Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

COMMENTARY

# Do religious experiences shape religious beliefs or religious concepts?

Andrew Shtulman

Department of Psychology, Occidental College, Los Angeles, CA, USA

The Interactive Religious Experience Model (IREM), proposed by Van Leeuwen and van Elk, uses agency detection to explain how general religious ideas, like "God answers prayers," become personal beliefs, like "God answered *my* prayers when *I* was sick." The model treats agency detection not as the source of religious ideas but as the moderator between learning about religious ideas (through culture) and fully embracing them, and it treats religious experience as the catalyst for detecting the belief-relevant agents (e.g., angels, spirits, gods). IREM helps to explain a variety of phenomena, from the personalized nature of religious worship to the personalized nature of religious rituals, but one aspect of the model that could use further clarification is the role of religious experience in fostering religious belief. The suggested role is to personalize ideas that are accepted as generically true, but another possible role is to select between competing ideas – ideas that may not be mutually compatible because they presuppose distinct conceptions of the agents involved.

Consider the concept of God. This concept has been associated with fundamentally different representations within and across cultures (Armstrong, 1994). Representations of God in public media and public discourse range from the highly anthropomorphic ("heavenly father," "almighty lord," "king of kings") to the highly abstract ("supreme being," "prime mover," "universal spirit"). This variation is echoed in how theists mentally represent God. When asked whether God possesses human attributes, most theists agree that God possesses psychological attributes, like beliefs and desires, but they disagree about whether God possesses physical attributes, like weight and height, or biological attributes, like organs and bodily functions (Richert, Saide, Lesage, & Shaman, 2017; Richert, Shaman, Saide, & Lesage, 2016; Shtulman, 2008, 2010; Shtulman & Lindeman, 2016). Three predictors of whether people assign physical and biological attributes to God are age, culture, and religiosity. Children are more likely to do so than adults; Hindus are more likely to do so than Christians, who are more likely to do so than Muslims; and the highly religious are more likely to do so than the less religious.

Why do people vary in their conceptions of God? One explanation is that people in communities are exposed to different representations of God. Anthropomorphic representations may dominate in some communities (e.g., Hindu communities, fundamentalist communities), whereas abstract representations may dominate in others (e.g., Catholic communities, Unitarian communities). This explanation is not particularly satisfying, though, as it begs the question of why representations would differ by community. IREM offers a different explanation: differences in mental representations arise not from differences in the public representations people encounter but from differences in the religious experiences that support those representations. Individuals who seek out intensive religious experiences, of the type described by Van Leeuwen and van Elk, may be more likely to "perceive" God via agency detection mechanisms, and these perceptions may, in turn, render anthropomorphic representations of God more appealing than abstract ones. Conversely, individuals who do

---

not seek out religious experiences may find abstract representations more satisfying, perhaps because these representations are more "theologically correct" (Barrett, 1999).

Religious experiences may help theists decide between competing conceptions of God in two ways: by answering the specific question of whether God is physically present in the environment or by answering the general question of whether God is causally responsible for the events in one's life. Agency detection may play different roles in answering each question. Mechanisms of agency detection like sensitivity to faces, sensitivity to goal-directed motion, and sensitivity to changes in peripersonal space would be useful for answering the first question but not necessarily the second. We can, after all, sense the presence of an agent without also attributing intentions to the agent, as when we sense a deer in the woods or a pedestrian on the other side of the street. On the other hand, mechanisms like sensitivity to order, sensitivity to design, and sensitivity to coincidences (see Keil & Newman, 2015) would be useful for answering the second question but not necessarily the first. We can tell when an environment has been altered by an agent even if the agent is no longer present, as when we see footsteps in the sand or trash in the grass.

Distinguishing these two routes from agency detection to belief formation is potentially important for understanding *how* religious experiences give rise to religious beliefs. Some beliefs, like "God is holding my hand" or "God is sitting at my table," presuppose a concrete, anthropomorphic conception of God, whereas other beliefs, like "God helped me decide" or "God planned for us to meet," are consistent with a more abstract notion of God – a notion in which God has intentional agency but not physical agency. The latter type of beliefs may be more widespread than the former given that almost everyone agrees God has a mind but not everyone agrees God has a body (Shtulman & Lindeman, 2016; see also Heiphetz, Lane, Waytz, & Young, 2016).

Given the priority of mental attributions over physical attributions in reasoning about God, the IREM may also need further clarification regarding theory of mind (ToM). ToM reasoning is applicable to any agent with a mind, but it's not obvious that the transformative value of agency detection, in the context of religious experience, is to provide further evidence that religious agents have minds. This claim is generally accepted, and evidence for the claim can be gathered in mundane contexts (e.g., reading meaning into coincidences, appreciating "design" in nature). Rather, the real work of agency detection may be to convince believers that religious agents have bodies (or physical forms) as well as minds. If this speculation is correct, ToM reasoning would play a different role in the creation of personal religious beliefs than the suggested role, directly linking general religious beliefs to personal religious beliefs rather than indirectly linking them via agency detection. Of course, the precise roles played by ToM reasoning and agency detection can only be established through empirical research, and the IREM provides a valuable framework for motivating and interpreting that research.

## Disclosure statement

## Funding

## References

Armstrong, K. (1994). *A history of God*. New York: Random House.
Barrett, J. L. (1999). Theological correctness: Cognitive constraint and the study of religion. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, *11*, 325–339.
Heiphetz, L., Lane, J. D., Waytz, A., & Young, L. (2016). How children and adults represent God's mind. *Cognitive Science*, *40*, 121–144.

Keil, F., & Newman, G. (2015). Order, order everywhere, and only an agent to think: The cognitive compulsion to infer intentional agents. *Mind & Language*, *30*, 117–139.

Richert, R. A., Saide, A. R., Lesage, K. A., & Shaman, N. J. (2017). The role of religious context in children's differentiation between God's mind and human minds. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, *35*, 37–59.

Richert, R. A., Shaman, N. J., Saide, A. R., & Lesage, K. A. (2016). Folding your hands helps God hear you: Prayer and anthropomorphism in parents and children. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, *27*, 140–157.

Shtulman, A. (2008). Variation in the anthropomorphization of supernatural beings and its implications for cognitive theories of religion. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, *34*, 1123–1138.

Shtulman, A. (2010). Theories of God: Explanatory coherence in a nonscientific domain. *Proceedings of the 32nd Conference of the Cognitive Science Society*, 1295–1300.

Shtulman, A., & Lindeman, M. (2016). Attributes of God: Conceptual foundations of a foundational belief. *Cognitive Science*, *40*, 635–670.