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## Moralizing Gods and the Rise of Civilization



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### Synonyms

[Religion and development of civilization](#)

### Definition

Gods and their moralizing values, especially the powers regarding punishment, are related with how civilizations rose and developed into large societies.

The emergence of human civilization is related to the power of large-scale cooperation. Although cooperative behavior is seen in most mammals, large-scale cooperation extends beyond genetically related relatives. This type of cooperation, sometimes called ultrasociality, can be seen even in anonymous and one-time interactions but, without the reputational concern of any kind of large-scale cooperation, cannot be explained by standard evolutionary mechanisms. One of the hypotheses to solve this problem is the

supernatural punishment hypothesis (Johnson and Krüger 2004). According to this hypothesis, the human surveillance mechanism does not observe and monitor every situation. However, the possibility of punishment by a supernatural agent eliminates the limitations of punishment for a person who violates moral rules. In other words, the mechanism of fear of supernatural punishment as an evolutionarily stable strategy explains why religions, and especially of religions with a moralizing high gods, spread (Johnson 2016). It is therefore thought that religious belief and especially the belief in fear of supernatural punishment is an evolutionary adaptation to eliminate the problem of cooperation between large groups (Johnson and Krüger 2004; Johnson 2016). In this perspective, the existence of punishment by an omniscient and omnipotent supernatural agent eliminates the possibility of being not able to observe a moral violator among the communities of human beings with certainty in punishing a person who will make a moral violation. It is thought that the emergence of the idea of supernatural punishment is what underlies the ultrasociality commonly seen in human societies (Purzycki et al. 2016; see also Norenzayan 2013).

In other words, it is thought that there is a relationship between the emergence of moralizing religions and cooperation. For example, the emergence of big moral religions is believed to force people to move together around the temple and thus lead to the agricultural revolution (Norenzayan 2013). The fact that the temples in

Göbekli Tepe are dated to a time before the agricultural revolution supports this view (Schmidt 2000).

In addition, different findings using different methods seem to support the supernatural punishment hypothesis. For example, people who believe that God has a punitive character do less cheating behavior on a subsequent task, while participants who believe in God's forgiving aspects show significantly more cheating behavior in the task (Shariff and Norenzayan 2011). In a cross-cultural analysis of national crime rates, Shariff and Rhemtulla (2012) found that there is a negative correlation between the degree of believing in hell and the national crime rates, but there is a positive correlation with the degree of belief in heaven. In a study of 186 different cultures, Johnson (2009) found a positive relationship between the belief in a punitive god and cooperation. Moreover, in a study conducted in eight different cultures, it was observed that a factor that increased the level of helping toward distant coreligionists is the belief that God has a punitive character (Purzycki et al. 2016). Yilmaz and Bahçekapili (2016) also experimentally showed that activating the punitive aspects of religion caused a significant increase in prosocial intentions. More interestingly, in a way similar to the punitive effect of religion, activating the punitive aspects of secular institutions has similarly led to an increase in prosocial intentions in the same study. This shows that, in addition to religious authorities, punitive secular authorities have similar power in cooperation in contemporary civilization. Likewise, in the study of Shariff and Norenzayan (2007), activating religious or secular institutions had a very similar effect on prosocial behavior.

As a result, these findings support the argument that societies that believe in punitive and omnipotent supernatural powers are more cooperative, and less selfish, which in turn expand and create

our large-scale civilization (see Norenzayan 2013).

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Altruistic Punishment and Strong Reciprocity](#)
- ▶ [Evolution of Morality](#)
- ▶ [Religious Beliefs](#)

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