Moral Stereotypes, Moral Self-Image, and Religiosity

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The precise mechanisms that account for the positive association between religion and self-reports of morality are uncertain. Three studies examined whether the association between religiosity and moral self-image was explained by perceptions of the morality of one’s religious ingroup, beliefs that one needs religion to be moral, and impression management. In Study 1 (N = 284), perceptions of the morality one’s religious ingroup, impression management, the perceived desirability of moral traits, and self-reported prosocial behaviors all independently partially explained the religiosity-moral self-image link. Study 2 (N = 593) demonstrated that religious people believe that engaging in religious behaviors and believing in God boosts one’s morality. Study 3 (N = 790) demonstrated that the association between religiosity and moral self-image was partially explained by impression management and perceptions of the morality of one’s religious ingroup. These studies demonstrated a consistent association between religiosity and moral self-image, which was explained by both the perceived morality of one’s religious ingroup and impression management.

Keywords: religion, morality, moral self-image

Supplemental materials: http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/rel0000263.supp

Across the world, there are widely held beliefs and stereotypes that religious people are more moral and trustworthy than atheists (e.g., Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011; Gervais et al., 2017; Harper, 2007). Not only are religious people perceived and stereotyped as more moral than the nonreligious, but they also appear to incorporate these views into their self-image. Religiosity is associated with viewing oneself as highly moral and with valuing moral traits (e.g., Furrow, King, & White, 2004; Johnston, Sherman, & Grusesc, 2013; Putnam, Campbell, & Garrett, 2010; Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette, Verschueren, & Dernelle, 2005; Vitell et al., 2009). The association between religiosity and moral self-image has been demonstrated with a variety of measures of these variables (Ward & King, 2018a). Scholars have speculated about the potential underlying mechanisms for this relationship (e.g., Galen, 2012; McKay & Whitehouse, 2015; Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008; Saroglou, 2013; Shariff, 2015), yet empirical examinations have been limited. The present studies explored the roles of potential factors that might underlie this link, including self-stereotyping, lay beliefs regarding the necessity of religion for morality, impression management, and self-reported prosocial behavior. Before presenting the studies, we first review each of these potential explanations for the link between religiosity and moral self-image.

Moral Self-Stereotyping

People who are religiously affiliated are perceived as morally superior to atheists by both religious and nonreligious people (e.g., Gervais, 2014; Gervais et al., 2017; Harper, 2007). Because of these widely held moral stereotypes about religion, as well as the fact that moral values are lauded in religious communities (e.g., Graham & Haidt, 2010), religious people might be inclined to self-stereotype with respect to moral traits. Self-stereotyping is a process whereby people assimilate traits that are prototypical or valued among their ingroup into their own personal identity (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Religious people may internalize pervasive stereotypes regarding their moral superiority, leading them to view themselves as highly moral as a function of their perceptions of the high morality of their religious ingroup. People with strong religiosity may be especially prone to self-stereotyping, as they should be more likely to have a heightened sense of shared identity with their religious ingroup than people with lower religious commitment (e.g., Pickett, Bonner, & Coleman, 2002).

The high morality reported by religious people has been suggested to result from self-stereotyping (e.g., Galen, 2012; McKay & Whitehouse, 2015), yet this conjecture has not yet been empirically tested. Outside the moral realm, self-stereotyping has been demonstrated to account for the link between religion and self-perceptions of interpersonal warmth: When controlling for perceptions of religious ingroup warmth, the association between religiosity and warmth traits was eliminated (Eriksson & Funcke, 2014). Thus, stereotypes about the traits possessed by one’s religious ingroup may account for individuals’ perceptions that they possess these traits. If religious people...
believe the average person affiliated with their religion is highly moral, this might account for their high self-reports of morality, a possibility we examined in Studies 1 and 3.

Lay Beliefs About Religion and Morality

In addition to self-stereotyping, religious people’s high moral self-image may be bolstered by viewing religious practices, rituals, and beliefs—rather than religious group membership itself—as heightening one’s morality (e.g., Galen, 2012; Shariff, 2015). Religiosity is strongly associated with thinking that God can help people determine what is moral and behave in accordance with moral truths (Piazza & Landy, 2013). After being primed with religious cognitions, people were more apt to believe that morality is objective rather than subjective (Yilmaz & Bahçekapılı, 2015), suggesting that religiosity might provide people with more confidence that they know what is moral. Indeed, many people believe there is a connection between features of religion and morality: A majority of the American population reports that belief in God is necessary for morality (Pew Research Center, 2014). Galen (2012) proposed that in countries like the United States, where beliefs linking religion to morality are prevalent, religious people might be especially likely to report high morality (and other normative traits) in comparison with more secular countries where these beliefs are less normative.

When people rate their own morality, they might incorporate widely held cultural norms and beliefs about which personal attributes have moral relevance. Religious people may view their belief in God and their strong commitment to religion as directly contributing to their morality, potentially because when they think about their personal morality their religious beliefs and experiences come to mind (e.g., Shariff, 2015). Just as someone may think that helping others or avoiding immoral actions strengthens morality, a religious person may view attending religious services or strongly believing in God as bolstering personal morality. In contrast, people low in religiosity might not view such behaviors as relevant to morality. Essentially, this naïve theory of the link between religiosity and morality would hold that religious practice, itself, constitutes moral action. We probed these lay beliefs in Study 2.

Certainly, self-stereotyping and lay beliefs about religion and morality are likely to be related, as people who strongly believe that religious beliefs and behavior contribute to morality are apt to view their own religious group as highly moral. Yet, there are notable distinctions. Whereas a self-stereotyping explanation proposes that religious people think that they are moral because they view their own religious ingroup as moral, a lay beliefs about morality account proposes that religious people’s high moral self-image stems from the perception that religious beliefs and practices are ipso facto necessary for morality more generally. Self-stereotyping primarily emphasizes perceptions of one’s group, whereas lay beliefs focus on more general ideas about the relevance of religion to being a moral person. In Study 3 we examined both of these potential mechanisms.

Impression Management

Self-reports of positively valenced characteristics like morality are known to be affected by social desirability bias, including impression management and self-deception (Paulhus & Reid, 1991). Impression management involves attempting to make a positive impression on others. Self-deception involves having an unjustifiably positive, though genuinely believed, impression of oneself (Paulhus & Reid, 1991; cf. Uziel, 2010; Zettler, Hilbig, Moshagen, & de Vries, 2015 for newer conceptualizations). Religiosity is moderately associated with impression management and weakly and inconsistently related to self-deception (see Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010, for a meta-analysis). Understandably, religiosity’s link with desirability bias has raised doubts regarding the veridicality of the high morality reported among the religious (e.g., Galen, 2012; McKay & Whitehouse, 2015; Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008; Shariff, 2015). However, research suggests that desirability bias is unlikely to fully explain this association. When controlling for socially desirable responding, religiosity remains significantly associated with self-reported altruism, empathy, volunteerism, and adherence to biblical commands (e.g., Hansen, Vandenberg, & Patterson, 1995; Rowatt, Ottenbreit, Nesselroade, & Cunningham, 2002; Saroglou et al., 2005). Ward and King (2018b) recently demonstrated that impression management only weakly contributes to explaining the association between religiosity and moral self-image (self-deception measures were unrelated to religiosity). We included a measure of impression management in Studies 1 and 3 in order to examine its contribution in comparison to self-stereotyping (both studies) and lay beliefs about morality (Study 3). However, we did not expect it to fully explain the association between religiosity and moral self-image.

