The sociopolitical effects of modernization and the sophisticated technological innovations of the consumer-driven marketplace have been credited with enhancing the average person’s security and control across many domains of their lives. These aspects of sociopolitical structure and economic developments buffer people from many of the threats to well-being and livelihood that have impacted individuals’ lives throughout most of history.

Given these accomplishments, it is perhaps not surprising that political leaders and corporate marketing campaigns often emphasize their ability to provide for people’s security needs. From government policy to the marketing of consumer goods, many of these services and goods are promoted as offering people a sense of security against threats, providing people with a sense of predictability, stability, and control in their lives. In 2011 Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper stated as much when he said that “the global economy is fragile” and that “our priority will remain to ensure the stability and security for Canadians in what remain extremely challenging global circumstances” (National Post, 2011). Similar language was used in 2009 by U.S. president Barack Obama when proposing health insurance reform. Specifically, he stated that such reform will “provide more security and stability to those who have health insurance. It will provide insurance to those who don’t” (The White House, 2009). Likewise, advertisements for numerous consumer products, such as vehicles, tout the product's reliability and safety, as well as the sense of security it provides. Home security systems, sports utility vehicles, winter tires, computer anti-virus protection, and extended warranties are all marketed as providers of safety and security, and they appeal to people’s concerns about randomness in the world.

But although various systems and entities external to the self are often relied on to satisfy psychological needs for stability, order, and control, these systems have recognized limitations. It is perhaps not surprising that Prime Minister Harper’s comments above came after a vote of no confidence from opposition parties that dissolved his minority government; that is, he appealed to people’s concerns about the nation’s stability and touted his party’s ability to assuage those concerns when the government’s legitimacy and efficacy were challenged. Likewise, President Obama...
emphasized healthcare reform’s ability to offer stability and security in the context of national concerns about the unpredictability of health insurance (e.g., being dropped from one’s insurance, being denied coverage) but also suspicions about moving toward more socialized medicine and the perceived flaws of such a system. Terrorist attacks, crime, economic fluctuations, and natural disasters are to varying degrees unpredictable and uncontrollable, and are also to varying degrees under the purview of the government and one’s sociopolitical system. Responding appropriately to events that threaten people’s sense of order in the world is necessary to maintain people’s confidence in their sociopolitical systems. The failure of these systems to eliminate or significantly reduce these remaining sources of insecurity may explain why people often express such disappointment in the performance of these systems. For example, the average approval rating of American presidents since the 1950s is only 54% (Gallup, 2010), and confidence in other government institutions such as Congress is typically much lower.

In the consumer domain, numerous recalls and product failures shake people’s confidence in the industry’s ability to offer the stability and security it claims. This is particularly troublesome in the case of numerous vehicle recalls dealing with features that are crucial to the safety of the car, such as tires and brakes. In 2000 Ford and Firestone announced a recall of millions of tires on Ford Explorer vehicles—vehicles that were often sold and branded as a safe family vehicle. People turn to consumer goods that offer a sense of security for their life, but these goods sometimes do not meet these needs, with tragic consequences.

The above failures of both the sociopolitical system and the marketplace to buffer people from these various threats leave the average person with a set of residual unmet security needs. These needs, when salient, can contribute to a sense of instability, disorder, and lack of control in one’s life that needs to be addressed (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Laurin, Kay, & Moscovitch, 2008). More generally, feelings of uncertainty, lack of control, and other similar threats initiate compensatory processes that function to resolve these threats and restore a sense of psychological security, including such processes as perceiving an orderly, non-random world (for a review, see Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009), increasing ingroup identification (Hogg, Adelman, & Blaff, 2010; Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007), and affirming cultural norms and values (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Proulx & Heine, 2008). Thus, it follows that, to the extent that residual insecurity undermines people’s confidence in the sociopolitical system and the marketplace, the representatives of those systems should be motivated to shore up the public’s confidence in their ability to eliminate these sources of insecurity. As these systems reach the limit of their ability to enhance actual security (Cowen, 2011), people may be motivated to provide an illusory perception of security. One potential strategy for accomplishing this goal, which we explore in our research, may involve symbolically aligning a given source of security—be it a government institution or consumer good—with what is often perceived to be a more dependable and powerful external source of security, that is, organized religion and God.

Throughout history, religious rituals and symbols have often been interwoven with the political system. In the Bible, God tells King Solomon that “if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14, NIV). Perceiving such a relationship between God and one’s nation has been an important theme throughout history, with monarchies being justified as ordained by God, and with leaders and citizens alike praying for God’s favor, so that some of his power and mercy can trickle down to more worldly sources of control and ultimately to the citizens. However, such perceptions are not limited to the ancient world or medieval Europe. Nearly 3,000 years after the story of King Solomon, where Solomon prays to God and God requests national prayer, President Ahmadinejad of Iran stated, “We believe that atomic energy is a blessing by God”, thus claiming a national relationship with God, as well as insight into God’s desires for the country.
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Such fusions between the nation and God are also not limited to historical or contemporary theocracies. In 2011 Governor Rick Perry of Texas proclaimed April 22–24, 2011, as days of prayer in response to unprecedented droughts and wildfires in Texas—a proclamation that was not private or addressed to a specific group but was officially posted on his government website (Montopoli, 2011). Subtler examples abound in modern democracies. For example, the British national anthem is titled “God Save the Queen”. In the United States, the prayer “God Bless America” is often played or sung at sporting events, “In God We Trust” is prominently displayed on money, and the phrase “one nation under God” is in the nation’s Pledge of Allegiance. In 2011 “In God We Trust” was affirmed as the official national motto of the United States, with the vote being 396–9 in favor (Lynn, 2011), despite the phrase being under no threat. In other words, politicians saw it as important to further solidify the link between their nation and God, perhaps driven (either consciously or unconsciously) to appear more aligned with God in the eyes of the public, or out of a genuine concern with country’s place in the eyes of God.

