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“Speak, Lord, Your Servant Is Listening”: Religious Priming Activates Submissive Thoughts and Behaviors

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RESEARCH

“Speak, Lord, Your Servant Is Listening”: Religious Priming Activates Submissive Thoughts and Behaviors

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According to many theoretical perspectives, religion is positively associated with submission and conformity. However, no study to date provided experimental evidence for this hypothesis. We did so in two experiments that relied on priming procedures. In Experiment 1, participants were tested for the strength of their religion-submission associations by using a lexical decision task. In Experiment 2, participants were primed with either religious or neutral concepts and were invited or not by the experimenter to take revenge on an individual who had allegedly criticized them. Both studies provided evidence for the expected religion-submission association, although the effects were limited to participants scoring high in personal submissiveness. Among these individuals, religious priming increased the accessibility of submission-related concepts (Experiment 1) and the acceptance of a morally problematic request for revenge (Experiment 2). Discussion focuses on questions for future research and implications for our understanding of religion’s role in morality and interpersonal relations.

Religion has many positive implications for people’s mental and social life. Recent research in personality and social psychology provided important and consistent evidence supporting this claim (Paloutzian & Park, 2005; Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003). However, religion may also be conducive to negative attitudes and behaviors such as prejudice, discrim-

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ination, and egoistic motivation in morality (Batson, Anderson, & Collins, 2005; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005).

Submission is an important concept for understanding people's attitudes, personality, interpersonal and intergroup relations, and personal and social morality. Surprisingly, however, psychological research has largely neglected how this important concept relates to religion. Many decades ago, Freud (1927/1961) argued that at the heart of religion is the strong dependence of people on the omnipotent figure of God, in a way that is similar to the dependence of children on an imaginary omnipotent father. Religions contain plenty of rules, norms, and prohibitions that believers are requested to respect. When they do not, some form of punishment is to be expected. Obedience has been highly regarded in spiritual texts and practices of many religions, and contemporary research suggests that it still is, for instance in children's education by conservative Protestants and Catholics (Ellison & Sherkat, 1993). The reference to an external authority in order to regulate one's own thoughts, feelings, and actions is at the core of religious orthodoxy (Deconchy, 1980).

From an evolutionary psychology perspective, religious beliefs and practices also have functional implications for social life (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Boyer, 2001). One of these is the establishment and maintenance of hierarchies, figures of power, and asymmetric relationships (Kirkpatrick, 2005). Gods are seen as powerful and controlling figures who request humans' submission. Behavioral expressions of veneration that are typical of religious worship (e.g., bending, bowing, kneeling, and touching one's head to the ground) represent displays of submission of low-rank individuals to high-rank ones in human and nonhuman species (Burkert, 1996). It has also been argued that establishing gods as similar but superior to humans has both positive (e.g., self-transcendence) and negative (e.g., legitimation of outgroup prejudice) implications for humans who are willing to differentiate themselves from demons, inferior animals, and infra-humanized others (Demoulin, Saroglou, & Van Pachterbeke, 2008; Haidt & Algoe, 2004).

Surprisingly, however, there has not been systematic experimental psychological research on the role religion plays with regard to submission (in its broad sense, including obedience, compliance, conformity, dependence, restriction of free will). Research on this issue has been mainly correlational and based on explicit paper-and-pencil measures of both religion and submission-related constructs. For instance, correlational research showed (a) that religious fundamentalists, and in some cases intrinsically religious people (not necessarily fundamentalists), tend to score high on right-wing authoritarianism, an important component of which is authoritarian submission (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2005); (b) that intense conversions and several forms of religious experience tend to attract people who score high in suggestibility (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997); and (c) that religious young adults across the three monotheistic religions tend to attach high importance to values reflecting conservation of social order (tradition and conformity) and low importance to self-direction (Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004; Schwartz & Huisman, 1995). Yet no experimental study examined whether exposure to religious concepts activates submission-related thoughts and behavior.

