (Buddhism and, for comparison reasons, Islam) would increase participants' prosocial tendencies.

### 1.2. *Intercultural implicit cognition*

Contrary to the religious domain, where there is almost no research on the non-conscious influences of "foreign" religious aspects from another cultural *milieu*, there is interesting research on non-conscious influences of foreign cultural dimensions. Indeed, probably due to the "culturally erosive" effects of globalization (Chiu, Gries, Torelli, & Cheng, 2011), priming people with elements from another culture often activates concepts and behaviors consistent with the primed construct. For instance, European Americans who were primed with East Asian culturally laden locations and the East Asian yin-yang symbol showed attitudes (anticipated greater change) that were consistent with East Asians' typical endorsement of greater change in the world (Alter & Kwan, 2009). Similarly, German students, belonging to an individualistic culture with independent rather than interdependent self-construal, experienced more pride when thinking about the achievements of others after being primed with the interdependent self-construal, typical of collectivistic societies (Neumann, Steinhäuser, & Roeder, 2009).

Given that religions can be considered as part of cultures, if not as cultural systems themselves (Cohen, 2009; Saroglou & Cohen, 2011), and taking into account the increasing cultural globalization, also occurring in the religious domain, we expected hetero-religious priming to be effective in increasing Westerners' prosociality. We investigated particularly whether or not this would be true for Buddhism, a religion which reflects, for both religious and (Eastern) cultural reasons, love, compassion, interdependence, and dialecticism, i.e., tolerance of contradictions (Davidson & Harrington, 2002; Goodman, 2009; Ma-Kellams, Spencer-Rodgers, & Peng, 2011). We also added Islamic religious primes to determine whether the above-expected effects are specific to Buddhism or can be more broadly generalized to other religions.

### 1.3. *Two sides of prosociality: generosity and tolerance*

In the present study we focused on two indicators of prosociality: (a) generosity, measured as the spontaneous willingness to share hypothetical gains rather than keeping them for oneself, and (b) outgroup tolerance, i.e., decreased prejudice of an ethnic outgroup. These two indicators may not function equally. Indeed, religious priming has typically been found to have an effect on prosociality, in particular when the targets of the prosociality are partners with whom the subject shares everyday interactions (see the many studies cited above). The impact of religious priming on (decreased) prejudice is less clear.

In one study, the prosocial outcomes of (homo-)religious priming were limited to ingroups, not extending to ethnic outgroups (Pichon & Saroglou, 2009). In three other studies, priming religion in general, or priming specific, coalitional, aspects of it, increased negative attitudes and prejudice against ethnic, religious, or moral outgroups (Johnson, Rowatt, &

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