Similarly, market brands and consumer goods are often associated with religion and God. In Ghana the growing influence of Catholicism can be seen in businesses such as the “God’s Time is Best” bookstore, the “God Never Fails Cement Company”, and “True God Plumbers” (NBC Nightly News, 2013). While examples this explicit may be more elusive in industrialized societies, consumers in these societies often find subtle ways to infuse religious symbolism into otherwise secular products. In a 2005 Baylor University survey, 24% of respondents in a nationally representative U.S. sample had purchased some religious item such as jewelry or bumper stickers to attach to themselves or some other personal item. People hang crosses from their rearview mirrors to remind them that God is with them while they are driving and thus exposed to all of the uncertainties and dangers of the road. Others put *ichthys* (e.g., “Jesus fish”) on their car, or, more to our point, “God is my co-pilot” bumper stickers. Although these behaviors may serve as a means of signaling one’s identity, they may also have the effect of imbuing the product with increased security, as they tie oneself not just with a particular religious group but also personally to what is often seen as an omnipotent and omniscient source of control in the universe.

We propose that the above examples serve as instances of secular targets external to the self (products, governments, etc.) being symbolically fused with God so as to increase their perceived ability to provide people with a sense of security against residual forms of unpredictability in their lives. In this chapter we outline the theoretical frameworks that help us understand the function of these symbolic fusions—namely, compensatory control theory (Kay et al., 2008; Kay, Whitson, et al., 2009) and system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004)—and present some evidence for how symbolic fusions between secular and religious sources of security offer people a sense of stability and order. We explore the consequences when government services and market products piggyback off of religion’s power to confer a sense of control, by first examining fusions of sociopolitical systems with religious symbols and then examining fusions of consumer goods with religious symbols.

### Compensatory Control Theory

Compensatory control theory (Kay et al., 2008; Kay, Whitson, et al., 2009) posits that people have a fundamental need to see their world as orderly and non-random and to ultimately be in control. One way of maintaining this perception is to assert a belief in personal control over one’s life outcomes. Such a belief necessarily entails seeing the world as orderly and non-random, as the self is seen as the cause of the outcomes that one experiences. However, perceptions of personal control can vary either chronically or situationally (Burger, 1989; Burger & Cooper, 1979; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Ji, Peng, & Nisbett, 2000; Pepitone & Saffiotti, 1997; Rodin, Rennert, & Solomon, 1980; Weisz, Rothbaum, & Blackburn, 1984; Wohl & Enzle, 2003), thus leaving people with an
unmet need to impose order and control on the world. In this case, people can turn to external sources of control. In other words, when the self is perceived as not being in control, the next-best option for people is to see some external entity as in control. Research has shown that when personal control is threatened or when the need to see order in the world is otherwise heightened, people will rely on external sources of order and control, such as social systems (Kay et al., 2008; Kay, Moscovitch, & Laurin, 2010; Shepherd, Kay, Landau, & Keefer, 2011). In this way, compensatory control theory helps to explain why people are motivated to defend and legitimize the social systems they live in (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2004); these systems are defended because they help offer people a comforting sense of stability and security, satisfying their fundamental need to see the world as orderly, non-random, and controlled. In a particularly vivid description of the solace that social systems provide to people, Ellison (1948/2003, p. 324) wrote that these institutions are “one of the bulwarks which men place between themselves and the constant threat of chaos. For whatever the assigned function of social institutions, their psychological function is to protect the citizen against the irrational, incalculable forces that hover about the edges of human life like cosmic destruction lurking within an atomic stockpile.”

However, social systems are not the only external sources of control and order. Research has identified several other means of seeing the world as controlled and non-random, including beliefs in a controlling God (specifically as opposed to a creator God; Kay et al. 2008; Kay, Moscovitch, et al., 2010; Kay, Whitson, et al., 2009), superstition (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008), fate (Tang, Shepherd, & Kay, 2014), consumer products (Cutright, 2012; Shepherd et al., 2011), belief in human progress (Rutjens, van Harreveld, & van der Pligt, 2010), belief in (orderly) evolution (Rutjens, van der Pligt, and van Harreveld, 2010), orderly, stage-based scientific theories over continuum theories (Rutjens, van der Harreveld, van der Pligt, Kreamers, & Noordewier, 2012), and even the power of one’s enemies (Sullivan, Landau, & Rothschild, 2010). More generally, threats to personal control lead people to desire increased structure in the world and to see more orderly patterns in external stimuli and events (Cutright, 2012; Friesen, Kay, Eibach, & Galinsky, 2014; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Affirming belief in these external sources of control helps lower anxiety associated with feeling a lack of control (Kay, Moscovitch, et al., 2010; Laurin et al., 2008). Importantly, the effects of control threat and compensatory control processes have been empirically differentiated from those of other threats, such as threats to self-certainty and mortality salience (Kay, Shepherd, Blatz, Chua, & Galinsky, 2010; Shepherd et al., 2011).

