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RELIGIOUS BELIEF AS A FACTOR IN OBEDIENCE TO DESTRUCTIVE COMMANDS

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Abstract

Thirty subjects selected from a college population were evaluated according to three religious beliefs' scales. They were subsequently exposed to a modified version of Milgram's (1963) procedure in which they were instructed to administer "shocks" to a victim for supposed "errors" on a learning task. Although it was hypothesized that persons scoring in the mid-range of religious scales would be less obedient than extremes, it was in fact found that moderate believers administered significantly more punishment than either the religious or nonreligious extremes.

A perennial and current conflict involves a man's response to authority when that authority demands that he harm another human being. In past times legitimate authorities have demanded that witches be burned, Jews be exterminated, and the mentally unbalanced be chained and beaten. More recently, American students have experienced intense conflict over their required role in Viet Nam. Oversimplified, the question becomes: How do I choose between two demands when they are *in opposition*—the demand of an external, legitimate authority and the demand of my own commitment to the protection of the welfare of others?

Laboratory experiments have been devised involving realistic situations in

which an authority orders an individual to obey commands which appear to result in destructive consequences for another person (Buss, 1961; Milgram, 1961, 1963). In Milgram's study an ethical dilemma is created which forces the individual to choose between an experimenter's demand to administer increasingly painful shocks to a fellow subject and defiance of the presiding authority which apparently disrupts the experiment. Over two-thirds of the subjects dealt with the conflict by obeying to the end the destructive commands (Milgram, 1963).

Several variables have been identified which relate to an individual's resolution of this conflict. Subjects tend to resolve the conflict through obedience to the

authority when they score high on measures of hostility (Haas, 1966; Buss, 1961; Youssef, 1968), when group pressure is applied (Milgram, 1964, 1965; Kudirka, 1965), when the victim is male or of a different race (Youssef, 1968), when the experimenter is viewed as high status, (Gladstone, 1969), and most significantly when their scores on measures of authoritarianism are high (Elms and Milgram, 1966; Abrams, 1964). On the other hand, subjects tend to defy the experimental authority when they score high on measures of moral judgment (Kohlberg, 1968), when their scores on social responsibility scales are high (Elms and Milgram, 1966), when the victim is high status (Williamson, 1967), and when guilt is induced experimentally (Carlsmith and Gross, 1969; Freedman, Wallington, and Bless, 1967).

It is the interest of this study to assess the influence of an individual's religious commitment on his choice of obedience or resistance. In an experimental situation in which the conflict is clearly experienced, will subjects with more pronounced religious commitment show stronger resistance to authority?

The Christian religion emphasizes man's responsibility to obey legitimate authority; but it places primary emphasis on man's responsibility to treat a fellow human being with respect and care. From a Biblical perspective, the press for obedience by an authority must always be assessed in light of the effects such obedience would have on the persons involved.

However, religious believers in America have often placed primary emphasis on obedience and have relegated man's responsibility for the protection of his neighbor to a position clearly secondary. For instance, within the religious structure children have been taught to obey

authority unquestioningly; they have not been taught to assess critically the legitimacy of that authority's demands. Thus, individuals who are deeply embedded in this structure would be expected to obey authority to the exclusion of other values.

At the same time, nonreligious extremes can become committed to an authoritarian structure of their own. They may find themselves caught in the web of excessive submission to the authority of their own value structure. Perhaps with respect to authoritarian systems, religious and nonreligious extremes hold similar positions.

On the other hand, it might be theorized that religious moderates have their values more in balance—i.e., while they recognize the importance of obedience to authority, they evaluate that authority in light of their concern for other men. If this is accurate, they would be expected hastily to terminate their participation in any procedure involving the infliction of pain on another person.

METHOD

Hypothesis

Persons scoring at the extremes on religious scales will be more obedient to an authority commanding destructive behavior than individuals scoring in the mid-range.

Subjects

Thirty subjects ranging in age from 18 to 33 were selected from a local two-year college. Seventeen were male and thirteen were female. No attempt was made to discriminate on the basis of religious or racial criteria. Thus, the subjects represented a wide range of church affiliations and religious backgrounds.

Procedure

Subjects came by individual appoint-

ment to a school facility. They were paid \$5.00 for merely appearing. It was explained that this money was in no way contingent on their performance during the experiment.

