Catholic Guilt? Recall of Confession Promotes Prosocial Behaviour
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Religious Rituals Are Costly
“In venerating gods, the religious delay or forgo hunting, gathering, breeding and rearing… risk infection by ritual piercing; malnourishment through starvation; mauling when hunting sacrificial carnivores; burning in trials by fire, and other harms.” (Bulbulia, 2004, p. 19).

Cultural Evolutionary Approach
Religious beliefs and practices evolve to the extent that they contribute to high levels of cooperation in religious groups (e.g., Norenzayan & Gervais, 2012).

Religious Rituals and Prosociality
A number of studies have examined whether participation in religious rituals promotes prosocial behaviour.

Sosis & Ruffle (2003)
Members of religious and secular Israeli kibbutzim played a common pool resource game.
Each game involved two members from the same kibbutz who remained anonymous to each other.


Sosis & Ruffle (2003)
100 shekels in an envelope.
How much to withdraw and keep?
If combined withdrawals > 100 shekels, both players got nothing.
Sosis & Ruffle (2003)
If the sum $\leq 100$ shekels, each player kept what they had withdrawn; remainder multiplied by 1.5 and split between both players.
Results: Less money withdrawn in the religious kibbutzim.
Frequency of engagement in collective religious rituals (synagogue attendance) negatively predicted the amount withdrawn.

Xygalatas et al. (2013)
Examined two rituals in Mauritius, part of the annual Hindu festival of Thaipusam.
1) a low-ordeal ritual involving singing and collective prayer;
2) a high-ordeal ritual involving body piercing, carrying heavy bamboo structures, and dragging carts attached by hooks to the skin for hours before climbing a mountain to reach a temple.

Xygalatas et al. (2013)
Method: Following the ritual, participants answered a questionnaire in a room near the temple. They were then paid 200 rupees for participating in the study and had the opportunity to anonymously donate any part of this money to the temple.

Xygalatas et al. (2013)
Results: high-ordeal participants donated significantly more than low-ordeal participants; higher levels of self-reported pain were associated with greater donations.

Religious Rituals and Prosociality
Evidence: Participation in religious rituals promotes prosocial behaviour.

But what about Absolution Rituals?
Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation

Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It has been 2 weeks since my last confession.

Through this ritual, faithful Catholics are absolved of their sins, released from guilt, and reconciled with the community of the Church.

But are they brought back into the fold with renewed prosocial vigour?

Absolution and Prosocial Behaviour

In releasing sinners from guilt, rituals of absolution – such as Catholic confession - may remove a key motive force for prosocial behavior:

Guilt

Regan et al. (1972)

A man approached women in a shopping centre and asked them to take his photograph.

Women led to believe they had broken the man's camera were more likely to help an unrelated third party than those told the camera malfunction was not their fault.

Guilt and Prosocial Behaviour

Ketelaar and Au (2003)

After pursuing a selfish strategy in a social bargaining game, individuals who felt guilty displayed higher levels of cooperation in a subsequent round of play than individuals who felt no guilt.

Guilt and Prosocial Behaviour

Jordan, Mullen and Murnighan (2011)

Participants who recalled an immoral act from their past reported stronger prosocial intentions and showed less cheating than people who recalled their past moral behavior.
The "Macbeth Effect"

Zhong and Liljenquist (2006)

Participants described an unethical deed from their past. Those who cleansed their hands afterward were less likely than controls to volunteer for a further research study to help a 'desperate graduate student'.

These participants were, arguably, "less motivated to volunteer because the sanitation wipes had already washed away their moral stains and restored a suitable moral self" (p. 313).


Religious Rituals and Prosociality

Evidence: Prosocial behavior is more likely when people feel guilty, or when their 'moral ledger' has a negative balance.

Question: If guilt/sin is a form of prosocial capital, might absolution rituals squander that capital?

Method

36 practicing Catholics were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, absolved or control.

All participants received a £5 show-up fee at the beginning of the experiment, paid in one-pound coins.

DV: Participants were given the opportunity to donate some of their £5 show up fee to a local Catholic church.

The experimental manipulation was a matter of when this donation was collected – either after (for absolved participants) or before (for control participants) the confession/absolution was recalled.

Method

Participants then completed two ‘memory tasks’:

Committing sin: Participants privately recalled a sin that they had committed in the past.

Confessing sin: Participants recalled confessing the sin and being absolved of it (or imagined doing so, if they had not in fact attended confession for the sin).

Method

At the end of the session all participants completed a questionnaire to measure religious beliefs and practices.

Items (1 = "strongly disagree"; 5 = "strongly agree")

- I am a religious person
- I often feel God's presence
- I believe God knows everything we do or think
- I believe God will reward believers
- I believe God will punish sinners
- My family are believers
- I often interact socially with people who are believers

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Absolved</th>
<th>Control</th>
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<tr>
<td>Recall committing sin → Recall confessing sin → Donation</td>
<td>Recall committing sin → Donation → Recall confessing sin</td>
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We first investigated the factor structure of our religion questionnaire by performing a principal components analysis. This yielded three major factors which we labeled Divine judgment beliefs, Religious activities and Religious sociality.

Recalling absolution strongly increased church donations; shifting the modal response from £1 in the control condition to £5 in the absolution condition. This effect was more pronounced the more participants believed in divine judgment and the more that they engaged in religious activities such as reading the bible or praying.

**Results**

**Discussion**

Our results indicate that the Catholic ritual of confession is an effective means of promoting commitment to the church. The Catholic church does not appear to address guilt in an evolutionarily counterproductive fashion.
Indeed, the Catholic church seems to have quite a good grasp of how to promote the evolutionary success of itself and its members...

Limitations and Future Research

A key question is whether absolution rituals also promote cooperation that extends beyond group boundaries (i.e., with outgroup members).

Pomio Kivung: a cargo cult inspired partly by the teachings of the Catholic mission that spread among traditional subsistence farmers living in the forest interior of Papua New Guinea.


The Pomio Kivung advocated a novel absolution ritual involving the payment of monetary fines. They amassed thousands of dollars in absolution money and made charitable donations to foreigners facing natural disasters in much wealthier countries (Whitehouse, 1995).


Limitations and Future Research

Our design could not clarify the mechanisms behind our effects.

One possibility is that absolution rituals promote prosocial behavior by generating positive emotions.

A second possibility is that absolution rituals may actually make past transgressions more salient, resulting in a paradoxical increase in feelings of guilt and stimulating restitutive prosocial behavior.

Ablutions vs. Absolution

Perhaps cleansing ceremonies with less of an explicit focus on sin are more likely to wash away the ‘moral stains’ that motivate prosocial behavior (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006).

Limitations and Future Research

Poor ecological validity.

The recall paradigm we used is commonly employed in moral psychology studies, but recalling the experience of Catholic confession is not equivalent to actually undergoing the experience.

It would be good to replicate our results in an ecologically valid setting.
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