The aim of the present research was to provide, for the first time in our knowledge, *experimental* evidence for the hypothesis that exposure to religious concepts activates submission, both conceptually and behaviorally. Based on the literature just reviewed, we hypothesized in two studies that this causal relationship may be observed, with people showing higher accessibility of submission-related concepts (Experiment 1) and behaving in a more submissive way

(Experiment 2) after being primed with religious concepts (compared to control conditions). We further hypothesized that the submissive behavior following religious priming may even be observed in the context of a morally problematic social influence (i.e., an explicit request to take revenge in Experiment 2).

In both studies, we relied on a subliminal religious priming procedure. Over the last 25 years, scholars in psychology have shown that priming social norms, goals, emotions, and stereotypes can guide subsequent responses and behaviors in a rather unconscious manner (Bargh, 2006). For instance, when people are primed with words related to the elderly stereotype, they walk significantly slower than control participants (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996, Experiment 2), and people primed with photographs of African Americans display more hostile reactions than people primed with Caucasian faces (Bargh et al., 1996, Experiment 3).

More relevant to the present research endeavor, recent empirical research has started to reveal the effectiveness of priming religious concepts in activating relevant cognitions and behaviors. Religious priming has been shown to influence self-evaluation concerns (Baldwin, Carrell, & Lopez, 1990), to decrease self-attribution of authorship for events (Dijksterhuis, Preston, Wegner, & Aarts, 2008), to activate prosocial concepts and behavioral schemata (de Dreu, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1995; Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007), and to elicit honesty (Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007), but also to facilitate aggressive behaviors (after exposing participants to a biblical text legitimizing violence; Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, & Busath, 2007). We thus hypothesized that a religious priming procedure may elicit submission effects. And, as just noted, we hypothesized that these effects would be obtained both in terms of a higher accessibility of submission-related concepts (Experiment 1) and higher willingness to behave in conformity to the experimenter's request, even when this request concerns a morally problematic behavior (Experiment 2).

An important question that was also examined in our experiments is whether the hypothesized effects would apply to all people or only to people who are themselves religious or high in submissiveness. Concerning religiousness, previous research provides rather inconsistent results on this issue, the effects of religious priming being found either only among religious participants or among both religious and nonreligious participants (Bushman et al., 2007; Dijksterhuis et al., 2008; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007; Weisbuch-Remington, Mendes, Seery, & Blascovitch, 2005). It is likely that some aspects of religious life, when primed, elicit responses only (or to a larger extent) among participants who are religious, whereas other aspects of religion may be universally shared and ready to be activated through priming in most people. For instance, religion may activate the concept of transcendence and morality in most people but activate more specialized concepts such as the concept of forgiveness and self-restriction only among people who have gained religious expertise through their socialization in religious settings.

Similarly, with regard to participants' submissiveness as an individual differences characteristic, previous research on automatic social behavior is not conclusive. In some studies, the consequences of priming a specific construct works for all participants independently of whether they are themselves high or low on the corresponding personality dimension (e.g., Brown, Croizet, Bohner, Fournet, & Payne, 2003). In some other studies, priming effects are only present (or most visible) among participants for which the activated construct has an important meaning in their life in terms of personal dispositions (e.g., Verplanken & Holland, 2002). Thus, we decided to include personal religiousness and submissiveness for exploratory

purposes. On the basis of the aforementioned research, we tentatively predicted that the effects of religious priming on submission would hold more clearly for religious and submissive people.

EXPERIMENT 1

The aim of Experiment 1 was to examine the existence of an associative link between religion and submission in long-term memory. This association would be revealed by facilitated performance in responding to submissive rather than neutral target words following a religious relative to a neutral prime. This experiment also allowed us to explore the role of submissiveness and religiosity in this associative effect. One possibility is that the predicted religion-submission association is to be found only among people scoring high in religiosity or in submissiveness.

Method

Participants. Participants were 52 students (M age = 19.89, SD = 2.42, 43 female) from psychology and other social sciences at a Belgian university. They were recruited through advertisement in the psychology building and elected to participate in exchange for a modest payment (3 euros). The experiment lasted about 12 min. One participant was excluded from the analyses because of a tendency to show a vast majority of extremely fast (<150 msec) or long (>1,500 msec) response latencies.