Whereas impression management involves a tendency to exaggerate on a range of positive traits, self-enhancement is often more selectively focused on traits people find personally important. Religious people have been shown to view themselves as better than others—even than other religious people—on traits that they strongly personally value, like warmth and communality (Eriksson & Funcke, 2014; Gebauer, Sedikides, & Schrade, 2017; Ludeke & Carey, 2015; Rowatt et al., 2002). To the extent that morality is viewed as strongly desirable among people with high religiosity, ratings of moral traits should be especially subject to self-enhancement. This perspective on the link between religiosity and moral self-image can be contrasted with impression management concerns because while self-enhancement may be limited to enhanced ratings of moral traits, impression management is more apt to be reflected in inflated ratings across positive characteristics (even those unrelated to religion). We explored the contribution of self-enhancement and impression management to the link between religiosity and moral self-image in Studies 1 and 3.

Prosocial Behavior

A final potential explanation for the association between religiosity and moral self-image is that religious people behave more prosocially or morally than the nonreligious. In past research, religiosity has been found to predict moral and prosocial behaviors in specific circumstances (e.g., Norenzayan, 2014; Saroglou, 2013), such as when religious or God concepts are primed (e.g., Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007; Shariff, Willard, Andersen, & Norenzayan, 2016), when moral threats are encountered (Ward & King, 2018a), or when the recipient of a prosocial action is an ingroup member (e.g., Saroglou et al., 2005; Sosis & Ruffle, 2003). The present studies focused on moral self-perceptions, rather than moral behaviors. Acknowledging that self-reports of
such behaviors are likely subject to the same biases noted above, we nevertheless examined self-reported prosocial behavior as a potential explanatory variable for the link between religiosity and moral self-image in Study 1. Based on past research (Studies 1 and 2; Ward & King, 2018b) we did not expect it to have a strong explanatory role.

**Overview and Predictions**

Three studies examined potential explanations for the link between religiosity and moral self-image, drawing on those reviewed above. Religiosity was measured in all studies along with a range of measures of the proposed mechanisms that may explain its association with moral self-image. In Study 1 we tested whether the association between religiosity and moral self-image was explained by self-stereotyping, impression management, or self-reported prosocial behavior. We predicted that self-stereotyping and impression management would jointly account for the association between religiosity and moral self-image.

In Study 2 we examined lay views about the link between religion and morality, addressing the question: Do religious (and nonreligious) people think that religious beliefs and behaviors boost a person’s morality? We predicted that religious people would think that morality is boosted by belief in God and religious behaviors. Finally, in Study 3 we sought to integrate Studies 1 and 2, assessing self-stereotyping (i.e., perceived religious ingroup morality), impression management, and beliefs that religion is necessary for morality. These data allowed us to test the independent contributions of these factors in explaining the link between religiosity and moral self-image.

**Study 1**

In Study 1, we first sought to demonstrate that religiosity was positively associated with self-reports of morality and then to probe whether self-stereotyping, impression management, or self-reported prosocial behaviors would either independently or jointly account for this association. In Study 1, we used a “better-than-average” rating task—a widely used measure of self-enhancement (e.g., Sedikides & Alicke, 2012). This task involved rating how much one possesses moral and competence traits in comparison with the average person as well as the desirability of these traits. Self-enhancement is observed when participants report that they possess high levels of traits that they also rate as desirable. If religiosity is found to be associated with self-reported morality and with rating moral traits as highly desirable (but not to competence trait ratings), this would indicate selective self-enhancement. Note that an impression management explanation would predict high ratings across all traits (i.e., both moral and competence traits). In addition, we assessed whether finding moral characteristics desirable helped account for the heightened moral self-image among the religious.

The better-than-average rating task also enabled us to investigate moral self-stereotyping. In addition to themselves, participants rated two other targets: the average religious ingroup member and the average college student. The former provided the basis for a measure of self-stereotyping, the degree to which people’s moral self-ratings are attributable to viewing one’s religious ingroup as morally superior. The latter target provided a way to verify that inflated morality ratings extended only to a stereotypically moral ingroup (one’s religious group) rather than to ingroups more broadly (college student peers). We included competence traits to demonstrate that religious self-stereotyping is unique to the moral realm and not due to ingroup favoritism more broadly. Religious people should view their religious ingroup as more moral, but not necessarily more competent, to accord with stereotypes of religious morality.

We predicted that the association between religiosity and self-reported moral traits would be accounted for by perceptions of the morality of one’s religious ingroup (i.e., self-stereotyping). This finding would imply that the association between religiosity and moral self-image is caused by an overly positive view of one’s religious ingroup rather than solely by individual-level self-enhancement. We also predicted that impression management and prosocial behavior would help account for the association between religiosity and self-reported moral traits, consistent with past research (Ward & King, 2018b).

**Method and Procedure**

Three hundred undergraduates at a large university in the United States completed the study online in partial fulfillment of research participation requirements. Qualtrics survey software was used in all studies. Table 1 shows demographics. To ensure adequate representation of nonbelievers, students who indicated they were atheist/agnostic on a premeasure were sent a recruitment e-mail alerting them to their eligibility for participation. The message did not mention the purpose of the study nor why they qualified for it, and these participants did not receive any additional incentives for participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Demographic Information, Studies 1 Through 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Study 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men (n)</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women (n)</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreported (n)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age, M (SD)</td>
<td>18.47 (.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African-American</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious affiliation (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostics</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sample sizea</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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a The total sample sizes (and the demographics reported here) exclude participants who failed attention checks, as described in the participant sections.
participation. Data from participants who failed two or more of the three attention check items included throughout the study (n = 16) were discarded (final N = 284). Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for all measures.

**Measures.** Participants completed measures in the following order: trait ratings, prosocial behavior, impression management, and religiosity. This was done to mitigate the influence of religiosity and prosocial behavior ratings on moral self-perceptions.

**Religiosity.** Participants completed the eight-item Intrinsic Religiosity scale from the Revised Intrinsic/Extrinsic Religiosity scale (e.g., “My whole approach to life is based on my religion”; Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989). Recent psychometric evidence has shown the three reverse-coded items on this scale are distinct and can invalidate responses (Cohen et al., 2017). Accordingly, we used the five positively worded items to assess intrinsic religiosity (see the online supplemental materials for items) here and in all subsequent studies (termed “religiosity”).

