

When seeing really is believing

YOUR world view may govern how you process visual images. So say Bernhard Hommel at Leiden University in the Netherlands and colleagues who found that Dutch people following a certain brand of Protestantism are quicker than their atheist compatriots to home in on an image's details.

Culture is known to distort visual perception. For example, Asian people tend to dart their eyes around a photo, while those in North America fix on specific details. To see if religion can also have an effect, Hommel's team showed 20 atheists and 20 neocalvinists, who follow a version of Calvinism, a series of large triangles or squares filled with smaller triangles or squares.

Both groups were quick to identify the image by its overall shape, but the neocalvinists were on average faster when asked to identify it by its component shapes (*PLoS ONE*, DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0003679). Hommel says neocalvinists may be less distracted by the large shape because their brains are used to separating out the influences of education, government and church, an idea central to neocalvinism.