Subjects completed two paper and pencil tasks:

1. Inventory of Religious Belief (Brown & Lowe, 1951). This is a brief 15-item measure highly discriminative of religious stances from believer to nonbeliever.
2. Religious Attitude Inventory (Broen, 1955). A 58-item scale which provides scores on two factors — a "Fundamentalism-Humanism" factor and a "Nearness to God" factor.

The subjects were subsequently introduced to a modified version of Milgram's (1963) procedure. At this point the subject was joined by a second "subject," actually an accomplice, and the pair were introduced to the experimenter. The purpose of the experiment was explained as an effort to judge the effects of punishment on human learning. A fake drawing elected the subject as "teacher" and the accomplice as "learner." The experimental apparatus was explained to the teacher and learner as a shock generator. This device was actually a panel of harmless switches graded from 15 to 450 volts.

The learner was strapped to a chair and connected to electrodes for receiving "shocks." He was out of view, but well within earshot of the teacher. He complained nervously of a heart condition and asked to be reassured concerning the punishment. The experimenter claimed, "the shocks may be painful, but they are not dangerous." The learning task, a paired-word association test, was administered by the teacher. When the learner made errors determined by a script,

the teacher was instructed to administer increasingly elevated voltage as punishment. As the errors continued, the learner gave agonized screams appropriate to the shock level. These outbursts put the teacher under increased tension to defy the experimenter's authority and terminate the procedure. He was permitted to do so only after a clear break was made with the experimenter's repeated demands to continue. The measure of each subject's obedience was the highest shock value he administered.

When the procedure was terminated, the subject was reconciled to the learner. The learner was shown to be an accomplice and not to have received any shocks. Most subjects were greatly relieved.

A therapist debriefed each subject for a minimum of one-half hour during which subjects expressed their feelings about the experiment. The extensive debriefing was an attempt to meet Baumrind's (1964) complaint that Milgram gave only "casual assurance" to his subjects.

RESULTS

Subjects experienced a wide range of emotions as the tension between fundamental ethical principles came into conflict with the experimenter's demand to continue punishment. The tension appeared in such forms as crying on the part of several female subjects, laughing when the learner groaned, anger toward the experimenter, and nervous fumbling and stalling before administering the shocks.

The hypothesis stated that obedient subjects would tend to be in the theological extremes, while defiant subjects would occupy the center of the theological spectrum. Prior to the collection of data, it was decided that a subject would be considered an "extreme believer" or an

“extreme nonbeliever” if he scored in the upper or lower 20% of the range for each of the three religious scales. The “moderates,” then, would be those subjects scoring in the middle 60% of each scale’s range. These figures were altered slightly after the data were collected because of the number of subjects

The mean of the maximum shocks for the extreme groups was 285.0 volts and for the moderate group, 409.0 volts. These data make it evident that the hypothesis was disconfirmed. However, the data suggest the reverse of the present hypothesis—namely that moderates are more obedient than extremes. In this

TABLE 1
COMPARISON OF MEAN MAXIMUM SHOCK FOR EXTREMES AND MODERATES
ON BROWN AND LOWE'S INVENTORY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Group	Sample Size	IRB Range	Standard Deviation	Mean Maximum Shock (Volts)	t value
Extreme Non-Believers (N=4)	11	15-34	144.6	319.3	2.66*
Extreme Believers (N=7)		60-75	129.4	225.0	
Moderates	19	35-59	48.2	409.0	

*p<.05

in each category. If subjects were limited for a given category, the range considered was sometimes increased slightly in order to include enough subjects to make data analysis possible. Table 1 compares the extremes and moderates on the Inventory of Religious Belief with regard to the highest shock level administered by subjects before terminating the experiment.

connection the difference between the means was significant at the .05 level. On the Fundamentalism-Humanism dimension, the extreme groups were again less obedient than the moderates. The difference between the means was significant at the .05 level, strengthening the possibility that religious moderates are indeed more obedient.