**Moral self-stereotyping.** We adapted the trait rating activity from Eriksson and Funcke (2014), using morally relevant traits and competence traits. First, participants rated the desirability from 1 (Not at all desirable) to 7 (Very desirable) of 11 morally relevant traits (nice, caring, ethical, helpful, fair, empathic, moral, generous, honest, virtuous, compassionate) and seven competence traits (clever, smart, efficient, competent, skilled, intelligent, capable). Next, they rated how much they thought they possessed each trait, presented in randomized order, compared with the average adult in the United States, ranging from 1 (much less than the average American) to 7 (much more than the average American). Then, participants made the same ratings for the typical person who shares their religious beliefs (or lack of beliefs if atheist/agnostic) and the typical college student, in counterbalanced order.

**Impression management.** Participants completed a shortened 10-item Impression Management scale (Paulhus & Reid, 1991). 3

**Prosocial behavior.** Participants rated how frequently they engaged in 16 prosocial behaviors and tendencies in the last year compared with the average American adult, ranging from 1 much less than the average American to 7 much more than the average American. Example behaviors/tendencies included giving money to charity, turning in a lost wallet, and being empathic with those in need (adapted from the Prosocialness Scale for Adults; Caprara, Steca, Zelli, & Capanna, 2005, and the Self-Report Altruism Scale; Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken, 1981; see the online supplemental materials for items).

### Results

There was no effect of order on ratings of the religious ingroup or college student targets, all ts < ±1.75; all ps > .08, and religiosity did not interact with order in predicting these ratings, interaction βs ± <.08, ps > .37. Analyses then tested for the effect of target on moral ratings. A repeated measures general linear model (GLM) showed that target (self, average college student, average religious ingroup member) influenced ratings of moral traits, F(2, 283) = 252.16, partial η² = .47, p < .001. The average college student was rated as possessing fewer moral traits.

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1 In Study 1, we also included an additional measure of moral identity and additional ratings of targets using this measure. Refer to the online supplemental materials for a full description and results of this measure; results were nearly identical to the results of the moral self-image measure reported here. In Studies 2 and 3, we also included ad hoc moral self-image items not reported here (similar to the items reported in the supplemental materials for Study 1). Across studies, we also measured extrinsic religiosity along with other measures of religiosity (e.g., 1-item measure of God belief in all studies; religious fundamentalism in Study 1; religious service attendance, Study 3) and related constructs for exploratory purposes.

2 Some of these items reflected agreeableness/warmth. Religiosity was significantly correlated with both the warmth items (nice, helpful, caring, empathic, generous, compassionately), r = .30, and all other moral items on the scale, r = .38, ps < .001.

3 These items were selected because they had the highest item-total correlations with the full scale in previous usage of this scale.

### Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for All Measures in Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Rel</th>
<th>IM</th>
<th>D-Mor</th>
<th>D-Com</th>
<th>Self-M</th>
<th>Rel-M</th>
<th>Col-M</th>
<th>Self-C</th>
<th>Rel-C</th>
<th>Col-C</th>
<th>PROS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity (Rel)</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impression management (IM)</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desirability-moral traits (D-Mor)</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desirability-competence traits (D-Com)</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-moral traits (Self-M)</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious ingroup-moral traits (Rel-M)</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College student-moral traits (Col-M)</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-competence traits (Self-C)</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious ingroup-competence traits (Rel-C)</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td>−.14*</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>College student-competence traits (Col-C)</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.86</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prosociality (PROS)</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.08</td>
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<td>Partials</td>
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<td>.28**</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>3.79 (1.79)</td>
<td>3.34 (2.13)</td>
<td>6.10 (7.3)</td>
<td>6.00 (7.2)</td>
<td>5.17 (7.8)</td>
<td>5.21 (9.7)</td>
<td>3.92 (7.5)</td>
<td>5.09 (7.6)</td>
<td>4.78 (8.4)</td>
<td>4.64 (8.0)</td>
<td>4.97 (8.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 286. Coefficients on the diagonals in italics are alpha reliabilities. Partial correlations between religiosity and self-moral traits, when controlling for other variables, are shown at the bottom of the table.

*p < .05. **p < .001.
compared with the self-moral ratings, paired t(283) = 20.88, p < .001, d = 1.63, and the average religious ingroup member, paired t(283) = 17.14, p < .001, d = 1.48, which did not differ from each other, paired t(283) = 0.59, p = .56, d = 0.04. Thus, people viewed themselves as equally moral as a religious ingroup member.

As shown in Table 2, religiosity was correlated with self-moral trait ratings, religious ingroup moral trait ratings (moral self-stereotyping), impression management, and prosocial behavior. The desirability of moral traits was strongly related to perceiving oneself as having those traits. Moral ratings for one’s religious ingroup were strongly related to seeing oneself as moral. Whereas religiosity was positively correlated with ratings of the desirability of moral traits, it was unrelated to ratings of the desirability of competence traits and to self-ratings of competence traits. This finding is consistent with research showing that religious people primarily self-enhance on traits they strongly personally desire and value (Eriksson & Funcke, 2014; Gebauer et al., 2017; Ludeke & Carey, 2015).

Religiosity predicted perceiving one’s religious ingroup as moral, but not to perceiving one’s college student ingroup as moral, demonstrating that it is one’s religious ingroup—and not just ingroups more generally—that is linked to moral self-perceptions. Impression management was significantly correlated with both perceptions of self and religious ingroups’ moral traits. As would be expected, impression management was unrelated to perceptions of the average college student’s moral traits, suggesting that response bias is at play with moral ratings of both the self and religious ingroup targets but not for moral traits more generally.

Examination of the partial correlations in Table 2 indicated that no single mechanism fully accounted for the correlation between religiosity and moral self-image. Single mediator models (using PROCESS models with 5,000 bootstrapped resamplings; Hayes, 2012), shown in Table 3, demonstrated that religious ingroup moral ratings (self-stereotyping), impression management, the perceived desirability of moral traits, and prosocial behavior, all partially mediated the effect of religiosity on moral traits. Next, we evaluated multiple mechanisms simultaneously using regression models. Table 4 shows hierarchical regression analyses testing whether accounting for a combination of variables (entered on the first step of the model) would attenuate the link between religiosity and moral self-image. Although perceptions of the morality of one’s religious ingroup (i.e., self-stereotyping) and impression management are often thought to explain the link between religiosity and heightened moral self-image, when controlling for both of these, religiosity still emerged as a significant predictor of moral traits (final column of Table 4). When controlling for both of these and the desirability of moral traits or prosociality (in different models), religiosity remained a significant predictor.

