

Studies reveal how faith counts in placing spiritual before material goods

by [David Briggs](#) in the [January 4, 2017](#) issue

New studies are revealing the ways members of different global faiths may transcend—or fall prey to—consumer cultures willing to co-opt even their most sacred festivals to move merchandise.

So, for example, many Buddhists in Singapore are finding their identity in luxury cars and expensive homes. And Hindu gods are being used to sell products in India.

The spiritual struggle with materialism is not just a matter of individual happiness and life satisfaction, the studies find. It also has consequences for the greater good in areas from volunteering to protecting the environment.

Five sometimes surprising findings from recent studies help reveal how the faithful cope with consumer pressures, and the ways believers may best equip themselves to resist defining themselves by their possessions.

1. Forget stereotypes of Buddhists. Researchers analyzing data from nearly 1,500 face-to-face interviews in religiously diverse Singapore expected to find Buddhists low in materialism because of the faith's emphasis on nonattachment to physical goods.

What they found, however, was that Buddhists were significantly more likely than Christians to say they like to own things that impress people and that they admire people who own expensive homes and cars.

Christians, however, were more interested in status seeking than Hindus.

2. A faith that grows, or a faith for show? Religious individuals who say faith is an important part of their lives, who put a priority on prayer, who believe God watches over them, and who feel a deep sense of responsibility for reducing pain

and suffering, were less likely than other followers to be concerned with seeking social status or impressing people with their possessions, the Singapore study found.

In the area of consumer ethics, a separate study of more than 1,000 adults in Indonesia and Australia found individuals who try to live out religious values were more likely to reject negative consumer behaviors. In contrast, those who go to worship to socialize and pray mainly for their own needs were more likely to say it is OK to profit from unethical consumer activities.

3. That new Mercedes doesn't buy happiness. That is according to a study of more than 1,000 individuals in Malaysia, divided among ethnic groups with majorities of Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus.

Individuals who said religion was an important part of their lives were both less likely to exalt consumer goods and more likely to report greater psychological and emotional well-being. In part, this was because religion appeared to decrease the negative impact of materialism.

"The more religious people are, the happier they are with their life compared with their less religious counterparts," the researchers said.

4. Getting more versus giving back. Increased religiosity was associated with a greater likelihood of volunteering, including giving money and raising funds for charity, the Singapore study found.

Among faiths, Buddhists were less likely to volunteer than Christians.

5. How big is that carbon footprint? Religion also appears to play a major role in sensitizing followers to how their consumer behavior affects the environment.

In the Singapore study, religious respondents were more likely to engage in sustainable acts such as paying more for products that are friendly to the environment and to stop buying their favorite brand if they knew the company producing it was a source of pollution.

Researchers in the Australian-Indonesian study said that religious leaders and communities can play an influential role in ethical decision making by "emphasizing the importance of religion and committing it to their daily life beyond receiving perks and benefits of joining a religious community." —theARDA.com

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