



## Update: Scientists Learn How To Change Your Beliefs

TN Note: Thanks to William Briggs for writing a proper rebuttal to this earlier article and debunking the skewed methodology that was used to come to absurd conclusions.

Here's the breathless headline: "[Scientists claim they can change your belief on immigrants and God – with MAGNETS.](#)"

Wait. Attitudes toward God and *immigrants*? Are these a natural pair? The newspaper thought so. They tell of an experiment which "claims to be able to make Christians no longer believe in God and make Britons open their arms to migrants." How's it done? "Using a technique called transcranial magnetic stimulation" researchers can "safely shut down certain groups of neurones" in the brain.

It seems to have worked. Volunteers were coaxed into having their brains zapped by giant magnets. And, lo! "Belief in God was reduced almost by a third, while participants became 28.5 per cent less bothered

by immigration numbers.”

The news report was based on the paper “[Neuromodulation of group prejudice and religious belief](#)” by Colin Holbrook and four others in the journal *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*. This paper is one in a long line of studies that purport to explain the workings of the human mind based on responses to simple questionnaires.

It’s true. Scientists in some fields have convinced themselves they can quantify the unquantifiable. They believe hideously complex human emotions can be adequately represented on scales of 1 to 5 (or some other bounds). For instance, on a scale of -4 to 4, how much do you agree with the statement, “There exists an all-powerful, all-knowing, loving God”?

Before you answer, consider. Is the distance in belief from 3 to 4 the same as it is from 2 to 3, and from 1 to 2, and so on? Are these distances exactly the same in all people? What happens if the scale were to be changed from -4 to 4 to one from 1 to 9, which is the same length? Would the results be the same? Does everybody agree on the precise definitions of “all-powerful,” “all-knowing” and so on?

The answer is obviously no to all these questions, but Holbrook’s results, and the results from thousands of such investigations, assume the answer is yes. It’s worse than this. Consider the same question about God but *after* you answer these two questions: “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you” and “Please jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to your body as you physically die and once you are physically dead.”

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