



“God Is Watching You” ... and might be influencing your brain, too

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“God Is Watching You” ... and might be influencing your brain, too

This issue of *Religion, Brain & Behavior* (RBB) features a book symposium on Dominic Johnson’s *God Is Watching You: How the Fear of God Makes Us Human*. Eight commentators engage Johnson’s book and the author replies.

RBB has published several articles and features on supernatural-agent monitoring and punishment throughout its history.

- RBB’s very first issue (2011) included a target article by Jeffrey Schloss and Michael Murray on “Evolutionary Accounts of Belief in Supernatural Punishment: A Critical Review,” accompanied by eight commentaries, including one from Dominic Johnson and one from psychologist Azim Shariff, whose well-known experimental studies on supernatural monitoring have inspired much work in the field. Shariff also comments on Johnson’s book here.
- Issue 1/2 included an article by Pierrick Bourrat, Quentin Atkinson, and Robin Dunbar on “Supernatural Punishment and Individual Social Compliance across Cultures,” which uses data from the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample to test hypotheses derived from supernatural punishment theory.
- In the same issue, “Bearing Gods in Mind and Culture” by LeRon Shults deals with divine monitoring accounts of religion in books by Scott Atran, Pascal Boyer, David Lewis-Williams, and Matt Rossano.
- Issue 5/4 was a large book symposium on Ara Norenzayan’s *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict*, with 10 commentators and a response by the author.
- Issue 6/1 presented articles that experimentally tested the supernatural punishment hypothesis in the laboratory and the field: “Priming of Supernatural Agent Concepts and Agency Detection” by Michiel van Elk, Bastiaan Rutjens, Joop van der Pligt, and Frenk van Harreveld; and “Supernatural Punishment, In-Group Biases, and Material Insecurity: Experiments and Ethnography from Yasawa, Fiji” by Rita Anne McNamara, Ara Norenzayan, and Joseph Henrich.
- Issue 6/2 continued the theme in an article by Yasha Hartberg, Michael Cox, and Sergio Villamayor-Tomas entitled “Supernatural Monitoring and Sanctioning in Community-Based Resource Management.” In this article the authors conducted a meta-analysis on case studies in which religion played some role in community-based resource management to determine the effects of supernatural monitoring on these cooperative endeavors.
- In issue 7/3 we published “After God’s Image: Prayer Leads People with Positive God Beliefs to Read Less Hostility in Others’ Eyes” by Marieke Meijer-van Abbema and Sander Koole, a priming experiment that examined the relationship between prayer, God-conceptions, and supernatural monitoring.
- Issue 8/2 was a special issue guest edited by Benjamin Purzycki, Joseph Henrich, and Ara Norenzayan on “The Evolution of Morality and Religion Project,” presenting results from a multicultural experiment involving supernatural monitoring.

And many articles not mentioned in this list touch on supernatural monitoring and punishment along the way.

This history involves a large number of different authors and many different angles on the topic. Thus, it may be fruitful to reflect on why the theme of supernatural monitoring and punishment is sustaining such high levels of scholarly and scientific interest.

On the one hand, the experimental evidence from priming and other studies indicates that this topic deserves the attention it is receiving. Artificial environments problematize experiments, including priming studies, but cumulatively we are seeing a strong signal: religious beliefs and practices seem to both express and nurture the idea that we are being watched and evaluated by morally interested supernatural agents. Of course, everything is complicated: not all supernatural agents are morally interested in human behavior and many religiously affiliated people are functionally naturalist in their worldviews. But the cross-cultural signal is there and looks to be phylogenetically ancient, so it calls for interpretation.

On the other hand, the supernatural monitoring and punishment hypothesis offers an elegant answer to deep questions about human cultural evolution, including the evolution of prosociality; the emergence of culturally borne moral norms; and the stabilization of religious beliefs, rituals, and behaviors. This answer knits together what we think we have learned about the way human cognition biases our approach to the world with what it must have taken to phylogenetically stabilize our cognitive-emotional equipment. It is not the whole story, but at this point any comprehensive explanation of human evolution seems to require an account of supernatural monitoring and punishment.

Thus, there are good reasons why the theme of supernatural monitoring and punishment has been so prominent in *RBB*. And we do not think interest in it is going away anytime soon.

The current issue also presents a rare longitudinal study in the field of neuroscience. Andrew Newberg and colleagues use single-photon emission computed tomography (SPECT) on practitioners before and after attending a spiritual retreat. Of course, the study is preliminary, but it is our hope that it may inspire other researchers to use similar intervention designs to examine the neural effects of major religious events. Most neuroscience studies today use either functional or structural neuroimaging. Functional studies are constrained by the artificial setting of the scan environment and the short time span of a typical scan session, whereas structural studies, which link brain anatomy with various religious variables, are purely correlational. Intervention studies such as Newberg et al.'s, if done properly, may double the cost of scan time, but they may well triple the pay-off by allowing researchers to study the neural effects of naturally occurring religious events. Indeed, we believe that future longitudinal studies will be instrumental in understanding how major religious events affect the brain over time.

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Editors