In a model controlling for all of these plausible explanatory variables simultaneously—religious ingroup morality, impression management, prosociality, and the desirability ratings of moral traits, \( \Delta R^2 = .45, p < .001 \) for step—religiosity still significantly predicted moral traits. Approximately 70% of the relationship between religiosity and moral traits was explained with the addition of these predictors. The difference between the beta weights for religiosity when alone in a model and with the four aforementioned control variables was significant, \( z = 3.29; p = .001 \).

**Discussion**

These results show that moral self-stereotyping, impression management, self-reported prosociality, and the desirability of moral traits independently explain some of the association between religiosity and moral traits. However, even when controlling for these variables, religiosity still significantly predicted the endorsement of moral traits. Therefore, this association is not solely a result of stereotyping oneself as a member of a highly moral group, valuing moral traits, or to impression management. In Study 2 we examined whether religious people believe that religious behaviors and beliefs contribute to morality.

**Study 2**

In Study 1, we demonstrated that the association between religiosity and moral self-image is not fully explained by self-stereotyping, impression management, or self-reported prosociality. What else might account for this association? Perhaps, religiosity is linked to thinking that one’s religious beliefs and behaviors directly contribute to morality. This research question does not readily lend itself to the same methods employed in Study 1. As such, we adopted a different approach in Study 2. We asked participants to judge how changes in religious behaviors and beliefs (as well as moral and immoral behaviors) would affect the morality of a religious or nonreligious target, as well as themselves. In so doing, we tested whether religious people think that changes in religious practices and belief redound to a person’s morality. In addition, we examined whether this link between morality and religious behavioral changes emerged for religious and nonreligious targets. In this study, we used brief ratings of target and participant morality as our dependent variable, as opposed to an extended measure of moral self-image (as we do in Studies 1 and 3), because participants were rating how several belief and behavior changes would alter morality. We thought it was prudent to first probe whether lay beliefs between religion and morality emerge using rating scales that could quantify moral changes prior to testing whether these beliefs account for moral self-image ratings on longer scales.

We predicted that religious people would believe that religious behaviors and belief in God lead to higher morality and that not doing these behaviors or doubting God’s existence would lower someone’s morality. We also expected that belief in God may matter more than religious behaviors in contributing to morality, as past research has shown that belief in God is widely regarded as necessary for morality (Gervais et al., 2011; Pew Research Center, 2014; Piazza & Landy, 2013). Study 2 also included examples of moral and immoral behaviors to provide a comparison of how religious beliefs and behaviors contribute to morality alongside putatively moral behaviors. Understanding the extent to which

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4 We also examined the possibility that there was a quadratic association between perceptions of religious ingroup morality and religiosity in Studies 1 and 3 to probe whether both people with low and high religiosity viewed their religious ingroup as highly moral. There was not a significant quadratic association in Study 1, but there was in Study 3. However, when this association was plotted it reflected a generally linear association between religiosity and religious ingroup morality. Refer to the online supplemental materials for these analyses.
Table 3
Tests of Mediation, All Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mediator: Desirability of moral traits</th>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Religiosity to mediator</th>
<th>Mediator to criterion (on left column)</th>
<th>Direct effect of religiosity on criterion when controlling for mediator</th>
<th>Indirect effect</th>
<th>95% CI of indirect effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study 1: Moral self-image</td>
<td>.11 (.02)**</td>
<td>.49 (.05)**</td>
<td>.11 (.02)**</td>
<td>.05 (.01)</td>
<td>[.03, .08]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 3: Religious identity-internalization</td>
<td>.30 (.05)**</td>
<td>.13 (.01)**</td>
<td>.12 (.02)**</td>
<td>.04 (.01)</td>
<td>[.03, .05]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 3: Moral self-image</td>
<td>.27 (.07)**</td>
<td>.09 (.01)**</td>
<td>.06 (.02)**</td>
<td>.03 (.01)</td>
<td>[.02, .04]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediator: Impression management</td>
<td>.23 (.03)**</td>
<td>.21 (.05)**</td>
<td>.11 (.03)**</td>
<td>.05 (.01)</td>
<td>[.02, .08]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 3: Moral identity-internalization</td>
<td>.23 (.02)**</td>
<td>.26 (.03)**</td>
<td>.10 (.02)**</td>
<td>.06 (.01)</td>
<td>[.04, .08]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediator: Religious ingroup moral identity</td>
<td>.23 (.02)**</td>
<td>.20 (.03)**</td>
<td>.04 (.03)</td>
<td>.05 (.01)</td>
<td>[.03, .06]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediator: Beliefs that religion is necessary for morality</td>
<td>.58 (.02)**</td>
<td>−.09 (.03)</td>
<td>.14 (.02)**</td>
<td>−.05 (.02)</td>
<td>[−.09, −.02]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 3: Moral identity-internalization</td>
<td>.58 (.02)**</td>
<td>−.02 (.04)</td>
<td>.17 (.03)**</td>
<td>−.01 (.02)</td>
<td>[−.05, −.03]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediator: Prosociality</td>
<td>.12 (.03)**</td>
<td>.45 (.05)**</td>
<td>.10 (.02)**</td>
<td>.06 (.02)</td>
<td>[.03, .09]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All tests conducted using PROCESS macro in SPSS (Model 4; Hayes, 2012). Analyses were bootstrapped with 5,000 resamplings. Values presented are unstandardized betas (SE). CI = confidence interval. *p < .05. **p < .001.

Method and Procedure

Participants on Mechanical Turk (MTurk; N = 609; paid $1; sample restricted to the United States) completed this study online in the order the materials are described below. Table 1 shows demographics. We discarded data from those failing two or more (n = 16) of three attention check items (final N = 593).

Lay beliefs about religion and morality measures.

Target ratings. Participants made ratings about a religious target and a nonbeliever target (defined as “a person who does not believe in God”), who were presented in counterbalanced order.

