Religion and Forgiveness

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The concept of forgiveness has gone from complete scientific obscurity as recently as 1980 to remarkable visibility in the first few years of the 21st century. The boom in forgiveness research can be appreciated by examining Figure 22.1, in which we have displayed the annual number of items catalogued in PsycINFO that include the word stem "forgiv*" in their abstracts (1980–2004). This figure clearly shows that whereas forgiveness was a psychological concept that received negligible empirical attention in the 1980s, social scientists have been producing scores of publications on the topic annually for the last several years.

Psychologists have given sustained attention to several aspects of forgiveness, including (1) the development of reasoning about forgiveness (e.g., Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; 2) applications of forgiveness to counseling and psychotherapy (e.g., Enright, 2001; Worthington, 2001; Worthington & Wade, 1999; 3) social-psychological factors that facilitate or deter forgiveness (e.g., Finkel, Rozin, Kornhaber, & Hinn, 2002; McCullough et al., 1998); (4) personality correlates of forgiveness (e.g., McCullough, 2001; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002); (5) the associations of forgiveness with measures of mental health, physiological functioning, and physical health (e.g., Karremans, Van Lange, & Ouwenerkerk, 2003; Lawler et al., 2003; Wittler, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001); and (6) the religious contours of forgiveness (e.g., McCullough & Worthington, 1999; Tsong, McCullough, & Hoyt, 2005).

In this chapter, we focus specifically on the links between forgiveness and religious experience, belief, and behavior. We describe the relevance of forgiveness to the religious lives of individuals and communities, as well as the importance of religion in shaping how people understand and experience forgiveness. We also speculate about the relevance of forgiveness for understanding the relationships of religion to aging and health. We close by introducing some ideas drawn from evolutionary psychology that might provide direction for future interdisciplinary work in this area.

WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

Psychologists seem to agree on several points about forgiveness. First, most concur with Enright and Coyle (1998) who argue that forgiveness should be distinguished from pardoning, condoning, excusing, forgetting, and denying. Most also concur that forgiveness should be distinguished from related concepts such as reconciliation. This is because reconciliation, which involves "the restoration of trust in an interpersonal relationship through mutually trustworthy behaviors" (Worthington & Drinkard, 2000), is not a prerequisite for forgiveness. For instance, people can forgive people with whom they cannot resume a relationship (e.g., someone who is in jail or is deceased) or with whom they do not wish to resume a relationship (e.g., an abusive partner).

But scholars continue to disagree somewhat about how forgiveness should be defined (Scobie & Scofield, 1998; Enright and colleagues [Enright & Coyle, 1998; Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992] defined "genuine forgiveness" according to philosopher J. North's (1987) proposal that forgiveness occurs when the target of an interpersonal transgression is able to "view the wrongdoer with compassion, benevolence, and love while recognizing that he has willfully abandoned his right to them" (p. 502). Worthington and colleagues [Berry & Worthington, 2001; Worthington & Wade, 1999] proposed that when one forgives, positive, love-based emotions (e.g., empathy, compassion, sympathy, and affection) replace the negative emotions he or she previously experienced regarding the transgressor (Worthington & Wade, 1999). McCullough and colleagues proposed that people forgive when they undergo a suite of motivational changes. Specifically, people come to experience forgiveness as they become less motivated to avoid and to seek revenge against a transgressor and simultaneously become more benevolent toward the transgressor (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). It is presumed that these motivational changes will increase the likelihood that a transgression recipient will, in turn, be...
have been locked in a cycle of blood revenge, which we have taken from Boehm's (1984) study of tribal Montenegrins:

At the ceremony, the two clans stayed away from each other "like two hostile regiments." Rovinški describes the ceremony in detail: A short moment of silence falls, and then a group of people steps out from the other side. The son of the murderer, in a single undergarment, barefoot and without a cap, creeps on all fours. And on his neck hangs a long gun on a strap (it is always a long gun, for a greater effect, even if the murder was just by pistol). . . . Seeing this, Zac hastily runs ahead in order to shorten this severe, humiliating scene. He runs to Bojković in order to raise him up more quickly, but at that very moment Bojković kisses him on the feet, the chest and the shoulder. Taking the gun off Bojković’s neck, Zac addresses him with the following words: "First a brother, then a blood enemy, then a brother forever. Is this the rifle which took the life of my father?" And not waiting for a reply, he hands the gun back to Bojković, expressing by this the full forgiveness of the past, and they both kiss each other, embracing each other like brothers. (Rovinški, 1990, p. 386, as cited in Boehm, 1984, p. 136)

This Montenegrin ritual of forgiveness and reconciliation was consummated by establishing 12 godfather relationships between members of the two clans, as well as 24 different blood-brother relationships (Boehm, 1984). It was their shared Orthodox Christian faith that made these kinship relationships possible in a culture in which vengeance was the normative response to homicide.

The roles of forgiveness in each of the above cultures reflect what may be a universal function of forgiveness for societies: its value for preserving stability in human relationships in the social world, the natural world, and the world of spirits.

