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## Mentalizing, Personal Prayer, the Presence of God, and Evil

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## Mentalizing, Personal Prayer, the Presence of God, and Evil

### Abstract

People who believe in a relational, personal deity, conceptualize god(s) as intentional agents with mental states. Hence it follows that mentalizing or theory of mind may be one of the cognitive foundations of religious belief and behavior. This study examined this relationship as it corresponds to reported prayer experiences, intimacy with god, and experience of agentic evil.

### About the Author

Dr. Laird Edman specializes in the cognitive science of religion, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and teaching and assessing critical thinking. He holds a doctorate in educational psychology that focused on cognition and learning from the University of Minnesota, as well as master's degrees in counseling psychology and English literature from the University of Notre Dame.

Dr. Edman's research has been published in *The Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, *The Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, *Psychological Reports*, *The Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, *Resources in Education*, *Teaching and Learning in Honors*, and *The National Honors Report*. He has also presented papers, workshops and seminars at the annual conferences of the American Psychological Association, Association for Psychological Science, International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion, National Collegiate Honors Council, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, and American Educational Research Association.

Chris Sietstra, Molly Townsend, Riley Harder, Corey Kundert, Hope DeRuyter, Rebekah Muilenberg, and Virginia Kjer are current and former students at Northwestern College.

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# Mentalizing, Personal Prayer, the Presence of God, and Evil

Laird Edman, Chris Sietstra, Molly Townsend, Riley Harder, Corey Kundert, Hope De Ruyter, Rebekah Muilenburg, Virginia Kjer  
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## Abstract

People who believe in a relational, personal deity conceptualize god(s) as intentional agents with mental states. Hence it follows that mentalizing or theory of mind may be one of the cognitive foundations of religious belief and behavior. This study examined this relationship as it corresponds to reported prayer experiences, intimacy with god, and experience of agentic evil.

## Introduction

People who believe in a relational, personal deity conceptualize god(s) as intentional agents with mental states. Since the deity with whom the individual has a relationship exhibits mental states that respond to human beliefs, desires, and concerns, it follows that mentalizing or theory of mind, the ability to represent and reason about other minds, may be one of the cognitive foundations of religious belief and behavior.

Norenzayan, Gervais, and Trzesniewski (2012) have found evidence for this relationship and suggest that a reliably developing ability to mentalize, or theory of mind, is an important predictor of religious belief. This relationship, however, has been quite controversial, and other researchers have been unable to find a relationship among mentalizing and religiosity.

It may be, however, that the relationship of mentalizing and religious belief is more specific than general. That is, generic measures of religiosity may be too unspecified to tease out the connection to theory of mind. It may be that mentalizing is related to specific religious activities and beliefs rather than to a more generic conception of religiosity. If mentalizing is an important part of religious belief, it follows that ability to mentalize may partially explain individual differences in prayer types, a believer's experience of the presence of god, and experiences of agentic evil—a devil or demons.

### Hypotheses

Ability to mentalize will be related to personal prayer, in that:

1. Differences in mentalizing will be related to relational, personal prayer practices.
2. Differences in mentalizing will be related to more intimate personal experiences with god(s).
3. Differences in mentalizing will be related to belief in and experiences with agentic evil.

## Methods & Procedure

**The Prayer Intimacy Scale:** Seven items rated on a continuum from 1 (never) to 5 (always) (Edman et al., 2016). Questions concern participants' experience in prayer, e.g., "When I pray, I hear God speak to me."

**The Multidimensional Prayer Inventory (MPI):** Twenty-one items rated on a continuum from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Questions concern prayer frequency and duration and assess frequency of different types of prayer, including adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, and reception (Laird, Snyder, Rapoff, & Green, 2004).

**The Empathy Quotient – short form (EQ):** Twenty-two items that assess the degree to which participants are able to vicariously identify with the perspectives and emotions of others (Wakabayashi et al., 2006).

**The Autism-Spectrum Quotient (AQ):** Fifty items assessing autistic characteristics in adults who have normal IQ scores (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Skinner, Martin, & Clubley, 2001).

**The Mind in the Eyes Test – Revised:** Thirty-six pictures that assess the presence of autistic traits in adults within a normative IQ range. Sensitivity to subtle social cues is measured by a participant's ability to accurately detect a person's emotion based on an image of a pair of eyes (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Hill, Raste, & Plumb, 2001).

**The Supernatural Evil Scale:** Five items modified from the Religious and Spiritual Struggle Scale (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014). Questions assess participants' belief in and experience with a devil or demons (Vermeer & Edman, 2016).