Table 4
Regression Models Predicting Moral Traits From Study 1 Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Model 1: All predictors</th>
<th>Model 2: All predictors but prosocial behavior</th>
<th>Model 3: All predictors but desirability of moral traits</th>
<th>Model 4: Impression management and religious ingroup moral perceptions as predictors</th>
<th>Control variables, ΔR² for step</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>β</td>
<td>B (SE); [95% CI]</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>B (SE); [95% CI]</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>B (SE); [95% CI]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impression management</td>
<td>.09 (.07) (.04) [−.02, .15]</td>
<td>.14* (.11 (.04) [.03, .19]</td>
<td>.16* (.13 (.04) [.05, .20]</td>
<td>.23* (.18 (.04) [.10, .27]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious ingroup moral perceptions</td>
<td>.13* (.10 (.04) [.03, .18]</td>
<td>.18* (.15 (.04) [.06, .23]</td>
<td>.16* (.13 (.04) [.05, .20]</td>
<td>.24* (.19 (.05) [.10, .28]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desirability of moral traits</td>
<td>.34* (.28 (.04) [.20, .36]</td>
<td>.40* (.33 (.04) [.25, .42]</td>
<td>.39** (.31 (.04) [.23, .39]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final step-religiosity, ΔR²</td>
<td>.33** (.25 (.04) [.18, .33]</td>
<td>.39** (.31 (.04) [.23, .39]</td>
<td>.39** (.31 (.04) [.23, .39]</td>
<td>.39** (.31 (.04) [.23, .39]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for step</td>
<td>.01*</td>
<td>.02*</td>
<td>.02*</td>
<td>.04*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>.11* (.09 (.04) [.01, .16]</td>
<td>.15* (.12 (.04) [.04, .20]</td>
<td>.15* (.12 (.04) [.03, .20]</td>
<td>.21* (.16 (.05) [.07, .25]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 283. Columns represent separate hierarchical regression models controlling for each set of predictors. Religiosity was entered on the final step of these regression models. Entered alone, religiosity predicted moral traits, ΔR² = .13, β = .36, p < .001; B (SE) = .28 (.04); CI [.20, .37]. *p < .05. **p < .001.
First, participants rated the perceived morality of the average religious person/nonbeliever, ranging from 1 (not at all moral) to 7 (extremely moral). They then rated how various beliefs and behavioral changes would affect the moral standing of the targets using this same moral rating scale (from not at all moral to extremely moral). For example, participants were asked to rate how moral they think a religious person who rarely prays is. Appendix A shows the items rated, along with alpha reliabilities for subscales (computed with the mean of items for rating categories involving two or more items). Nonbeliever targets were rated on a subset of the categories used for religious targets, as it was not plausible for them to engage in lower God belief or religious behaviors than they currently do.

**Self-ratings.** After target ratings, participants completed self-ratings of morality that were tailored to their religious identification (religiously affiliated vs. atheist/agnostic). First, participants rated their own morality, ranging from 1 (not at all moral) to 7 (extremely moral). Then, participants rated how various behaviors would alter their moral standing compared with where they see themselves now (e.g., “How moral do you think you would be if you start praying more?”), ranging from 1 (much less moral) to 7 (much more moral), with 4 (same level). This scale was used to avoid the possibility that they would view themselves as extremely moral and thus have no way to improve. Appendix B shows all of the items that were rated and alpha reliabilities for subscales (computed with the mean of items for rating categories involving two or more items). Nonreligious participants (atheist/agnostics) responded to all of the aforementioned items except decreasing religious behaviors and believing in God less, as these were unlikely to be relevant. Not applicable options (coded as missing data in analyses) were provided in instances where one could plausibly not already do the behavior (e.g., one cannot go to church less if they do not already attend).

**Religiosity.** At the end of the study, participants rated their religiosity using the five-item scale from Study 1, \( \alpha = .94; M (SD) = 3.55 (1.96) \).

## Results

We submitted morality ratings to a repeated measures GLM with target ratings (belief and behavioral changes) and religion of target (religious vs. nonbeliever) as within-participant factors and religious status (2 levels: religiously affiliated or atheist/agnostic) and order (religious vs. nonreligious target rated first) as between-participant factors. All main effects and two and three-way interactions were significant, \( F_s > 3.09, \text{all } p_s < .02, \) with the exception of the Type of Rating \( \times \) Order interaction, \( F(4, 541) = 1.77, p = .13 \). Consequently, we ran separate GLMs for religious and nonreligious participants (\( n = 226 \) atheists/agnostics).

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**Religious participants’ ratings.** Figure 1 shows results for religious participants. For both nonbeliever and religious target ratings, there were significant differences among the types of ratings but no effect of order or a Type of Rating \( \times \) Order interaction. As shown in Figure 1, religious people found the religious target more moral at baseline than the nonreligious target, paired \( \tau(325) = 4.57, \ p < .001 \). As predicted, religious people reported that belief in God and religious behaviors, like going to church and praying, can contribute to making a person more moral, which was true of both religious and nonbeliever targets. Religious targets were seen as reducing in morality (compared with baseline) if they began doubting their belief in God, engaging in fewer religious behaviors, or having questionable motives for religion/not following one’s religion. Belief in God exhibited a stronger effect on morality ratings than the effect of other religious behaviors, consistent with past research noting the moral importance of God belief (e.g., Gervais, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014). Both moral and immoral behaviors exerted a similar influence on morality ratings of religious and nonbeliever targets.

As Figure 1 shows, religious participants’ ratings of how religious belief and behaviors would influence their own morality demonstrated a similar pattern to the target ratings. Engaging in religious behaviors and strongly believing in God were viewed as boosting one’s morality, whereas lowering belief and behavior was viewed as reducing one’s morality. Interestingly, strengthening one’s belief in God was rated as giving one just as strong of a boost in morality as engaging in more moral behaviors, paired \( \tau(324) = 0.55, \ p = .58 \).

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5 We examined whether excluding non-Christian religious participants (Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Native American religions) would change results. When excluding these participants (\( n = 36 \)) the pattern of findings for the religious participants’ target and self-ratings remained the same.
Nonreligious participants’ ratings. Figure 2 shows results for nonreligious participants. For both nonbeliever and religious target ratings, there were significant differences across the types of rating categories and an effect of order. For the nonbeliever target, there was an Order × Type of Rating interaction so we probed order effects on all nonbeliever target ratings. Nonbeliever targets were rated as more moral, M (SD) = 5.21 (1.29), when rated prior to religious targets; when rated after, M (SD) = 4.65 (0.95), n(221) = 3.63, p < .001; no other ratings differed by order, ps > .07, rs < 1.84 so we report results in Figure 2 with order entered as a covariate.

Nonreligious participants showed less variability in their ratings for the religious target, who they viewed as less moral than the nonbeliever target, paired t(222) = 10.61, p < .001. Interestingly, nonreligious participants rated religious targets as becoming more moral if they started believing in God more strongly or engaging in more religious behaviors (consistent with religious participants’ ratings) but they also perceived that believing in God less or doing fewer religious behaviors would boost morality (see the online supplemental materials for significance tests of mean differences). In contrast to religious participants, the nonreligious viewed the nonbeliever target as becoming less moral if they began doing more religious behaviors or believing in God more strongly. With regard to self-ratings, nonreligious people perceived that doing more religious behaviors and believing in God more strongly would detract from their personal morality.

Comparisons of religious and nonreligious participant’s ratings. Both religious and nonreligious participants had similar views of how moral and immoral behaviors would enhance or detract from baseline morality for both the religious and nonbeliever targets. Both groups appreciated the importance of actual moral behavior to morality overall. However, the groups differed in their assessments of how influential religious behaviors/cognitions would be to morality. Religious participants unsurprisingly viewed these as more relevant than nonreligious participants. These results suggest that religious and nonreligious people interpret the moral relevance of behaviors differently. It is also notable that both the religious and nonreligious participants viewed their (non)religious ingroup target as more moral than the outgroup target.