Forgiveness as a Religious Concern in the United States

Closer to home and the present day, forgiveness is an acute religious concern in the Christian and Jewish traditions that form the mainstream of religious expression in the United States. According to data from a 1998 General Social Survey, over 80% of U.S. adults feel that their religious beliefs "often," "almost always," or "always" help them to forgive others, to forgive themselves, and to feel forgiven by God, respectively (Davis & Smith, 1999). Wuthnow (2000) studied a representative sample of U.S. adults involved in religiously oriented small groups (e.g., prayer groups, Bible study groups). Sixty-one percent of the sample reported that their group had helped them forgive someone and 71% of the sample reported that they had experienced healing in a relationship because of their group participation.

How Religion Promotes Forgiveness

Religious scholars have noted that all of the major world religions have structures that promote forgiveness (McCullough & Worthington, 1999; Rye et al., 2000). Tsang et al. (2003) noted that religions can promote forgiveness in several ways. Religious meaning systems can prescribe forgiveness as a value, encourage emotions such as compassion and empathy, and model forgiving actions through Scriptures and/or rituals. Religion can also sanctify forgiveness behavior by providing role models of forgiving behavior and presenting a worldview that allows individuals to interpret events and relationships in ways that
facilitate forgiveness. Thus, religion is a concern that people bring to their thoughts, feelings, and behavior regarding forgiveness.

But perhaps the opposite is also true: Perhaps people also reformulate their religious convictions as a result of choices that they make about forgiveness. People may question or even redefine their religious convictions when confronted with difficult dilemmas of forgiving. Indeed, philosophers and psychologists have noted the potential of forgiveness to transform an individual's entire outlook on life (Enright & Coyle, 1998; North, 1987).

**RELIGION AND THE PROPENSITY TO FORGIVE OTHERS**

Because the teachings of many of the major religions promote forgiveness (McCullough & Worthington, 1999; Rye et al., 2000), it is worth considering how religion might influence whether and how individuals forgive.

**Religion and "Forgiveness"**

For three decades, psychological research has consistently demonstrated that religious involvement is positively related to the disposition to forgive others—a trait that researchers are now referring to as forgiveness (Roberts, 1995). In some of the earliest work on the topic, Rokeach (1973) found that people who reported greater church attendance, religiousness, and intrinsic as well as extrinsic motivation for religious involvement placed "forgiveness" as a higher priority in their personal value systems than did people who scored lower on these religious indicators. Poloma and Gallup (1991) also found a positive relationship between religious involvement and self-reports of people's tendency to forgive those who have harmed them. In a reanalysis of Poloma and Gallup's nationally representative data, Goursuch and Hao (1993) found that, compared to nonreligious people, highly religious people reported having greater motivation to forgive, working harder to forgive, and harboring fewer reasons for getting even and staying resentful toward their transgressors. Others have reported similar findings (e.g., Bono, 2002; Mauger, Saxon, Hamill, & Parrell, 1996; Mueller et al., 2003).

**The Religion–Forgiveness Discrepancy**

The above-mentioned research on the links between religiousness and forgiving others is based on measures of people's valuing of forgiveness, their self-reported forgiveness regarding typical or hypothetical transgressions, and their general reasoning about the propriety of forgiveness as a way of dealing with transgressions. However, research on the association of religious involvement with measures of forgiveness in response to specific, real-life transgressions has yielded less consistent evidence (McCullough & Worthington, 1999). McCullough and Worthington referred to this tendency for forgiveness to be positively associated with people's self-reported tendencies to forgive others in general but only trivially associated with forgiveness responses to specific transgressions as the religion-forgiveness discrepancy. Tsang et al. (2005) investigated the possibility that this discrepancy is caused by the fact that a single measure of behavior does not provide a good indicator of the dispositional or personality-based influences on that behavior because of situation-specific error. Applying the aggregation principle (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1974), Tsang et al. (2005) found that, indeed, when self-reports of forgiveness were based on transgressions that were recalled under restrictive procedures (i.e., forcing participants to recall specific types of transgressions occurring within specific types of relationships) as well as aggregated across multiple transgressions, positive correlations emerged between religiousness and transgression-specific forgiveness. Measures of religiousness such as religious commitment and intrinsic religious motivation accounted for approximately 4% of the variance in people's tendency to forgive across many transgressions committed by many relationship partners (e.g., friends, parents, and romantic partners). Therefore, studies with improved methods seem to support the proposition that religious individuals are, in general, slightly more forgiving than are less religious people, although this association is rather small.

