

Atheists, believers do good for different reasons

by [Kimberly Winston](#) in the [June 27, 2012](#) issue

Atheists and others who don't adhere to a religion often say they can be good without God. Now three new studies appear to back them up.

Researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, conducted three experiments showing that less-religious people perform acts of generosity more from feelings of compassion than do more-religious people. The findings were published in the current issue of the online journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

Their results challenge traditional thinking about what drives religious people to perform acts of kindness for others. "The main takeaway from the research is that there may be very different reasons why more and less religious people behave generously when they do," said Robb Willer, an assistant professor of sociology at Berkeley and a coauthor of the studies.

"Across three studies, we found compassion played a much bigger role in the way that less-religious people treated others. Religious people, in contrast, tended to behave as generously as they would regardless of how compassionately they felt."

At the same time, Willer said, views of nonreligious people as cold and amoral need adjustment. "We find that nonreligious people do feel compassion for others, and that those feelings are strongly related to whether they choose to help others or not."

The goal of the studies was to determine what drives people's "prosocial" behaviors—acts intended to help others. In the first experiment, researchers analyzed a national survey of more than 1,000 U.S. adults. Those who agreed with the statement, "When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective toward them," said they were more inclined to act generously toward those people—giving them a seat on a bus, for example, or lending them a belonging.

“These findings indicate that although compassion is associated with prosociality among both less-religious and more-religious individuals, this relationship is particularly robust for less-religious individuals,” the researchers wrote.

In the second experiment, 101 American adults were shown two videos, one neutral and one depicting poverty-stricken children. They were then given ten “lab dollars” and told that they could give any or all of it to a stranger. The less religious in the study gave more of the dollars away.

The third experiment involved more than 200 college students who were asked how compassionate they felt. They then played a game in which they were given money to share or keep, and were told that another player had given a portion of his money to them. The players could reward the giver by giving back some of the money, which had doubled. The less religious who reported high feelings of compassion were more inclined to share their winnings than other participants.

But to read the results of these studies as a condemnation of religious people would be a mistake, Willer said. “We did not find that less-religious people were more compassionate or generous than more-religious people,” he said. “This wasn’t what our research was about.

“What we were studying were the different reasons why more- and less-religious people behave generously or not. And we guessed that less-religious people are more driven by compassion, and that’s what we found. So we’re not saying that less-religious people are more generous, we’re saying they’re generous for different reasons.”

Brian Howell, an associate professor of anthropology at Wheaton College, a flagship evangelical school, said the results of the Berkeley study did not surprise him.

“They did not find that nonreligious people were more generous overall, just that they needed emotional responses to be generous more than religious people do,” he said. “So all those TV ads of starving children are important for the nonreligious to give money, but not so much for the religious.”

Howell cited anthropological research among U.S. evangelicals that shows their decisions to be generous can involve God’s expectations of human behavior. “They want to be, as they would say, ‘good stewards’ of their giving,” Howell continued. “Though compassion is part of this, I think a lot of religious people would not report

that as central to their decision making because they would want to know that their giving is going to support long-term, even eternal, priorities of God.”

The Berkeley researchers suggest that people who are more religious may base their generosity less on feelings of compassion and more on “doctrine, communal identity, or reputational concerns.” —RNS