External sources of control are substitutable not only for personal control but also for one another. In a series of studies, Kay and Shepherd et al. (2010) found that when the government was framed as efficacious and stable, people showed decreased beliefs in a controlling God (but not decreased beliefs in God offering meaning in life). Conversely, when it was suggested to participants that if God exists, it is impossible for him to interact in the world and control any part of it, people showed increased support for their sociopolitical system. In a longitudinal study in Malaysia, two weeks after an election, participants saw the country as more stable than they did two weeks before the election, and this increase in perceived stability post-election was subsequently associated with a drop in a belief in a controlling God. This kind of substitutability can be observed among the major political orientations in the United States (Kay & Eibach, 2012); left-leaning individuals (i.e., Democrats) tend to be less religious and support more government intervention, whereas right-leaning individuals (i.e., Republicans) tend to be more religious and support smaller government; libertarians tend to be less religious and support smaller government while affirming belief in personal control.

**Symbolically Fusing Secular and Religious Sources of Control**

While both sociopolitical systems and God serve as substitutable means of maintaining perceptions of security and order in the world, they are not created equal. As mentioned earlier in this chapter,
the government is often accused of being inefficient, ineffective, and incompetent. Economic collapse, natural disasters, and terrorist attacks all can undermine people’s confidence in their system, and while people are often motivated to defend their social system when under threat (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2004), these perceptions cannot always be maintained. Compare this to God, who is often seen as being omnipotent and omniscient. In the United States, nearly 90% of Americans are certain or mostly certain that God exists (Gallup, 2006), and 70% believe that God is the “all-powerful, all-knowing creator of the universe who still rules it today” (The Barna Group, 2009). When this is compared to the average approval rating of any given political leader or government institution, it is clear that people generally have much more faith in God than in their political system. Representatives of the political system may thus be tempted to symbolically align themselves with religious symbols in order to borrow some of religion’s more awesome powers to confer perceived control.

To test the effectiveness of this strategy, we investigated the consequences of symbolically fusing secular sources of order and control with God, through the lens of compensatory control theory. If people are inclined to turn to God as a source of control, then it follows that anything that is symbolically associated with God may benefit from this association with a more powerful and reliable provider of security. In other words, secular sources of control can piggyback off of people’s religious beliefs and take on some of God’s control-affirming properties. This prediction follows not only from compensatory control research but also from research on the culturally universal laws of sympathetic magic. When a secular object contacts a sacred object, the secular object is perceived as receiving some of the supernatural properties of the sacred object (Frazer, 1925; Rozin, Markwith, & Ross, 1990; Rozin, Millman, & Nemeroff, 1986). This may be observed when people refer to America as being “in God’s favor” with consequences for the nation and its stability and well-being. If the nation is seen as in favor with God or in alignment with God’s plan, then it will benefit in the form of prosperity. This was reflected in a 1985 speech by Ronald Reagan:

> There’s no story more heartening in our history than the progress that we’ve made toward the brotherhood of man that God intended for us. Let us resolve there will be no turning back or hesitation on the road to an America rich in dignity and abundant with opportunity for all our citizens. . . . That’s our heritage, that’s our song . . . we raise our voices to the God who is the Author of this most tender music. And may He continue to hold us close as we fill the world with our sound—in unity, affection, and love—one people under God, dedicated to the dream of freedom that He has placed in the human heart, called upon now to pass that dream on to a waiting and hopeful world.

_(Ronald Reagan, January 21, 1985)_

The potential benefits of such symbolic fusions are numerous. Below we detail some of our research on this phenomenon and discuss its implications, first for the sociopolitical system and then for individual citizens. The scope of this phenomenon lends itself to a variety of research methodologies. As such, we use archival, correlational, and experimental methods across different cultures to illustrate the consequences when secular sources of control are symbolically fused with God.

It is worth noting that Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales, and Huici (2009) have studied “identity fusion”. This occurs when one’s group becomes functionally equivalent with the self, and it increases devotion to the group and sacrifice for the group. Our concept of fusion is rather different and is instead more in line with the concept of sympathetic magic, which posits that secular entities or objects, when in contact with sacred objects or symbols, assimilate the supernatural properties of the sacred object (Frazer, 1925; Rozin et al., 1986, 1990). In our research, we propose
a similar process whereby symbolically associating one’s possessions or one’s nation with God will put oneself in alignment with God’s grace.