Comparisons of the differences between nonreligious and religious participants’ perceptions of the targets (Figures 1 and 2) showed that the nonreligious participants viewed the religious target’s morality even more negatively than the religious participants perceived the nonbeliever target’s morality. This demonstrates that, to some extent, nonreligious people also demonstrate ingroup moral bias when rating the morality of targets, though this interestingly did not extend to self-ratings of morality in Study 1 or to morality ratings of (non)religious ingroup members (as both were positively associated with religiosity). This finding is consistent with Simpson and Rios (2016), who found that atheists expressed more negative moral expectations of Christians than Christians did of atheists’ morality.

Discussion

These results showed that both religious and nonreligious participants viewed religious beliefs and behaviors as relevant to the morality of a religious target. Although religious participants viewed religious behaviors as boosting the morality of nonreligious targets as well, nonreligious participants did not share this view. Rather, for nonreligious targets (and themselves), increases in religiosity were viewed as detracting from morality. Although we did not predict this pattern, it may indicate that among the nonreligious, changes in religious behavior are viewed as inauthentic. The results of Study 2 suggest that just as behaving morally and immorally can contribute to a person’s morality, so too, can religious behaviors, as viewed by religious people.

Study 2 was limited by the fact that we assessed how specific belief and behavioral changes resulted in perceptions of moral changes using brief morality ratings. It did not examine whether lay beliefs that religion contributes to morality account for the positive association between religiosity and moral self-image. We addressed this limitation in Study 3, using a longer assessment of moral self-image. Additionally, lay beliefs that religion is necessary for morality may overlap with other factors, such as moral self-stereotyping. As such, it is important to pit this idea against self-stereotyping to identify its potential independent contribution to explaining the link between religiosity and moral self-image.

Study 3

In Study 1, we provided support for the roles of self-stereotyping and impression management in accounting for the link between reli-
giosity and moral self-image. In Study 2, we demonstrated that both religious and nonreligious participants view religious beliefs and behaviors as morally relevant actions for religious targets. Only religious participants viewed religious behaviors and beliefs as beneficial to their personal morality. In Study 3 we aimed to integrate the findings from both of these studies by examining the possibility that the association between moral self-image and religiosity would be fully accounted for by self-stereotyping (i.e., perceptions of religious ingroup morality), impression management, and lay beliefs about the necessity of religion for morality.

Study 3 also extended beyond the previous studies in two key ways. First, in Study 3 we examined the association between religiosity and moral self-image in a more religiously diverse sample than we used in Study 1. Second, to provide a further test of religiosity’s association with moral self-image measures (and explanatory variables for this association), in Study 3 we included an established measure of moral identity, assessing the extent to which people value being moral, as well as a new assessment of moral self-image, capturing moral self-perceptions. Because there are no widely agreed upon measures of moral self-image, we thought it vital to show that religiosity relates to multiple measures of this construct, rather than just to the measure we used in Study 1. Although it was possible that the magnitude of associations might differ when using different measures, we nonetheless expected religiosity to be positively correlated with the moral self-image and moral identity measures used here.

Method and Procedure

Participants on MTurk (N = 808; paid $0.50; sample restricted to the United States) completed this study online in the order presented below. This order of scale administration was selected to minimize the chances that self-reports of morality would be affected by ratings pertaining to religion. Table 1 shows demographic information. Table 5 shows descriptive statistics for all measures. Participants who failed two or more (n = 18) of three attention-check items were removed from the dataset (final N = 790).

Measures. Participants completed measures in the following order: trait ratings, prosocial behavior, impression management, and religiosity.

Religiosity. Participants completed the 5-item religiosity scale used in Studies 1 and 2.

Moral identity-internalization. Participants rated the Internalization subscale of the Moral Identity Scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002), which assesses how strongly people value embodying moral traits. Participants are shown a list of moral traits (e.g., honest, caring, fair) and then asked to rate five items regarding how strongly they value the traits (e.g., “I strongly desire to have these characteristics”).

Moral self-image and moral self-stereotyping. Participants rated how moral they perceive themselves (“moral self-image”) and then their religious ingroup using items following the same structure (e.g., “Living up to a set of moral ideals is important to me [to my religious ingroup]”; see the online supplemental materials for items).

Impression management. Participants completed the 10-item Impression Management scale used in Study 1.

Lay beliefs about religion and morality. Eleven items were generated to assess the belief that religion and belief in God are necessary (or helpful) for being a moral person (e.g., “Without religion, a person would have no moral guidance.” “Believing in God can help people to do the right thing when they are faced with temptation”; see the online supplemental materials). Our items about religion and God belief were strongly correlated, r = .88, so all items were formed into a composite.

Results

Table 5 shows that religiosity was very strongly associated with beliefs that religion is necessary for morality and these beliefs were associated with stronger moral self-image. Moral identity-internalization was related to moral self-image, r = .44, p < .001, but not so high as to suggest redundancy. Both measures exhibited similar patterns of correlations with religiosity. As in Study 1, religiosity was positively associated with believing that one’s ingroup is moral (self-stereotyping) and impression management. The partial correlations show that religious ingroup morality, impression management, and beliefs that religion is necessary for morality all appear to partially account for the association between religiosity and moral self-image and moral identity-internalization.

Single model mediation tests (using PROCESS models with 5,000 bootstrapped resamplings; Hayes, 2012), shown in Table 3, indicated that religious ingroup moral ratings and impression management partially mediated the effect of religiosity on moral identity and moral self-image. Lay beliefs about morality and religion partially mediated the association religiosity shared with moral identity-internalization but not religiosity’s association with moral self-image. We next assessed the joint influence of these variables. When the measure of beliefs that religion is necessary for morality was added to regression models predicting moral self-image and moral identity along with impression management and perceptions of religious ingroup morality, it was either completely unrelated to the outcome (β < .001, p = .16 predicting moral self-image) or negatively related (β = −.14, p = .01 predicting moral identity-internalization). Contrary to predictions, these beliefs do not independently explain religiosity’s association with morality measures when entered in conjunction with the additional explanatory variables; thus, this measure was dropped from subsequent models. Table 6 shows hierarchical regression models predicting moral outcomes from perceptions of religious ingroup morality and impression management. As can be seen, these two variables fully explained the link between religiosity and moral identity-internalization and partially explained the association between religiosity and moral self-image.

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6 We also measured beliefs about morality relevant only to religious participants, though these are not reported here. We would also like to acknowledge that a similar scale assessing lay beliefs about God’s necessity for morality was developed by Piazza & Landy (2013). Rather than use Piazza and Landy’s scale, which included many items that were not of central interest to our key goals, we developed items for this study that best captured the content we wanted to assess.

