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Priming Effects of Religious Concepts on Moral Judgment: Between Mean Values and Variation

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Abstract: Social psychological researchers have found that most conceptual structures can be primed, i.e. activated unobtrusively and exert an influence on subsequent behavior without the participant's awareness of this influence. I investigated whether exposing people to words related to a punishing God or a forgiving Christian could influence subsequent moral judgment. Participants completed a 'scrambled sentence' task before rating five vignettes concerning various moral transgressions. Analysis showed that participants in the 'forgiving' condition on average made slightly less severe moral judgments than did participants in both the 'punishing' condition and a control condition. Whereas previous religious priming studies have often treated 'religious' concepts as a homogenous category with homogenous priming effects, the current experiment questions that assumption. Also, the study incorporated a measure of participants' associations with the prime words, revealing considerable variation. This suggests that participants' different interpretations of religious words are an important topic and concern for future studies.