**When Are Symbolic Fusions Between the Nation and God Most Prevalent?**

According to our theoretical model, fusions between the nation and God should be most prevalent when unmet security concerns become salient, that is, when the perceived order and control of one’s world are undermined. A secure world is one that is predictable and orderly, whereas it is difficult to conceive of a chaotic and random world that offers a sense of security. In this way, a sense of control and order and a perception of security in the world are intimately related (although we make no claims as to which is more primary, nor as to whether order and security are meaningfully different constructs). Likewise, such fusions are likely to be more prevalent when the sociopolitical system is threatened and people need to bolster their confidence in their system and its ability to effectively manage crises. We explored this hypothesis through a historical analysis of presidential speeches. Governments are expected to deal with issues that are often beyond the control of human institutions. These threats not only draw people toward external sources of control to provide a sense of security and order but also hold the potential to undermine people’s confidence if not handled appropriately. Throughout U.S. history, numerous such national-level security threats have been experienced, including World War II; the Korean War; the high-stakes nuclear stalemate during the Cold War period; the assassination of President Kennedy; the Vietnam War; the terrorist attacks on New York City and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001; natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina; and numerous other domestic problems and international conflicts. Since the proliferation of access to radio in the 1930s, presidents have been able to address people’s concerns and fears through speeches that could be heard simultaneously throughout the nation. We predict that if the government, in addressing these concerns, piggybacks off of people’s confidence in God, whether intentionally or not, then we would find that times of national threat and uncertainty are associated with increased presidential references to God.

To test this hypothesis, we (Shepherd, Eibach, & Kay, 2013) collected 267 presidential speeches from 1933 to 2010 that were addressed to a public audience (following the criteria of Domke and Coe, 2007, in their analysis of U.S. presidential speeches), which were retrieved from the American Presidency Project website (www.presidency.ucsb.edu/). Coders then rated these speeches according to the amount of national threat and instability at the time of the speech. Speeches were then coded for the number of times the president referenced praying for a given outcome (e.g., “This is the work that awaits us all, to be done with bravery, with charity, and with prayer to Almighty God.” —Dwight Eisenhower), referenced God’s control (e.g., “… though we share your grief, your pain is unimaginable, and we know that. We cannot undo it. That is God’s work.” —Bill Clinton), or connected the nation with God in some way (e.g., “… every one of us has a solemn obligation under God to serve this nation in its most critical hour…” —Franklin Roosevelt). We found that coders’ ratings of national threat indeed predicted the number of times a president made religious references. Specifically, speeches that were made during times of national threat or uncertainty contained more references to God’s control, to prayer, and to the joining of the nation with God.

**How Does Fusing the Sociopolitical System With God Influence Perceptions of the System?**

In over 80 years, U.S. presidents have called on God, or asked the nation to call on God, during times of political, social, economic, or foreign instability and insecurity. What consequences do
these kinds of fusions have for perceptions of the sociopolitical system? Does this fusion between
the nation and God serve to increase people’s confidence in the nation and the sociopolitical
system, as the piggybacking hypothesis predicts? We explored this possibility in another study
by measuring people’s general religiosity and then threatening all participants’ sense of personal
control to heighten their desire for external sources of control (Cutright, 2012; Kay et al., 2008;
Rutjens et al., 2012; Rutjens, van der Pligt, et al., 2010; Rutjens, van Harreveld, et al., 2010; Shep-
herd et al., 2011; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008) and the motivation to see their sociopolitical system
more favorably (Jost et al., 2004; Kay et al., 2008). Participants were presented with either a single
image that combined elements of the nation and God together (e.g., the American flag, a bald
eagle, hands in prayer, a cross, and the phrase “In God We Trust”) or two separate images, with
one depicting symbols of the nation and the other symbols of God. After viewing these images,
participants read about several potential security threats, including a stock market crash, melting
polar ice caps, a terrorist plot, an oil tanker spill, and a flu epidemic. They then rated the extent
to which they thought the government could effectively manage each threat. They also rated the
extent to which they thought that God could help with each scenario.

The results supported our hypothesized piggybacking effect. First, when the nation and God
were not symbolically fused, religiosity was not a significant predictor of government efficacy.
However, symbolically joining the nation and God led to a significant effect of religiosity, such
that religious participants came to see the government as more effective in managing the various
threats, relative to (i) those lower on religiosity and (ii) religious individuals in the unfused condi-
tion. A similar and significant effect was also observed for participants’ ratings of how patriotic they
felt, with religious individuals in the fusion condition reporting higher levels of patriotism com-
pared to those in the unfused condition. Finally, we calculated the correlations between people’s
ratings of government efficacy and God’s efficacy. Our hypothesis would predict that when the
nation and God are symbolically associated, then religious individuals should see the government
as capable of managing a given issue to the extent that they see God as capable as well. This is
what we observed. Only those participants who were (i) religious and (ii) in the fusion condition
yielded a significant correlation between their ratings of government efficacy and God’s efficacy. In
other words, when the nation and God were symbolically linked, to see one as an effective source
of control (i.e., God) was to see the other as an effective source of control (i.e., the government).

In another study we explored the effects of more mundane fusions between the nation and
God. Specifically, we leveraged the ubiquity of the phrase “In God We Trust” on American cur-
rency and explored the implications in the context of the ongoing economic slump. Participants
professing at least some belief in God were first randomly assigned to a personal control threat
induction (“think of a time that they lacked personal control over some outcome . . .”) or a no
threat condition. Participants were then asked to look at an image of two overlapping one-dollar
bills and to count the number of times the word “dollar” appeared. In the fusion condition, the
phrase “In God We Trust” was prominently displayed. In the no fusion condition, the bills over-
lapped such that this phrase was obscured. Participants then rated their confidence in the U.S.
economy and the government’s ability to manage it.

