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LOVE RELIGION, BUT HATE INTOLERANCE? TRY BUDDHISM

New research finds that, unlike those of monotheistic faiths, Buddhist concepts do not inspire prejudice toward outsiders.

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Does religion do more harm than good? Considerable research suggests the answer depends upon the type of “good” you are considering. Many studies have linked religiosity with mental and physical health, as well as a stronger tendency to help those around you. Others have found it inspires prejudice against perceived outsiders.

A newly published paper reports this trade-off may not be universal. It finds calling to mind concepts of one major world religion—Buddhism—boosts both selfless behavior *and* tolerance of people we perceive as unlike ourselves.

Reminders of Buddhist beliefs “activate both universal pro-sociality and, to some extent (given the role of individual differences), tolerance of people holding other religious beliefs or belonging to other ethnic groups,” writes a research team led by psychologist Magali Clobert, a visiting postdoctoral researcher at Stanford University.

“AFTER BEING PRIMED WITH BUDDHIST WORDS, PARTICIPANTS REPORTED LOWER EXPLICIT NEGATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD ALL KINDS OF OUT-GROUPS.”

In the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Clobert and her colleagues concede that the mention of mantras or meditation don’t impact everyone in the same way. Indeed, they have little if any effect on people with strong authoritarian tendencies.

But for the rest of us, having Buddhist ideas on the brain appears to not only evoke caring, but also reduce prejudice. This dynamic was found in three experiments featuring, respectively, people raised in a Christian society, people raised in a Buddhist culture, and Western converts to Buddhism.

The first experiment featured 116 Westerners who had joined Buddhist centers in Belgium. They were asked to complete one of two versions of a word-search puzzle. One included 10 Buddhism-related terms, including “Dharma” and “Sutras;” the other featured 10 positive non-religion-related words, such as “freedom” and “flowers.”

They then filled out a series of prejudice-related poll questions, in which they were asked whether they would like to have certain minority group members (including Muslims, atheists, and gays) as a spouse, a neighbor, or a political representative.

“After being primed with Buddhist words,” the researchers report, “participants reported lower explicit negative attitudes toward all kinds of out-groups.”

Of course, it can be argued that converts to a religion are a different breed. What about people who gradually assimilated a Buddhist worldview by growing up in an Eastern culture?

To find out, the researchers conducted another experiment featuring 122 undergraduates from National Taiwan University. (Only 8.5 percent of them identified as Buddhists; the majority were either “folk believers” or atheists.) They completed a “lexical decision task” which included either Buddhist terms such as “monk” and “reincarnation,” Christian ones such as “church” and “Bible,” or neutral concepts.

They then took two Implicit Association Tests designed to reveal any underlying prejudice against African people and Muslims. Finally, they completed surveys measuring the extent to which they possess certain psychological traits, including religiosity and authoritarianism.

The key finding: “Exposure to Buddhist concepts, compared with neutral and Christian concepts, activated decreased ethnic and religious prejudice,” particularly in people who score low in authoritarianism.

These results essentially duplicate that of yet another experiment, which featured 117 students from a French-speaking Belgian university, who (aside from the authoritarians) responded to the Buddhist terms even though they overwhelmingly identified themselves as either Catholic or atheist.

To put it another way, putting Buddhist ideas into the forefront of people’s minds apparently inspires them to weaken the distinction they make between in-group (“one of us”) and out-group (or “outsider”). All that talk of compassion and comfort with contradictions seems to lower defenses and broaden our sense of oneness.

So with its lack of dogma, Buddhism doesn’t seem to inspire the same antipathy toward outsiders that is the dark side of Western religious traditions. While these results need to be duplicated, they suggest that one common knock against religions may in fact apply only to monotheistic faiths.