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New psychology research indicates that subtle exposure to religious words can increase benevolent sexism

by [Eric W. Dolan](#) — November 25, 2019 in [Psychology of Religion](#), [Social Psychology](#)



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Brief exposure to Judeo-Christian religious words can increase the endorsement of sexist attitudes among both men and women, according to a new study published in the journal *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*.

“Previous research in this area had found that subliminal religious priming is [associated with increased racial prejudice](#) in US undergraduate samples. Given that many people no longer associate Christianity with overt, negative attitudes toward African-Americans, I wondered what impact it had on attitudes about women,” explained study author Megan Haggard, an assistant professor at Francis Marion University.

“Many Judeo-Christian denominations and groups still practice and preach different and unequal roles for men and women, both within the religious organization and outside of it, so this research examines how brief activation of Judeo-Christian concepts, both above and below people’s awareness, influences their endorsement of sexist beliefs.”

In four experiments, which included 384 Belgian participants and 286 U.S. participants in total, the researchers found that people primed with religious concepts were more likely to agree with statements such as “Women should be cherished and protected by men.” This was true among both theist and atheist participants.

The experiments used two different methods to prime religion. Some participants were asked to unscramble sentences with that contained religious words, while the control group unscrambled sentences that did not contain any religious words. Other participants were shown a string of individual letters and were asked to decide as quickly as possible if the series of letters was a word or not.

“Small, even unnoticeable exposure to religious words, especially those associated with supernatural beings like God and angel, may alter your feelings toward women briefly, regardless of your gender or belief in God,” Haggard told PsyPost.

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“Specifically, following religious priming, we saw an increase in benevolently sexist beliefs,

which appear positive, including items about women being more moral, fragile, and artistic compared to men. However, previous research has found that endorsement of benevolent sexism undermines both men's and women's support of gender equality."

But the study – like all research – includes some limitations.

"This study only examined samples in two countries that have relatively low rates of both kinds of sexism, hostile and benevolent, as well as ones with majority Judeo-Christian influence on culture. Therefore, more work should be done to examine how religious priming impacts those living in countries with higher rates of sexism or with different majority belief systems, such as Islam or Hinduism," Haggard explained.

"Also, we examined if there were differences in endorsement of sexist ideals only. It is also important to assess whether this leads to different behavior toward men or women, such as increased backlash toward those who violate gender stereotypes. A more naturalistic study, such as exposure through being near a church versus a civic building, would also build upon these findings."

Religious priming also did not have a significant impact on hostile sexism. While hostile sexism is associated with viewing women as manipulative rivals who aim to dominate men, benevolent sexism is associated with viewing women as fragile and in need of men's protection.

"Because previous research has found that priming religious agents increases pro-sociality toward others, it may seem counterintuitive that exposure to these primes is found to increase agreement with benevolently sexist ideals. However, as sexism researchers have argued, benevolent sexism can be viewed as rewarding those women who fit into the prescribed notions of gender role division within a patriarchal society," Haggard noted.

"Essentially, it praises women for fitting in to the roles men allow them to have. The studies done in the US also feature different types of religious prime words that are categorized by religious agent (like God and angel), religious institution (like church and scripture), and spirituality (like miracle and faith). I think more careful religious priming using these categories may help clarify future findings in this area."

The study, "[Religion's Role in the Illusion of Gender Equality: Supraliminal and Subliminal Religious Priming Increases Benevolent Sexism](#)", was authored by Megan C. Haggard, Rob Kaelen, Vassilis Saroglou, Olivier Klein, and Wade C. Rowatt.