We found that the control threat and fusing of the nation with God yielded a significant
interaction, such that when control was threatened and the nation was symbolically associated
with God (via the phrase “In God We Trust”), participants showed increased confidence in their
national economy, as well as in the government’s ability to get the economy on track. Critically,
higher levels of optimism and confidence were observed for these participants relative to (a) the no
threat condition when the critical phrase was visible and (b) the control threat condition when the
critical phrase was not visible. Thus, when personal control was threatened, and the desire to see
one’s social system favorably was thereby heightened, participants found confidence in the system
when it was symbolically associated with God.
To what extent, then, can belief that one’s nation has a special connection with God buffer against the negative impact that perceived system decline has on one’s evaluations of the system? One would expect that seeing one’s nation in a state of decline might undermine one’s confidence in the basic tenets of that system, that is, one’s pride in being a part of that system, one’s respect for that system, and one’s confidence that the current system is the best possible sociopolitical arrangement. However, if one believes that one’s nation has a special place in God’s plan, then such a belief might buffer against the dispiriting effect of perceiving national decline.

To test this, we analyzed data from the 2000 Politics of Character Survey (Hunter & Bowman, 2000), which was accessed from the Association of Religion Data Archives (www.TheARDA.com). Contained in this survey are a number of items relevant to our hypothesis, including (a) the extent to which the participants perceive the United States as being in a state of national decline versus improvement, (b) the extent to which they see the nation as having a special place in God’s plan for history, and (c) their support and respect for U.S. political institutions, their pride in being American, and the belief that the American system is the best possible system.

Controlling for religiosity, religious affiliation, and political orientation, we found the predicted buffering effect. As expected, among those who did not see God as having a plan for the United States, perceiving the nation as being in decline undermined their confidence in and support for this system. However, this effect was significantly attenuated among those who saw the United States as having a special place in God’s plan. Put differently, those who saw the nation as in a strong decline but also thought that God had a plan for the United States maintained a level of support for the sociopolitical system that was on par with those who saw the nation as holding steady but did not think that God had a plan for the United States.

To summarize, we observe the predicted piggybacking effect in a number of contexts. Presidents are more likely to make appeals to God when the national stability and security are undermined, and people are more likely to see their government as efficacious and their economy as stable when these are symbolically associated with God. This is particularly the case when an individual’s sense of personal control is threatened, which heightens (i) the need to turn to external sources of control and (ii) the desire to see one’s social system favorably, in the service of satisfying this important psychological need.

**Implications**

The above studies suggest that when the sociopolitical system is symbolically associated with God it can piggyback off of people’s beliefs in divine power and accrue a number of benefits. Our results suggest that the government benefits by being seen as increasingly effective at times when it otherwise might not and when confidence in the system might otherwise wane. While previous compensatory control research has found that when one source of control is bolstered, people have less need for another (Kay, Shepherd, et al., 2010), the studies we reviewed suggest that this relationship can be undone by symbolically fusing the nation with God, creating a more compatible relationship between the two where to support one is to support the other.

Such an outcome speaks to the utility of this practice and its ubiquity over time, with divinely guided or ordained sociopolitical systems benefitting from the increased perceptions of efficacy and legitimacy that come with being seen as better sources of security in people’s lives. Given the prevalence of belief in God and his infallibility, fusing the sociopolitical system with God may serve as an especially robust means of justifying the system. Because people are motivated to perceive their system as legitimate and fair (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2004), such perceptions can be maintained and are unfalsifiable to the extent that the existing state of affairs, whether good or bad, just or unjust, is seemingly ordained by God. Just as God is often thanked for blessing one’s nation, so too are suffering and inequality often justified using religion. Negative outcomes, even
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on a massive scale, can be attributed to “God’s will” or to being “part of God’s plan.” Popular ideologies with deep religious roots, such as the Protestant work ethic, can also perpetuate the idea that outcomes are fairly and justly distributed in society, even if seemingly unfair on the surface. Likewise, existing policy may be more immune from criticism to the extent that it is explicitly tied to religious doctrine. Combine this with the flexibility of religious scripture in how it can be interpreted and applied, and it is likely that a social system can be perceived as very robust, resistant to change, and legitimate and effective to the extent that it is symbolically tied to God. The notion of American exceptionalism and divine providence reflects a potent modern fusion of nationalism and religion and can be a particularly powerful way to either resist change or push an agenda, especially when national anxiety is high (Fettweis, this volume).