Due to the strong association between religiosity and beliefs that religiosity is necessary for morality, we also assessed how these beliefs related to a one-item measure of God belief, r = .67, p < .001, which was included in the study. These results show that these beliefs are strongly related to both God belief and our measure of (intrinsic) religiosity, allaying concern that the association is highly inflated due to the particular measure of religiosity we employed.
Table 5
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Measures, Study 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Rel</th>
<th>MSI</th>
<th>Int</th>
<th>LBMR</th>
<th>IM</th>
<th>RelMI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity (Rel)</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral self-image (MSI)</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral identity-internalization (Int)</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lay beliefs about morality and religion (LBMR)</td>
<td>.78**</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>.08*</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impression management (IM)</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.15**</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious ingroup moral identity (RelMI)</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partials-moral self-image</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td></td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>3.78 (1.98)</td>
<td>5.63 (1.02)</td>
<td>6.26 (.87)</td>
<td>3.15 (1.49)</td>
<td>3.81 (2.67)</td>
<td>5.10 (1.12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *N = 790. Coefficients on the diagonals in italics are alpha reliabilities. Partial correlations are for the association between religiosity and moral self-image/moral identity-internalization, controlling for each variable shown in that column.
*p < .05. **p < .001.

Brief Discussion

Here we showed that the association between religiosity and the internalization of moral identity is fully accounted for by perceptions of the morality of one’s religious ingroup (i.e., self-stereotyping) and impression management, both of which also partially account for religiosity’s association with moral self-image. It is interesting to note that the explanatory power of impression management and self-stereotyping differed depending on the measures of moral self-image and self-stereotyping used in this study and in Study 1. We revisit these differences below.

Together with the results of Study 1, these findings provide additional evidence that both self-stereotyping and impression management help account for the association between moral self-image and religiosity. This study demonstrated that although religiosity is strongly related to beliefs that religion is necessary for morality, these beliefs do not explain the association between religiosity and moral self-image, though they do partially explain religiosity’s association with valuing moral traits (moral identity-internalization).

General Discussion

Contemporary scholars have speculated that the association between religiosity and self-reported morality is potentially due to socially desirable responding or self-stereotyping (e.g., Galen, 2012; McKay & Whitehouse, 2015; Shariff, 2015). The present studies demonstrate that both self-stereotyping and impression management help account for the association between moral self-image and religiosity. In Study 1, we demonstrated that the desirability of moral traits and self-reported prosociality also contributed to this association. In Study 2, we illustrated that religious people believe religious behaviors and belief in God can directly contribute to morality. However, these lay beliefs about the role of religion in morality only minimally accounted for the role of religiosity in moral identity/moral self-image in Study 3. These studies provide further demonstrations that religiosity is linked to viewing oneself as highly moral and they suggest new insights into the mechanisms underlying this association.

Across studies, religiosity was positively associated with diverse measures of moral self-image, including seeing oneself as better than the average American on a variety of morally relevant traits (r = .36, Study 1), viewing oneself as highly moral (r = .31, Study 3), and with moral identity-internalization (r = .19, Study 3). It is notable that the strength of the correlations differed, which may be attributed to differences in the participant samples (university students in Study 1; adults on Mturk in Study 3) or the measures we used. There are no widely used or validated measures of moral self-image or moral self-enhancement, which is why we took great strides to test different operationalizations and measures in the present...
Religiosity was more strongly related to measures of moral self-perceptions than with the moral identity-internalization scale. Religiosity may be more strongly related to views of oneself as moral rather than to valuing moral traits. The weaker association between religiosity and moral identity-internalization helps to explain why impression management and self-stereotyping fully accounted for this association in Study 3, whereas they only partially accounted for religiosity’s association with moral self-image measures. Examining religiosity’s association with multiple distinct morality measures would be valuable in future research.

Moral Self-Stereotyping Versus Lay Beliefs About Religion and Morality

We expected that self-stereotyping (i.e., perceiving oneself as moral due to perceiving one’s religious ingroup as moral) and beliefs about religion’s role in promoting morality would be related, yet distinct concepts. Certainly, part of the reason religious people might view religious ingroup members as highly moral is because they perceive religious beliefs and behaviors as directly contributing to morality. Study 3 results provided support that ratings of the morality of one’s religious ingroup members were correlated with lay beliefs about the necessity of religion for morality (r = .30). Nevertheless, when entered alongside impression management and perceptions of religious ingroup morality in regression models, lay beliefs about morality did not help contribute to explaining the association between religiosity and moral self-image measures. The present studies demonstrate that even though religiosity is associated with believing that religious practices and beliefs contribute to a person’s morality, the link between religiosity and moral self-image is better explained by perceptions that one’s religious ingroup is moral (i.e., self-stereotyping). Just as reporting oneself as strongly moral potentially reflects self-enhancement, perceiving one’s religious ingroup as moral also serves a self-enhancement function, enabling people to perceive their ingroup as morally superior to others.

Impression Management

In Studies 1 and 3, we found that impression management helped to explain the link between moral self-image and religiosity. In Study 1, we demonstrated that religiosity was linked to perceiving oneself as moral and desiring moral traits, evincing self-enhancement. The present findings dovetail with past research demonstrating that religious people exhibit higher trait impression management (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010), yet primarily appear to self-enhance on traits that are highly personally valued, including warmth (Eriksson & Funcke, 2014; Gebauer et al., 2017) and morality, rather than traits that are less valued (e.g., competence; Study 1). Due to the strong desirability of moral traits among religious people (Study 1), self-enhancement in the moral domain may be even stronger than in other interpersonal domains previously studied (e.g., general warmth, communal traits), making it more challenging to fully account for this association. In Studies 1 and 3, we found that the association between religiosity and moral self-image was not fully accounted for by the mechanisms examined (though many of them independently partially mediated the association; see Table 3). Past studies have found that religious self-enhancement on warmth/agreeableness traits was fully accounted for by the perceived desirability of agreeableness and impression management (Ludeke & Carey, 2015) and the perceived warmth of one’s religious ingroup (self-stereotyping, Eriksson & Funcke, 2014). It would be valuable for future research to examine whether self-enhancement among the religious is especially strong on moral traits and whether similar mechanisms account for religious self-enhancement in different domains.

Prosocial Behavior

In Study 1, we showed that religiosity was positively associated with self-reported prosocial behaviors, which partially explained its relationship with moral self-image. Yet, self-reported prosocial behavior and moral self-image were moderately correlated (r = .52), suggesting that the prosocial behavior measure was likely to also reflect moral self-perceptions. It could be argued that our measure of prosocial behavior was flawed, as it captured more about self-perceptions, rather than behaviors. However, research using longer, more varied measures of prosocial behavior has similarly found it does not explain the association between religiosity and moral self-image (Ward & King, 2018b). Nevertheless, one limitation of the present studies is that none included behavioral measures of morality. To better address the possibility that the high moral self-image among the religious is due to differences in moral behavior, future research should evaluate how religiosity and moral self-image relate to a broader range of moral behaviors in laboratory and naturalistic settings.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

These studies illuminate mechanisms for the association between religiosity and moral self-image, though there are important limitations worth addressing. First, it is worth noting that the cross-sectional nature of the current studies renders causal conclusions about the relationship between religion and self-enhancement tendencies inappropriate. Although this link is often interpreted as religion promoting self-enhancement, it is also possible that a general disposition toward self-enhancement may draw people to religion (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010), as religion enables people to feel personally important. Additionally, because the variables within each study were collected at one timepoint, common method variance may have contributed to stronger relationships among them. It would be useful for future research to examine the associations among religion, ingroup moral perceptions, and lay beliefs regarding religion and morality at different measurement occasions.