TABLE 2
COMPARISON OF MEAN MAXIMUM SHOCK FOR EXTREMES AND MODERATES
ON BROEN'S FUNDAMENTALISM-HUMANISM DIMENSION

Group	Sample Size	F-H Range	Standard Deviation	Mean Maximum Shock (Volts)	t value
Extreme Non-Believers (N=5)	11	0-6	138.0	249.0	2.22*
Extreme Believers (N=6)		25-31	133.9	337.5	
Moderates	19	7-24	61.0	402.1	

*p<.05

TABLE 3
COMPARISON OF MEAN MAXIMUM FOR EXTREMES AND MODERATES
ON BROEN'S NEARNESS-TO-GOD DIMENSION

<i>Group</i>	<i>Sample Size</i>	<i>N-G Range</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Mean Maximum Shock (Volts)</i>	<i>t value</i>
Extreme Non-Believers (N=5)	12	0-11	171.4	312.0	1.26
Extreme Believers (N=7)		24-31	107.1	332.1	
Moderates	18	12-23	79.8	390.0	

Extremes on the Nearness-to-God dimension were less obedient than moderates, but the difference was not significant ($.20 > p > .10$).

A scatterplot representation of the data suggested a curvilinear relationship; i.e., extremes on each of the three religious scales tended to administer lower maximum shocks than the moderates. On the basis of this observation a correlation ratio, eta, was computed between scores on each religious scale and maximum shock administered. The results are given in Table 4.

On each of the three religious dimensions eta was found to be significant at the .05 level. In order to establish curvilinearity each eta was compared with a Pearson *r* computed for the same data. For two of the three comparisons the differences were significant at the .05 level.

Finally, a comparison was made to see if sex was a factor in the administration of shock. Contrary to Youssef (1968), no differential levels of shock were observed, although the male mean (372.4 volts) was slightly higher than the female

TABLE 4
CORRELATION RATIO AND TEST OF NONLINEARITY FOR RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE
SCORES VERSUS MAXIMUM SHOCK ADMINISTERED

<i>Attitudes Correlated</i>	<i>Eta (n)</i>	<i>Pearson r</i>	<i>F test of Linearity (F Scores)</i>
Inventory of Religious Belief with Maximum Shock Administered	.72*	.06	2.75*
Fundamentalism-Humanism with Maximum Shock Administered	.70*	.03	2.83*
Nearness-to-God with Maximum Shock Administered	.72*	.17	2.20

* $p < .05$

mean (351.9 volts). A difference between these means failed to reach significance ($t=0.42$; $p > .50$).

DISCUSSION

The aim of this investigation was to determine the relevance of a religious variable in choosing between obedience or resistance to destructive commands. The results suggest an unexpected relationship which requires explanation. Although it was hypothesized that persons scoring in the extremes on religious scales would perform more obediently, it was in fact found that they were significantly more resistant.

It is apparent that the theory initially presented in this paper is defective. Struening (1963) and Allport and Ross (1967), among others, found that *frequent* church-attenders and *non*-attenders are less prejudiced than *infrequent* attenders. In light of these results, a more accurate prediction would have been that the moderates of this study, perhaps comparable to the infrequent attenders, would show more submission to external norms. On the other hand, the religious extremes, comparable to the frequent attenders and non-attenders, should have been expected to behave more in accordance with humanitarian or moral directives.

One may theorize that the religious extremes consist of persons who have arrived at strong commitments. The ability to make firm decisions has perhaps become part of their life style. Thus, under experimental stress, they are both attitudinally and behaviorally capable of

making decisions consistent with moral conscience.

Contrariwise, the religious moderates may be unaccustomed to firm decision-making. They are the "agnostics," those who do "not know for sure." In the presence of such indecision, they are willing to have the momentary decisions of life made for them. In this experiment, it was compelling to surrender moral conscience to a seemingly knowledgeable and decisive person. Only those accustomed to independent decision-making could resist.

The fact that this religious variable is significant suggests that an alternative explanation may arise from within the structure of religion itself. In the Judeo-Christian tradition a high value is placed on a strong, well-defined response to "the will of God." In fact, a decisive response even if negative is to be preferred over neutrality. The Biblical position is that the man who is undecided about basic religious issues is unable to be decisive when confronted by an ethical dilemma. His tendency is to forfeit his choice to any impinging power. On the other hand, having taken a definite religious stance, one is in a position to act in accord with conscience.

Finally, the unexpected direction of the results and the size of the sample limit the extent to which generalizations are valid. However, the provocative outcome of this study suggests the need for future research designed to clarify the relationship between religious variables and ethical decisions which involve the demands of authority.

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