Procedure. A within-subject design was adopted. Participants carried out a lexical decision task and made judgments (i.e., word vs. nonword) about a series of 64 letter strings presented on the computer screen. On each trial, a fixation point appeared on the screen for 500 msec and was immediately followed by a 200-msec premask (a string of Xs). The prime then appeared for 30 msec and was immediately overwritten by a 200-msec postmask (identical to the premask) that was itself directly followed by a letter sequence on which a decision had to be made. Participants had to respond whether the sequence was a word (by pressing the *I* key) or a nonword (by pressing the *R* key).

The target stimuli (i.e., the letter sequences) were either submission-related words ($n = 8$), neutral words ($n = 8$), or nonwords ($n = 16$). Each of the 32 target stimuli was preceded once by a religious prime and once by a neutral prime, totaling 64 lexical decisions for each participant. Counterbalanced between participants was whether a given word was preceded first by a religious or by a neutral prime. The latter factor led to neither main nor moderating effect and is not discussed further.

The neutral primes consisted of a series of Xs. The religious primes were borrowed from Pichon et al. (2007; e.g., in English translation, *faith, communion, belief, miracle, soul*). The submission target words were gathered after looking at dictionaries of synonyms and reaching an agreement among four psychologists. These words were (English translation) *submission, acceptance, obedience, conformity, dependant, dominated, passive, influenced*. For selecting the neutral words, we took into account the possibility that submissive words may have a negative

connotation. Therefore, we selected neutral words by matching them with the submissive words in valence in order to obtain similar mean scores (and standard deviations) in data collected from another sample of 23 participants using a bipolar scale (from negative to positive valence). The neutral words retained were (English translation) *dirtiness*, *computer*, *handicap*, *cupboard*, *rain*, *ugly*, *fat*, *misfortune*. Finally, the nonwords were anagrams of the words.

Postexperimental measures. Finally, participants filled in two scales measuring self-reported religiousness and submissiveness. Five items (5-point Likert scale) were used to have a measure of individual differences in submissiveness: "I see myself as someone who . . . 1. is timid; 2. is docile; 3. has not self-assertiveness as s/he should; 4. chooses his/her own goals (reverse scored item); and 5. has a great freedom of thinking (reverse scored item)." The first two items were taken from Wiggins (1979) circumplex model, and the last two items were taken from Schwartz (1992) Value Survey. After deleting Item 2, reliability increased and became acceptable (from $\alpha = .56$ to $\alpha = .68$). Personal religiousness was measured through three items (7-point scale) measuring importance of God in life, importance of religion in life, and frequency of prayer ($\alpha = .93$).

Results and Discussion

The dependant variable consisted of the strength of association between religion and submission. It was computed from the response times to the target words that were larger than 150 msec and smaller than 1,500 msec. Specifically, we subtracted (a) the mean response time for the submission words preceded by the religious prime from (b) the mean response time to the submission words preceded by the neutral prime (string of Xs). To control for a possible effect of the religious versus neutral priming on response times in general, we subtracted, from the aforementioned difference, the difference in mean response time for (c) the neutral words preceded by the religious prime, and (d) the neutral words preceded by the neutral prime (string of Xs). The dependant variable was an associative strength score, computed as follows: $(b - a) - (d - c)$, with larger values on this score reflecting stronger religion-submission associations in participants' long-term memory.

This associative strength score was found to be positively correlated with participants' responses to the self-reported submissiveness scale, $r(51) = 0.29$, $p < .05$ (two-tailed), but not with participants' self-reported responses to the religiosity scale, $r(51) = -0.11$, *ns*. Further analyses showed that among participants scoring above the midpoint of the submissiveness scale ($n = 21$) the associative strength score ($M = 48.84$, $SD = 128.74$) was significant and in the expected direction, $t(20) = 1.74$, $p < .05$ (one-tailed), whereas it was not among participants scoring low on submissiveness ($n = 30$; $M = -13.79$, $SD = 146.67$), $t(29) = -0.51$, *ns*.

