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Religious rituals come in a large variety of forms compiled from diverse components and attributes. One such variable is the manipulation of body postures of ritual participants. Some ritual forms specify or even codify details of body postures to be assumed, while other come with no such requirements. Although there is no single body posture uniquely associated with ritual practice, the ubiquity of submissive postures (e.g. kneeling, prostration) across cultures suggest a possible common underlying function.

Current embodied cognition theories claim that body postures play an important role in composition of specific embodied states. Thus, bodily positions are not just the result of some antecedent emotional state; they are a necessary part of the emergence and shaping of states. In the light of existing research, I argue that submissive bodily positions in religious rituals are not mere expressions of specific affective states, but that they establish and regulate attitude and behaviour. Closed, collapsed and lowered postures are generally perceived as either expressing submission and obedience or shame and atonement. Therefore, depending on the associated affective state (submission or shame), these postures might either emphasize power dichotomy between the superhuman agents and human participants, or signal conformity with moral norms.

To test these hypotheses, I use data collected from the Human Relations Area Files electronic databases (eHRAF) and the coded variables from Standard Cross Cultural Sample (SCCS).