While the system justification motive can be a powerful form of motivated cognition, giving people rose-colored lenses through which to see and evaluate their sociopolitical system, sometimes reality cannot be denied, and various threats and problems may undermine people’s confidence in their social system. When this happens, people lose a significant source of security in their lives—one that is very proximal and tangible. Therefore, people may be motivated to fuse the nation with their religious beliefs, insofar as it allows them to maintain perceptions of legitimacy in the system. For this reason, individual citizens are perhaps even more inclined to include God in national symbols. People wear items or attach stickers to their car that say “God bless America” or “One Nation Under God.” They express outrage when civil liberties activists challenge the placement of religious phrases or items in public schools or government buildings (such as the Ten Commandments or the Lord’s Prayer). Many citizens also refer to America in explicitly religious terms as being a “Christian nation.” So long as the nation is sufficiently tied to God or is seemingly attempting to be in God’s favor, religious individuals may maintain confidence in the system and optimism in its future, even when such confidence may be unfounded.

Another important potential consequence of this piggybacking effect for citizens is the implications for the actual efficacy and responsiveness of their government. Research has shown that when primed with God (particularly God as a controlling force in life), individuals are less motivated to pursue important long-term goals (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012). Therefore, it is possible that politicians, to the extent that they espouse a belief in a controlling God, are less inclined to take action on certain issues, or indeed to see any issue at all, if they believe that God is a more powerful source of control. This can perhaps be seen in the earlier example of Texas governor Rick Perry calling for a national day of prayer for rain after weeks of drought and wildfires. Likewise, U.S. congressman John Shimkus, who had bid to chair the U.S. House Energy Committee, professed belief that God will not allow global warming to destroy the planet (Mail Online, 2010), stating, “As long as the earth endures, seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, will never cease . . . . I believe that is the infallible word of God, and that’s the way it is going to be for his creation.” Such beliefs may absolve the system of responsibility to effectively deal with issues, while also offering a divinely guided solution that requires no effort on the part of citizens or the political system, and one that is comforting to many individuals. The implications of this dovetail nicely with the observation that in a compensatory control framework, conservatives typically turn to religion before government as an external source of order and control. Republican politicians professing God as a source of control may simultaneously be providing a rationale for limited government involvement.

Finally, while political and economic modernization have often been seen as forces that promote secularization, in part because they reduce the insecurities that in the past have led people to turn to religion for solace (Norris & Inglehart, 2004), the inability of the sociopolitical system and the marketplace to eliminate residual sources of insecurity may explain why the secularization process in many modern societies has been incomplete. To this point, the relation between valuing security (national security, social order) and religiosity is greater in less developed countries. In
such societies, corrupt, dysfunctional, and/or transient governments leave people with unaddressed security needs (Tomczyk, Yu, & Zhou, this volume). The government and marketers of products and services may actively draw on religious symbols to maintain public confidence in their capacity to provide security and resolve these residual needs.

**Fusing Consumer Products and God**

Just as sociopolitical systems often fall short in meeting our needs for security, so too do consumer products. For instance, our lives depend on the safety features of the cars we drive, but in the first nine months of 2012 alone there were over 25,000 traffic related fatalities in the United States (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2012). Clearly, these safety features do not stop all deaths. Many of these deaths are due to factors largely beyond the victim’s control, such as the reckless behavior of other drivers on the road (who may or may not be impaired), unfavorable weather, and unpredictable automobile malfunctions. Our professional livelihoods often depend on the reliability of products such as computers and cell phones. Our personal safety and well-being are dependent on the integrity of our home and the utilities it provides.

And just as people will symbolically fuse their nation with God, so too do people symbolically attach consumer goods to God so as to make them a more effective means of satisfying their security needs and maintaining their belief that the world is orderly and non-random. Individual consumers actively construct fusions of religious symbols with products. As mentioned before, individuals commonly attach religious symbols to their possessions so as to imbue them with an increased sense of security, stability, and safety (Baylor University, 2005). This can be seen in a Christian context when people hang crosses from their rearview mirror, when ships are christened, or on October 4 each year when people take their dogs to be blessed in remembrance of St. Francis of Assisi (Sweeney, 2011). This attempt to imbue these products with these qualities is understandable, given how much we depend on these products on a daily basis. Rituals for attaching sacredness to consumer products are found in diverse religious contexts, including Hindu religious culture, where it is common to have a variety of everyday objects blessed in a ceremony called a puja. In this ceremony an individual makes offerings to a god in the hopes that the object being blessed will be guarded and protected through divine means. Secular-religious fusions are also found in the marketing of consumer products and services. Companies such as Chic-fil-A and In-N-Out Burger in the United States are rather explicit about their religious affiliations, with the latter putting Bible verses on their takeout bags. In these various examples an attempt is being made, either implicitly or explicitly, to receive divine protection for consumer products. We argue that such practices are ultimately motivated by concern about randomness in the world and the desire to see the world as more orderly and controlled.

To explore this idea, we carried out a series of correlational and experimental studies in two cultural contexts—India and the United States—to test (i) whether or not control and order needs predict an increased tendency to symbolically associate products with God, and (ii) whether such fusions increase perceptions of that product’s control-affirming properties—that is, reliability and safety (Shepherd, Kay, & Eibach, 2013). In one such study, Indian Hindu participants were asked some personality questions as well as questions about their beliefs about different products. Participants were presented with 28 consumer goods and were asked to rate them according to how important it was for someone to have that item blessed in some way. Items included a car, stereo, bicycle, toaster, TV, computer, tablet, phone, wristwatch, vacuum, camera, and so on. Participants then completed a single item from the personal need for structure scale (PNS; Neuberg & Newsom, 1993): “It upsets me to go into a situation without knowing what I can expect from it.” We used the PNS scale because the need for structure can be thought of as a chronic need to perceive order in the world. Past research has shown that personal control threat increases scores on the
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PNS scale (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008) and that control threat increases the tendency to see and seek out structure and patterns (Cutright, 2012; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Furthermore, past research has shown parallel effects between this individual difference measure and situationally induced needs for personal control, such that those with a high chronic need for structure show similar order- and control-seeking tendencies as those who are situationally under personal control threat (Cutright, 2012).