Study 1 established the predicted association between religion and submission, but only for people scoring high on self-reported submissiveness. This finding qualifies in an interesting way the classic view that religion is linked to submission. Indeed, no such association was found here for the less submissive individuals. This associative finding is also interesting in making behavioral predictions. Indeed, it suggests that priming religious concepts may facilitate the production of submissive behaviors, at least for those individuals who score high on submissiveness.

EXPERIMENT 2

In Experiment 2, we considered the impact of religious primes on participants' sensitivity to a request for revenge, a behavior that is in opposition with the ideal of forgiveness, common in most religions (Rye et al., 2000). On the basis of the findings obtained in Experiment 1, one may predict that priming religion would increase participants' susceptibility to accept such a problematic request, at least for those scoring high on self-reported submissiveness.

Method

Participants and design. Participants were 94 first-year students in psychology at a Belgian university who took part in the experiment in exchange for course credits. The majority ($n = 84$) were women; mean age was 19.38 ($SD = 4.18$). They were randomly assigned in a 2 (priming: control vs. religious) by 2 (request for revenge: absent vs. present) between-participants design.

Procedure. The study was advertised as an investigation on "impression formation and judgment." As participants arrived individually at the experimental room, the experimenter asked them to write down in 10 min an advertisement for a fictitious bed store. A fictitious name store (with minimal information on opening hours and delivery system) was provided to the participants who were instructed to create an advertisement of 6 to 10 lines for this store. All participants were led to believe that their text would be evaluated by another student who was allegedly completing the same task in another room. Participants were told that they were separated from the other student in order to minimize biases in the evaluation of their text.

After 10 min, the experimenter took the advertising text produced by the participant and pretended to bring it to the student in the other room for evaluation. The experimenter returned to the laboratory after a few seconds and informed the participant that he or she would be asked to complete a short unrelated experiment while the other student would be busy evaluating his or her text. In fact, the experimenter instructed the participant to perform a lexical decision task involving 20 target letter strings presented at the center of a computer screen. These 20 target stimuli always consisted of 10 neutral words and of their respective anagrams. Participants had to respond as fast and accurately as possible whether the target sequence was a word (i.e., *I* key) or not (i.e., *R* key). Each trial started with a fixation point appearing for 500 msec on the screen. Immediately after, a control or a religious prime appeared for 15 msec on the computer screen and was immediately overwritten by a mask (a string of Xs) that remained on the screen for 500 msec. After 500 msec, the mask was replaced by a target letter string on which a lexical decision was required. The 20 religious primes (e.g., *salvation*, *bless*) and 20 neutral primes (e.g., *glue*, *cupboard*) were borrowed from Pichon et al. (2007). We took great care to not include religious primes that referred to institutional aspects of religion or to figures of religious authority. The neutral and the religious primes were of equal length (the mean number of letters by word were, respectively, 6.90 and 6.75).

Following to the lexical decision task, the experimenter left again the laboratory, allegedly to collect the evaluation of the participants' advertisement text made by the other student. The experimenter then returned to the laboratory and gave to the participant a short text on which

the other student had allegedly reported his or her evaluation of the participants' text. This text was actually always the same and was prepared so as to be overly critical of the participants' writing performance, containing only negative statements such as, "I do not know what to think; The ideas are trivial; The text is not attractive and not convincing at all."

After the participant read the evaluation, the experimenter informed him or her that for the next part of the experiment he or she would be asked to select 15 questions from a given list of 45 questions that referred to knowledge about movies. The participant was told that the questions he or she was to select would be asked to the student who had made the evaluation of their text and for whom the experiment would continue. To avoid interferences due to the anticipation of reciprocation expectations, the participant was informed that he or she would not take part in this movie-related study so that no further interaction would follow with the other student. The participant was also told to feel free to select questions for which he or she did not know the answer.

