God will forgive: reflecting on God’s love decreases neurophysiological responses to errors


www.oxfordjournals.org Accepted July 17, 2014.

Abstract
In religions where God is portrayed as both loving and wrathful, religious beliefs may be a source of fear as well as comfort. Here, we consider if God’s love may be more effective, relative to God’s wrath, for soothing distress, but less effective for helping control behavior. Specifically, we assess whether contemplating God’s love reduces our ability to detect and emotionally react to conflict between one’s behavior and overarching religious standards. We do so within a neurophysiological framework, by observing the effects of exposure to concepts of God’s love vs punishment on the error-related negativity (ERN)—a neural signal originating in the anterior cingulate cortex that is associated with performance monitoring and affective responses to errors. Participants included 123 students at Brigham Young University, who completed a Go/No-Go task where they made ‘religious’ errors (i.e. ostensibly exhibited pro-alcohol tendencies). Reflecting on God’s love caused dampened ERNs and worse performance on the Go/No-Go task. Thinking about God’s punishment did not affect performance or ERNs. Results suggest that one possible reason religiosity is generally linked to positive well-being may be because of a decreased affective response to errors that occurs when God’s love is prominent in the minds of believers.