As predicted, individuals who reported having a higher need for structure in their lives placed greater importance on having the presented consumer goods blessed, even when controlling for other variables, such as age, sex, and religiosity. These results are suggestive of a piggybacking effect, whereby those who require more order in the world (here, in the form of increased reliability and safety in consumer goods) fuse consumer goods with divine control so as to imbue them with these security-affirming properties.

In a subsequent study we tested this more directly. Indian Hindu participants were asked to rate the same 28 consumer goods according to how often they break down or stop working properly for no reason, without warning. The items were again rated according to how important it is to have them blessed. The results were supportive of the idea that people desire to have products blessed because of randomness concerns; individuals had a greater desire to have items blessed to the extent that they had a general tendency to see items as likely to randomly break down. Furthermore, a product-level analysis showed that those items that were seen as more susceptible to random faults and breakdowns were judged as being the most important ones to have blessed. Therefore, it appears that the desire to have items blessed is at least in part motivated by concerns about the risk of random product malfunctioning.

To test this idea more precisely, we conducted a series of experiments where we manipulated people’s sense of personal control and also whether or not an item—in this case, a car—was blessed. Indian participants were again recruited and completed either the same control threat induction mentioned earlier or a no threat task. Participants then viewed what was ostensibly an online ad for a used car. In the fusion condition, the ad stated that “our dealership offers a free puja with the purchase of this car. A Puja will be available to perform the puja immediately after purchase.” This is common practice at many Indian car dealerships. An image was also provided showing the processes of blessing a car. In the no fusion condition, this phrase and image were omitted. The two ads were otherwise the same. All participants then rated the perceived safety of the car.

The results were supportive of the hypothesis that consumer goods are perceived to be safer and more reliable when they are symbolically fused with God, specifically when the need for order and non-randomness is heightened. The two-way interaction between threat and fusion was significant, and, critical to our hypotheses, perceived safety was highest among those whose sense of personal control was threatened and who were told that the car would be blessed upon purchase. Importantly, this effect was observed only among Hindus. The same two-way interaction was not significant among non-Hindus, nor were any simple effects significant, thus suggesting a level of specificity to this effect as opposed to something else about the manipulation that increased people’s perceptions of safety.

This effect was replicated in an American sample. One hundred sixty-eight American participants were randomly assigned to the same control threat versus no threat induction as above and then viewed an online ad for a used car. In this case, the fusion was through the presence versus absence of a common Christian symbol, the “Jesus fish”, on the trunk of the car. Participants then rated how safe and reliable they perceived the car to be, how prone it is to random faults and breakdowns, and how much they trusted the car with their family’s safety.

The same two-way interaction was observed as in our earlier study. Higher levels of perceived safety and reliability were observed among those whose sense of personal control was threatened and who saw the car with the Christian symbol on it. These ratings were higher than those in the
threat condition when the symbol was absent, as well as those in the no threat condition when the symbol was present. Similar to our earlier studies, this pattern suggests a motivated effect. When personal control was threatened, seeing a Christian symbol on a consumer good allowed people to satiate that motivation by imbuing the item with increased safety and reliability—the very properties that help them see it as protected from randomness and unpredictability. Again, these effects were unique to Christians as opposed to non-Christians.

Implications

Symbolically fusing consumer goods with God has a number of potential consequences. First, the results we reviewed suggest that when the companies use these fusions to market their products or services this may serve to increase consumer confidence in the quality of those goods. As is the case with sociopolitical systems, profit-driven businesses are not always trusted as looking out for the customer's best interests (e.g., caveat emptor). Given people's associations between religion and morality, another likely goal and consequence of fusing one's business with God may be to enhance customers' trust in that business. By enhancing the perceived reliability of a product or service and the perceived morality of the business offering that product or service, fusions with religious symbols may also increase sales. For example, car dealerships in India that offer pujas for free when a car is purchased, which served as the stimulus for our study of this process, likely realize the effectiveness of this service as a means to increase sales.

What value do individuals receive by purchasing a blessed item, having it blessed themselves, or otherwise associating it with symbols of the divine? Our research suggests that people have increased confidence in these products or, at the very least, can assuage anxiety associated with the reliability of that product. In situations where one's livelihood depends on a single item, such as a car or computer, and/or where that item cannot be easily replaced if broken, the desire to have it blessed, and thus be on the receiving end of God's favor, is tempting for many individuals. This may be even more the case when one's safety, or the safety of one's family, is dependent on the security offered by a possession, whether it be a vehicle of some kind or one's home. In short, the desire to see one's world as orderly and controlled drives people to seek out external means that can help satiate this need and maintain perceptions of a non-random world. To the extent that fusing consumer goods with God may help imbue these items with perceived properties of control and security, then, this fusion process should offer many people psychological reassurance as they go about their daily lives.

