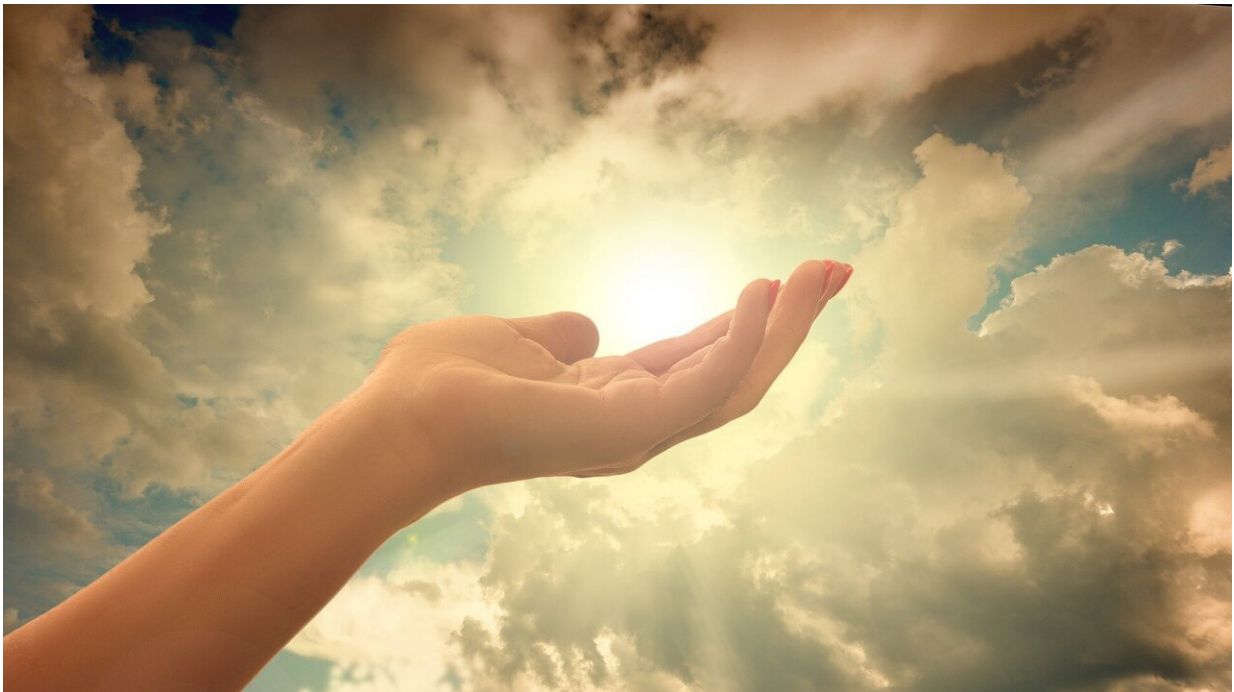


# Study helps explain how religious beliefs are formed

May 24 2021

---



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Feeling anxious can direct our attention and memory toward supernatural beings such as gods, a University of Otago study has found.

Lead author Dr. Thomas Swan, of the Department of Psychology, says the research may help explain how [religious beliefs](#) are formed.

For the study, published in the *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 972 participants completed an online recall test to determine if a bias to recall supernatural agents was stronger in [anxious people](#), rather than non-anxious people.

Those who felt anxious were more likely to remember beings with supernatural abilities than beings without.

"Anxiety is an emotion that evolved to make us pay greater attention to potential threats, so when we feel anxious, a god that can read our thoughts and punish us for them, or flood the Earth, is going to be memorable," he says.

Previous research has shown [anxiety](#) can lead to greater levels of religious belief, with the explanation being that belief provides comfort. However, this so-called 'comfort theory' has problems: why are there punishing gods and hellish afterlives when these are far from comforting?

Dr. Swan believes the theory also fails to address what comes between feeling anxious and becoming a believer. This research suggests the first step involves the cognitive effects of anxiety, which cause people to attend to and recall threats.

"In our previous research, we found that [supernatural beings](#) are perceived as potentially threatening because they have abilities that defy our expectations about the world. The present research confirms that the cognitive effects of anxiety also extend to the threat that is afforded by supernatural beings.

"Ironically then, our research suggests comfort theory has it somewhat backwards: anxious people are attracted, at least initially, to the scary traits of gods, which may explain why so many gods have scary features.

Comfort, we suspect, comes later when some people transform their view of the god into something more palatable that they are happier believing," he says.

The research also suggests other supernatural concepts—such as ghosts, psychics, and astrology—will be digested in the same way because of how they alarmingly defy our expectations about what is possible.

Dr. Swan hopes the research prompts people to develop a greater understanding of how their emotional states affect the information they look at and remember, particularly religious information.

"We should all be mindful of how we came to believe the things we do, especially those with [anxiety disorders](#) who feel anxious much of the time—they should be mindful of what they are attracted to and why. If they find themselves reading fantasy novels, that may be harmless. If they find themselves joining a cult, then it's time for some reflection. The same goes for people without disorders who are just in anxious situations, such as sitting in a hospital bed or suffering financial troubles."

On the flipside, he hopes religious groups pay more attention to people's mental states.

"They should be providing care but also giving people time to overcome their troubles before integrating them into a highly religious system of beliefs and practices. If they are still willing to join the religion when the turmoil is over, that might be a more ethical moment."

**More information:** Thomas Swan et al, Anxiety Enhances Recall of Supernatural Agents, *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/10508619.2021.1898808](https://doi.org/10.1080/10508619.2021.1898808)

Provided by University of Otago

Citation: Study helps explain how religious beliefs are formed (2021, May 24) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-05-religious-beliefs.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.