The list of questions provided to the participant included three series of 15 questions labeled as "easy," "average," and "difficult." All participants were told that they could base their selection on the latter information. Participants assigned to the revenge condition were further requested by the experimenter to select difficult questions (i.e., "I thought the evaluation of your text made by the other student was overly negative, so I would like you to select difficult questions"). Of interest was whether the religious priming would make participants more likely to conform to this social influence, with the difficulty of the selected questions being higher after a revenge request for participants primed with religious than neutral concepts.

Finally, the same measures of religiosity and submissiveness were administered to participants at the end of the experiment. As it was the case for Experiment 1, religiosity led to no significant results and is not discussed further.

Results and Discussion

Each of the 15 questions selected received a score of -1 , 0 , or 1 depending on whether it pertained to the easy, average, or difficult category, respectively. A global social influence score (reflecting responsiveness to the social influence of the experimenter requesting that the participant select difficult questions because of the negative evaluation by the confederate) was computed by adding up the scores of the 15 selected questions, with possible scores ranging from -15 to 15 . These scores were submitted to a 2×2 analysis of variance, with the priming condition and the revenge request condition entered as independent factors.

No main effect of priming was observed. A main effect of request for revenge was found: Participants selected more difficult questions when requested to engage in revenge ($M = 6.41$, $SD = 0.74$) than when not ($M = -0.08$, $SD = 0.66$), $F(1, 90) = 46.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .34$. This confirms the efficiency of the request condition. More important, there was a significant interaction between priming and request, $F(1, 90) = 7.12$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .07$, with the presence of a request for revenge increasing the difficulty of the selected questions more in the religious priming ($M_{\text{Norequest}} = -1.87$, $SD_{\text{Norequest}} = 0.73$ vs. $M_{\text{Request}} = 7.17$, $SD_{\text{Request}} = 1.11$) than in the control priming ($M_{\text{Norequest}} = 1.71$, $SD_{\text{Norequest}} = 0.99$ vs. $M_{\text{Request}} = 5.65$, $SD_{\text{Request}} = 0.96$) condition. Complementary analyses revealed that in the absence of request for revenge, less difficult questions were selected by participants primed with religious than control primes, $t(46) = 2.92$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.84$. This can be interpreted in the light of previous research

showing an effect of religious priming on prosociality (de Dreu et al., 1995; Pichon et al., 2007; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). However, this prosocial effect of religion disappeared when the religious priming was joined by the request for revenge, the difficulty of the questions being even descriptively (although not significantly) higher in the religion priming than in the neutral priming condition, $t(44) = 1.03, ns$.

The aforementioned findings bring support to our hypothesis that priming religion increases people’s sensitivity to the presence of a request, even be it a morally problematic one (a request to take revenge). Indeed, participants’ behavior was more affected by the presence of a problematic request after being primed with religious than with neutral concepts. And when participants were confronted with a request for revenge, the priming of religious concepts led to more submissive behaviors, though not significantly. Yet, on the basis of the findings obtained in Experiment 1, we may predict the latter effect to be observed for individuals scoring high on submissiveness, that is, for participants who are more likely to hold religion-submission associations in long-term memory. Complementary analyses provided evidence consistent with this prediction: Participants scoring above the midpoint of the submissiveness scale (54% of participants) showed significantly more revenge when the request for revenge was preceded by a religious ($M = 9.15, SD = 4.58$) than by a neutral prime ($M = 5.08, SD = 5.50$), $t(23) = 2.02, p < .03$ (one-tailed), $d = 0.84$ (see Figure 1).

In sum, this experiment shows that, whereas exposure to religious concepts makes people nicer in the absence of negative social influence, and this independently of personal submissiveness, exposure to the same religious concepts makes submissive people meaner in the presence of a negative social influence.