## Method Highlights

<b>Sample (data from 4 studies)</b>	622 Men 2 unreported	757 Women
<b>Age Range</b>	17 – 77	( <i>M</i> = 28.53, <i>SD</i> = 11.41)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	561 White/Non-Hispanic; 430 Asian; 199 Other; 192 Hispanic/Latino; 54 African-American	
<b>Reported Religion</b>	307 Protestant; 307 None; 193 Hindu; 143 Catholic; 102 Other; 81 Muslim; 24 Buddhist; 3 Mormon; 3 Jewish	

## Results

### H1: Mentalizing will be related to relational, personal prayer practices *Partially Supported*

2-step hierarchical multiple regression, predicting Mind in the Eyes scores:

Step 1: Thanksgiving, Adoration, Reception

$R^2 = .02$ ,  $F(3, 1292) = 9.939$ ,  $p < .001$

Step 2: add Supplication, Confession

$R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(5, 1290) = 8.374$ ,  $p < .001$

2-step hierarchical multiple regression, predicting Empathy Quotient scores:

Step 1: Thanksgiving, Adoration, Reception

$R^2 = .01$ ,  $F(3, 1382) = 4.032$ ,  $p = .007$

Step 2: add Supplication, Confession

$R^2 = .02$ ,  $F(5, 1380) = 5.080$ ,  $p < .001$

There was no relationship among AQ and MDPI scores. The final model for Mind in the Eyes, only Prayers of Reception resulted in a non-statistically significant  $\beta$  (.121,  $t = -1.90$ ,  $p = .058$ ). Final model for AQ, only Prayers of Reception and Supplication resulted in statistically significant  $\beta$ s ( $-.215$ ,  $t = -3.577$ ,  $p < .001$  and  $.117$ ,  $t = 2.522$ ,  $p = .012$ ).

### H2: Mentalizing will be related to more intimate personal prayer experiences *Supported*

Mind in the Eyes (MET), EQ, and AQ scores predicting Prayer Intimacy (PI) Scores:

$R^2 = .11$ ,  $F(3, 724) = 30.341$ ,  $p < .001$

*MET and PI:*  $r(734) = -.31$ ,  $p < .001$

*AQ and PI:*  $r(809) = .11$ ,  $p = .002$

*EQ and PI:*  $r(815) = .13$ ,  $p < .001$

### H3: Mentalizing will be related to higher scores on Supernatural Evil *Supported*

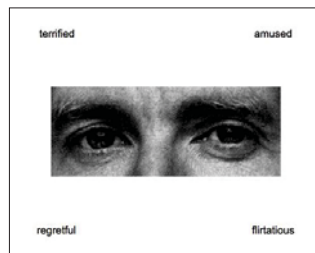
Mind in the Eyes, EQ, and AQ scores predicting Supernatural Evil Scores:

$R^2 = .17$ ,  $F(3, 722) = 49.697$ ,  $p < .001$

*MET and SE:*  $r(726) = -.38$ ,  $p < .001$

*AQ and SE:*  $r(726) = .23$ ,  $p < .001$

*EQ and SE:*  $r(726) = .19$ ,  $p < .001$



Example question from Mind in the Eyes Test - Revised.

Correct Answer: Regretful

## Discussion

Mentalizing may be related to personal prayer practices in predicting Mind in the Eyes and EQ scores, but not AQ scores. However, this relationship accounted for only a very small percentage of score variance. Further analysis should include examination of subsets of participants in order to account for varying levels of religiosity and different religious traditions. It may be that the large number of "nones" in the data set (and hence the large number of people who do not pray) may have diluted this potential relationship. The relationships of mentalizing with the experience of intimacy with god during prayer and with belief in and experience of agentic evil are more compelling. These results lend support to the theory that mentalizing is one of the cognitive foundations of religion and is an important component in understanding differences in religiosity. The results indicate that the relationship of mentalizing with belief in and experience of supernatural evil is stronger than that with one's experience of god(s). The results also support the notion that MET scores are actually negatively related to supernatural experiences. This implies that mentalizing is a multi-dimensional construct. More research is needed to examine the nature of mentalizing.

### Conclusion

The research connecting theory of mind and religious belief has met with controversy. The present study clarifies this—it may be that mentalizing is implicated in the intensity and kind of relationship a believer has with supernatural agents, both benevolent and malevolent. This may reveal why some researchers have found the connection and others have not: it may depend upon how religious belief is measured. It also may reveal one of the reasons why some people have intense or very personal experiences with God and others don't—it may be related to the cognitive ability to mentalize. If this is true, it also may have implications for faith leaders. This may explain why older prayer practices that involve imagining oneself into a scene and experiencing what the characters in the scene are experiencing is a powerful way to "feel" the presence of God—it increases one's ability to and propensity to mentalize.

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