Other consequences may also exist that were not explored in our research. For example, if people increasingly trust in the safety and reliability of a product when they believe it to be divinely protected, this perception may lead to increased risk taking (e.g., driving faster or more recklessly). Another possibility is that these fusions create the opportunity for counterfactuals that maintain this behavior of symbolically fusing items with God. Just as people may be wary of decreasing their current insurance coverage because of the availability of counterfactuals if something goes wrong, so too might people be hesitant to take the cross down from their rearview mirror, or pass on having their next car blessed, out of fear that something will go wrong and the accompanying negative emotions associated with regret.

Finally, it is worth noting that the sale of these religious items is itself a big business. As mentioned before, nearly a quarter of Americans report buying some religious item in the past year (Baylor University, 2005) to attach to themselves or an item they own. In these and other contexts, the purchasing of items or services to confer a religious blessing on material objects can cost significant time and/or money. While such purchases reflect other motivations, such as identity signaling, some proportion of these purchases are likely driven by a motive to increase perceived protection from God. Given the number of these transactions that occur
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globally, it can be said that a considerable amount of money is being spent on satisfying people’s security needs through the consumption of consumer goods that have been fused with symbols of the divine.

Other Forms of Secular-Religious Fusions

While our research has only explored the phenomenon of fusing secular sources of security with God, there are other possible forms of symbolic fusions among external sources of control that may be advantageous under certain circumstances. For example, consumer products and religious institutions may benefit from being fused with symbols of the nation. As already stated, sociopolitical systems are often defended and resistant to change, benefiting from the status quo bias and system justification motivations (Crandall, Eidelman, Skitka, & Morgan, 2009; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Kay, Gaucher, et al., 2009; Laurin, Shepherd, & Kay, 2010; Shepherd & Kay, 2012). Therefore, anything associated with the overarching sociopolitical system may benefit from this association in these ways. Evidence of this can be seen in the consumer domain; research shows that when one’s sociopolitical system is threatened, the motivation to defend that system leads certain individuals to show increased preference for domestic brands (Banfield, Kay, Cutright, Wu, & Fitzsimons, 2011; Cutright, Wu, Banfield, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2011).

Religious institutions may also benefit from being associated with the sociopolitical system. For instance, religion often tries to integrate itself into the sociopolitical system, just as the sociopolitical system often aligns itself with God. Despite Jesus’ plea to “render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s”, organized religion has maintained a strong influence in sociopolitical systems over time. While God may be seen as omnipotent and omniscient, the sociopolitical system has other benefits that are useful to accrue via association with that system. When Jerry Falwell encouraged the Moral Majority and “Christian Right” to vote for Ronald Reagan to bring the nation back to a state of morality, it increased evangelical Christians’ participation in politics where there was previously little interest in integrating the two. The goal of the Moral Majority was to mobilize conservative Christian Americans around issues such as abortion and “traditional family values,” to get them to vote for politicians that would represent these values at the state and national levels, and to have Christian morality encoded in the legal system. When religious beliefs become a part of the legal system (e.g., constitutional bans against gay marriage), they become institutionalized and thus more resistant to change because of the additional practical and legal barriers. Integration of religious doctrine into the system and the status quo also makes it tradition and “just the way things are”, thus associating support for religion and religious ideas with patriotism. In this way, religious fusions with the system, such as inclusion of religious materials in public schools, courthouses, and government buildings, may be supported by people who may not even be particularly religious, insofar as they see these things as simply part of their system. Religion may also be seen as a sounder belief system when it is seemingly endorsed by the sociopolitical system. As the basic foundations of religion are increasingly challenged by science, religion may need greater social validation of this sort than it did in the past (Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956). Weaving religion into the sociopolitical system may therefore benefit religion as much as it does the system.

Conclusion

Many observers of human behavior have been intrigued by the widespread tendency of people to attribute powerful agency to various abstract, external forces, including the sociopolitical system, the marketplace, and religious entities. Taussig (1997, p. 3) made note of this tendency when he wrote:
How naturally we entify and give life to such. Take the case of God, the economy, and the state, abstract entities we credit with Being, species of things awesome with life-force of their own, transcendent over mere mortals. Clearly they are fetishes, invented wholes of materialized artifice into whose woeful insufficiency of being we have placed soulstuff. Hence the big S of the State.

Compensatory control theory suggests that this tendency to attribute agency to these external sources may in part function to reassure people that their personal lives and wider events in the world are not random and uncontrollable. Previous theory and research on compensatory control processes emphasized how these various external sources of control offer substitutable means of maintaining one’s belief in a secure, controlled reality when one’s feelings of personal control are low. We reviewed more recent research that shows that these external sources of control can also function to bolster confidence in one another if these external sources of control are symbolically linked, as they often are in everyday life. This suggests that there is even greater versatility than was previously suspected in people’s ability to use compensatory control mechanisms to fulfill their need to perceive a secure, controllable world. These findings also have implications for better understanding the functional interdependence of people’s political, economic, and religious ideologies.

References


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