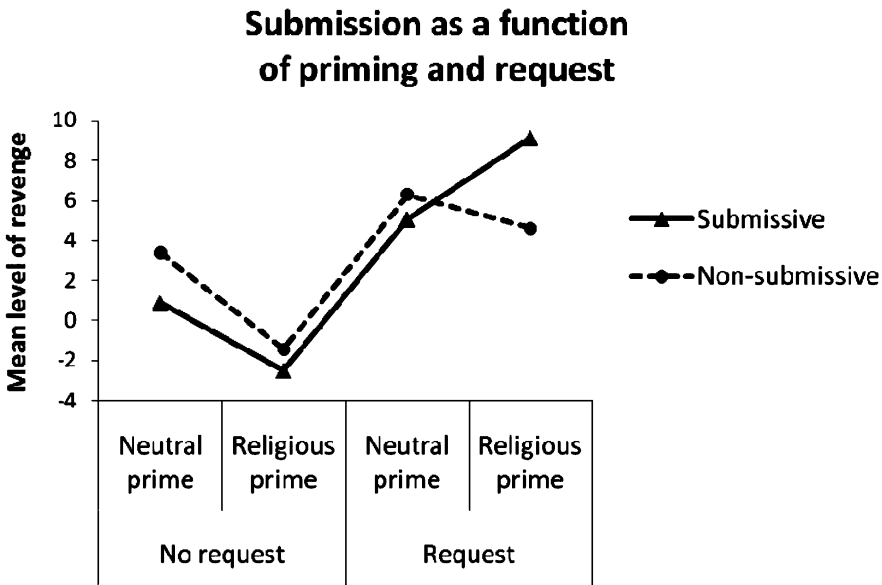


FIGURE 1 Effects of religious priming and request for revenge on actual revenge (Study 2).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The two experiments reported here provide original experimental evidence that, at least for people scoring high on self-reported submission, activating religious concepts increases accessibility of submission-related concepts (Experiment 1) as well as the production of submissive behaviors, even when a target request concerns a morally and religiously reprehensible behavior such as taking revenge (Experiment 2). To our knowledge, the present studies are the first to provide *experimental* evidence for the religion-submission link but also qualify the classic view by suggesting that this link may be particularly prevalent among people scoring high in submissiveness. Indeed, the religion-submission association was only obtained among highly submissive individuals in the present experiments.

In both experiments, we relied on a subliminal priming manipulation, which makes the findings even more interesting: Submissive concepts and behavior were induced beyond the participants' awareness by simple religious concepts (e.g., *faith*, *miracle*, *soul*); the effects were thus not produced by a specific kind of religious explicit discourse (e.g., a fundamentalist one), visible symbols (e.g., ones implying verticality), or figures (e.g., religious leaders and ministers). The fact that the observed effects were obtained under a subliminal priming procedure suggests that these effects reflect a rather implicit influence of the priming manipulation rather than a conscious motivation from the participants to behave in a way that is consistent with one's religious standards. These results thus nicely extend previous research that has revealed the negative effects of religion in interpersonal relations (aggression) produced by *supraliminal* religious priming (Bushman et al., 2007).

Of importance, however, these effects were observed only among submissive people. This suggests that the subliminal activation of religious concepts activates concepts and behavioral schemata related to submission only for people who are themselves cognitively and behaviorally sensitive to the submission-inducing aspects of relevant social realities. This was the case with religion in this study, but similar effects could probably be observed in other areas, such as politics or education. Submissive people may be sensitive to various kind of priming having to do with authority, social order, and norms. Personal religiousness, on the contrary, led to no significant effect in the present experiments, which suggests that the religion-submission association is independent from people's explicit familiarization with or involvement in religion. This does not exclude the possibility that other forms of religiousness (such as religious orthodoxy, including by definition a component of authoritarian submissiveness) may turn out to interact with religious priming in predicting submission.

The study of religious priming effects is only in its infancy. Religious concepts are multifaceted and may activate a large spectrum of associated concepts and behaviors that further research should identify. Some of these associations may be universally shared whereas others may depend on specific contexts or persons. Of interest, in the nonrequest context of Experiment 2, religious primes activated "universally" (i.e., independently of participants' religiousness or submissiveness) a prosocial behavioral schema, that is, lower propensity to take revenge. On the contrary, in the request context of Experiment 2, religious primes activated a submissive behavior among people who were themselves submissive, probably because specific religion-submission associations are stronger in these individuals.

