

Belief in God strengthened by imagining how life would be different

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New research shows a person's belief in God is strengthened when thinking of "what might have been" especially in reflecting on a major life event that could have turned out poorly. Importantly, the study shows how believers can come to perceive evidence for their religious conviction via deliberate and rational cognitive processes. The study, "But for the Grace of God: Counterfactuals Influence Religious Belief and Images of the Divine," is published in the April issue of *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

Dr. Anneke Buffone, lead author of the study, began her research on the subject because she "became intrigued by the question of how people perceive God as an active, trustworthy, and giving influence in their everyday lives. Why is it that the vast majority of Americans, and many people across the globe, perceive a divine or spiritual influence in their lives and are firm believers in God, even in our modern world where many mysteries of the past have been scientifically explained?"

To examine these perceptions, the team focused on counterfactual thinking.

"Counterfactuals, imagining how life would be different if a given event had not occurred, seemed like a good candidate due to its effect of making inferred connections between events seem more meaningful, surprising, and 'meant to be,' Buffone says. "We specifically explored how downward counterfactual thinking, thoughts about how life would be worse if an important life event had not occurred, may be a way in

which believers come to perceive evidence for a God that is acting for their benefit."

In their first study, 280 undergraduate students wrote an essay in which they described an important positive or negative life event from their past. One third of the participants were then told to think about how life could be better, one third asked to imagine how life might be worse, and one third simply asked to describe the event in more detail. Following this exercise the participants answered a series of questions related to their strength of religious beliefs including faith, behavior, and how much they felt the influence of God.

"The results suggest that counterfactual thinking leads believers to the belief that the event did not occur by chance alone, and leads them to search for a source, in this case God, and this in turn leads to an increase in religious faith," says Buffone.

The authors found effects to be strongest when people thought about the events in a downward counterfactual direction, that is, when they thought how life would be worse if an event had not occurred.

The team conducted a second study with a non-college group. 99 people went through a similar essay and questionnaire process as the previous study. The results from this second, non-student study were consistent with those of the first study.

The authors recognize the limits of the study, especially using a U.S.-based population.

"Some major religions do not believe in a deity at all or do not believe in just one deity and it is unclear whether counterfactual thinking's effects on [religious belief](#) would differ between monotheistic and polytheistic religions as well as between different religions more generally," Buffone

said. "Furthermore, individuals who believe that God frequently intervenes in human affairs likely will be more affected by downward counterfactual reflection than believers that think that God rarely (or never) intervenes."

"Ultimately, I hope this research will help believers and non-believers understand the [cognitive processes](#) involved in religious conviction," says Buffone. "Religious conviction does not have to be grounded in blindly accepting dogma or scriptures, but can be deduced by logical reasoning processes as well. From a scientific standpoint this work helps explain how religious conviction can prevail despite a lack of concrete, physical evidence for religious claims."

More information: Buffone, Anneke; Gabriel, Shira; Poulin, Michael (2016) "But for the Grace of God: Counterfactuals Influence Religious Belief and Images of the Divine" *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. [dx.doi.org/10.1177/1948550616632576](https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550616632576)

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