In Studies 2 and 3, we assessed participants’ perceptions of how religious beliefs and behaviors contribute to morality using face-valid self-report items. It could be argued that assessing these perceptions using self-report is not the most valid way to test our research question and that more indirect (or experimental) measures would be optimal. However, given that we intended to measure lay beliefs, we believe it was prudent to capture direct self-reports rather than indirect measures that may not provide clear insight into people’s actual beliefs and attitudes.

The present studies did not examine the possibility that fear of supernatural punishment also accounts for the link between religiosity and moral self-image, yet this is a possibility that warrants attention in future research. Norenzayan and Shariff (2008) proposed that thinking about God may heighten reputation concerns and subsequently encourage religious people to behave more morally. Indeed, people’s
endorsement of punitive moralistic gods that observe human behavior has been linked with more moral behavior (Purzycki et al., 2016). Just as beliefs in punitive, watchful gods can promote moral behavior, they may similarly motivate religious people to report themselves as highly moral.

These studies were all conducted in the United States, where many people believe that religion is fundamental for morality (Pew Research Center, 2014). Religious self-enhancement is known to be especially pronounced in religiously predominant countries (e.g., Eriksson & Funcke, 2014; Gebauer et al., 2017; Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010). Moral self-enhancement may be less related to religiosity in other contexts and perhaps within some religious groups, which remains an important area for future research. These studies demonstrated a consistent association between religiosity and moral self-image, which was explained by both the perceived morality of one’s religious ingroup and impression management. The results of these studies can lay the foundation for future inquiries into the association between religiosity and moral self-image.

References

Caprara, G. V., Steca, P., Zelli, A., & Capanna, C. (2005). A new scale for perceived morality of one’s religious ingroup and impression management. The results of these studies can lay the foundation for future inquiries into the association between religiosity and moral self-image.


Sedikides, C., & Alickie, M. D. (2012). Self-enhancement and self-


(Appendices follow)
Appendix A
Ratings for Targets, Study 2

Nonbeliever Target Ratings
Baseline rating
How moral do you think average nonbeliever (a person who does not believe in God) is?
More religious behaviors, $\alpha = .89$
How moral do you think a person who used to be a nonbeliever but who has begun praying regularly is?
How moral do you think a person who used to be a nonbeliever but who has begun going to church regularly is?
How moral do you think a person who used to be a nonbeliever but who converted to being religious is?

Strengthening belief in God, $\alpha = .83$
How moral do you think a person who used to be a nonbeliever but who has begun believing in God is?
How moral do you think a person who used to be a nonbeliever but who now strongly believes in God is?

Religious Target Ratings
Baseline rating
How moral do you think average religious person is?
Fewer religious behaviors, $\alpha = .67$
How moral do you think a religious person who rarely goes to church is?
How moral do you think a religious person who rarely prays is?

More religious behaviors, $\alpha = .82$
How moral do you think a religious person who prays frequently is?
How moral do you think a religious person who goes to church very frequently is?

Strong belief in God
How moral do you think a religious person who strongly believes in God is?
Doubting belief in God, $\alpha = .76$
How moral do you think a religious person who questions their belief in God is?
How moral do you think a religious person who secretly does not believe in God is?
How moral do you think a religious person who sometimes doubts there is a God is?

Follows rules of religion
How moral do you think a religious person who follows all the rules of their religion is?
Questionable religious motivation, $\alpha = .87$
How moral do you think a religious person who does not follow the rules of their religion is?
How moral do you think a religious person who rarely follows the rules of their religion is?
How moral do you think a religious person who is only religious because their family wants them to be is?
How moral do you think a religious person who goes to church because their friends go is?
How moral do you think a religious person who only goes to church because they enjoy the choir is?

Ratings Completed for Both Targets
Moral behaviors, $\alpha = .91$ for religious target; $\alpha = .91$ for nonbeliever target
How moral do you think a person who is a nonbeliever who behaves very morally is?
How moral do you think person who is a nonbeliever who volunteers often is?
How moral do you think person who is a nonbeliever who often helps strangers is?
How moral do you think person who is a nonbeliever who donates to charity is?
How moral do you think a person who is a nonbeliever who does their best to help others in need is?
How moral do you think person who is a nonbeliever who is very honest is?

Immoral behaviors, $\alpha = .92$ for religious target; $\alpha = .89$ for nonbeliever target
How moral do you think a person who is a nonbeliever who often behaves immorally is?
How moral do you think a person who is a nonbeliever who steals from their workplace is?
How moral do you think a person who is a nonbeliever who cheats to get ahead is?
How moral do you think a person who is a nonbeliever who cheats on their romantic partner is?
How moral do you think a person who is a nonbeliever who often lies is?
How moral do you think a person who is a nonbeliever who is often unfair to others is?

Note. Subscales were computed with the mean of items for categories that had two items or more.
Appendix B
Self-Ratings, Study 2

Self-Ratings: Religious Participants
How moral do you think you would be if:

More religious behaviors, $\alpha = .83$
- You begin going to church more often.
- You start praying more
- You start reading the bible (or other religious text) more often
- You buy more religious pictures and symbols to put around your house
- You begin attending religious events in your community more often

Fewer religious behaviors, $\alpha = .91$
- You start going to church less frequently than you do now
- You start praying less often than you do now
- You take down religious pictures and symbols around your house
- You stop attending any religious events
- You stop reading the bible (or other religious text)

Stronger belief in God
- You strengthen your faith in God

Doubting belief in God, $\alpha = .75$
- You begin doubting your belief in God
- You stop believing in God

Self-Ratings: Nonreligious Participants
How moral do you think you would be if:

More religious behaviors, $\alpha = .93$
- You begin going to church
- You start praying
- You begin reading the bible (or other religious text)
- You buy religious pictures and symbols to put around your house
- You begin attending religious events in your community

Self-Ratings Completed by all Participants
How moral do you think you would be if:

Moral behaviors, $\alpha = .88$ for religious participants; $\alpha = .83$ for nonreligious participants
- You begin volunteering often
- You begin donating to charity

Immoral behaviors, $\alpha = .86$ for religious participants; $\alpha = .71$ for nonreligious participants
- You begin being dishonest more often
- You begin behaving immorally

Note. Subscales were computed with the mean of items for categories that had two items or more.