More important, the present findings may help to reconcile an apparent contradiction in previous studies as well as to propose new ideas for future research. Indeed, religious priming

seems to facilitate both pro-social (donating: Pichon et al., 2007; cooperating: Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007; being honest: Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007) and antisocial (being aggressive: Bushman et al., 2007; being prejudiced: Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005) behaviors. As already suggested, this divergence of outcomes may result from the consideration of different targets of behavior (see Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette, Verschuere, & Dernelle, 2005) or from the consideration of different aspects or dimensions of religion (Batson et al., 2005; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005). What the present research suggests, however, is that religion may actually facilitate participants' *general* receptivity to social influence, increasing their susceptibility to engage in either prosocial or antisocial behavior depending on the specific request they are exposed to. In other words, if social cohesion and order, at the collective and the interpersonal level, are important values within religion (Saroglou et al., 2004; Schwartz & Huismans, 1995), this means that religion may contribute to both positive and negative social outcomes, but possibly not so (or always) for intrinsic reasons, at least if we think of people high in submissiveness.

Whereas the present research provides original experimental evidence that religious concepts may prime submissive thoughts and behaviors, its limitations should also be discussed and ultimately addressed in subsequent research. Clearly, it would be important to examine how the effects reported here may be moderated by factors pertaining to the nature of the population, of the primes, or of the task. First, participants in the present research had mainly a Christian background. Generalizability to all religions is thus not guaranteed, although it is plausible: All religions imply to some extent a submission of the faithful to the divine or to religious authorities. Second, gender may play a moderating role, because gender differences are known for both religiousness and submissiveness. Third, the religious words used for subliminal priming were rather positive (see Pichon et al., 2007). It is possible that using neutral or negatively valenced religious concepts (e.g., priming institutional aspects of religion or aspects implying fear or punishment) would further increase or broaden social influence effects of religious priming, by extending for instance the effects to the nonsubmissive participants. Fourth, although the present research suggests that the impact of religion on submission may extend even to behaviors that are not socially and morally valued (revenge), there may be a point at which the request communicated in a social influence attempt becomes so extreme or counternormative that participants simply refuse to comply with it, no matter the priming type. Indeed, as human history documents, some aspects or forms of religion are responsible for resistance to unethical regimes and requests. Finally, larger religion priming effects may be observed when the social influence deals with a behavior that is in conformity with religious ideals and social norms (e.g., donating for a charity, helping, being honest).

Future research should also examine the mechanisms responsible for the effects obtained here. There are several candidates. For instance, religion may activate the need for social harmony and cohesion (Schwartz & Huismans, 1995) or the need for social acceptance (Batson et al., 2005). Some religious aspects may activate fear and self-restriction (Skinner, 1953) or inhibit critical thinking (Deconchy, 1980). Activation or identification to supernatural agents may also facilitate receptivity to socially valued (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007) or socially reprehensible (Bushman et al., 2007) influences, possibly through depersonalization (see Dijksterhuis et al., 2008).

In conclusion, we believe that the present research may initiate a fruitful experimental contribution to the study of a socially important issue that has been so far mainly addressed

at the correlational level. The present findings may also help to reconcile divergent findings reported in the past literature. Finally, the perspective proposed here may also contribute to revisiting past findings under a new, social influence perspective. To give but one example, if exposure to religious concepts leads automatically, at least for some people, to the production of docile behaviors, then the well-known effects of religion on ethics and health (Spilka et al., 2003, for review) may be thought as reflecting the influence of both external (susceptibility to social influence) and internal (internalization of religious ideas) factors. With regard to the latter, much research has already been done. With regard to the former, the area is rather unexplored. We are certainly not the first to suspect that some consistency exists between humans' propensity for submissiveness and religions' willingness to give instructions and offer directions. The present research should contribute to initiate an experimental investigation of the facilitative factors and boundary conditions of this phenomenon.

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