### Choosing Forgiveness-Oriented or Revenge-Oriented Aspects of Religious Belief Systems

The research we have reviewed above clearly suggests that people with high levels of religious participation, religious salience, or religious commitment tend to be more forgiving than are their less religious counterparts. However, the major world religions also contain some revenge and rettributive justice in some contexts. As Tsang et al. (2005) pointed out, support for the doctrine of lex talionis (equal and direct retribution) can be found in the Judaic Old Testament (e.g., "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, an arm for an arm, a life for a life"); the Christian New Testament (e.g., "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you"); 2 Thessalonians 1:6, New International Version Bible), and the Islamic Qur'an (e.g., "O ye who believe! the law of equality is prescribed to you in cases of murder: the free for the free, the slave for the slave, the woman for the woman"); 2:178). The doctrine of karma in Buddhism and Hinduism can also be seen as an endorsement for rettributive justice: all our actions, good and bad, will eventually bring proportional consequences. This availability of religious doctrines that promote retributive justice or belief in a just world—the belief that God's (or karma) justice ensures that wrongdoers will ultimately get what they deserve (Lerner & Simmons, 1966)—may enable people to use their religious beliefs to justify their own vengeful stances toward transgressors.

Tsang et al. (2005) proposed that individuals who are actively motivated to seek revenge in response to a specific transgression might selectively employ religious beliefs that will justify their vengeful stances, presumably to maintain self-consistency. If so, people's religious beliefs and commitments may shift temporarily so that they can maintain self-concepts that are perceived to be in accordance with the mandates of their religious belief systems—a notion that is consistent with models of the self as flexible and subject to momentary shifts to accommodate social goals (e.g., Andersen & Chen, 2002).

To examine this possibility, Tsang et al. (2005) measured Christian university students' transgression-related interpersonal motivations (i.e., how avoidant, vengeful, and benevolent they felt) regarding a transgressor who harmed them within the last 7 days. Tsang et al.'s participants also completed two measures of religiousness to examine whether people who were highly vengeful toward a specific transgressor were using their religious beliefs to rationalize their unforgiving stances. First, participants indicated whether they endorsed a variety of religious sayings (some of which were from the Christian Scriptures and some of which sounded religious but were not from the Christian Scriptures) that were either forgiving or punitive in nature. Participants also indicated the extent to which a set of justice-related adjectives (e.g., "just," "fair"), a set of forgiveness-
RELIGION AND THE PROPENSITY TO SEEK FORGIVENESS FROM OTHERS

Confessing, repenting, and seeking forgiveness play important roles in many religious systems. In particular, the Scriptures of all of the Abrahamic religions place a strong emphasis on the importance of confession and contrition as a means of achieving forgiveness and relational wholeness. As a result, it seems likely that religion exerts an influence on whether and how people will seek forgiveness when they harm others.

Preliminary Work on Religion and Seeking Forgiveness

Sandage, Worthington, Hight, and Berry (2000) made the first attempt to define and empirically investigate seeking forgiveness. They defined seeking forgiveness as "a motivation to accept moral responsibility and to attempt interpersonal reparation following relational injury in which one is morally culpable" (p. 22). Sandage et al. found no relationship between participants' general religiosity and the extent to which they reported having sought forgiveness after committing a particular transgression. However, their failure to find a significant relationship may be due to some of the methodological factors that McCullough and Worthington (1999) invoked to explain why religiosity tends not to correlate with the extent to which people report having forgiven specific individuals who harmed them in the past.

Indeed, other research that obviates such methodological problems has yielded results that suggest that religiosity does indeed promote seeking forgiveness. In Meek, Altbright, and McMinn's (1995) study, participants read a vignette in which they were to imagine that they had committed a dishonest act for personal satisfaction and then confess for it. Participants then completed self-report measures of intrinsic and extrinsic religious motivation, along with single-item measures of how much they would feel forgiven by themselves, how much they would feel forgiven by God, and how likely they would be to confess, to feel good about confessing, to feel good for committing the act in the first place, and to repeat the offense. Individuals who were high in intrinsic religiousness reported being more prone to guilt, more likely to confess and to feel good about confessing, more likely to forgive themselves, and more likely to feel forgiven by God than individuals who were extrinsically religious. Moreover, Meek et al. found that guilt completely mediated the negative relationship between intrinsic religiosity and feeling good for committing the dishonest act. Guilt partially mediated the negative relationship between intrinsic religiosity and likelihood of repeating the offense (i.e., intrinsically religious people felt more guilty about their dishonest behavior, enjoyed the act less, and had a decreased likelihood of repeating the act in part because they felt more guilty). Although the validity of Meek et al.'s study was limited by studying people's hypothetical responses instead of their actual behavior, it nonetheless provides preliminary evidence that people who internalize religious values (in this case, within the Christian faith) may seek forgiveness more readily because of a stronger inclination to feel guilt for their transgressions.

Wirtz et al. (2002) examined the physiological correlates of guilt and seeking forgiveness and consequently helped clarify the role that religion may play in seeking forgiveness. In this study, participants identified an incident from their past in which they were to blame for significantly hurting another person. Having recalled an appropriate incident, each participant engaged in five different types of imagery: (1) recalling the feelings associated with hurting the victim; (2) imagining seeking forgiveness from the victim; (3) imagining the victim responding in an unforgiving way; (4) imagining the victim responding in a forgiving way; and (5) imagining the victim responding with some appropriate form of reconciliation.

Wirtz et al. (2002) found that when people focused on recalling what they did and how it harmed the relationship partner, they felt more forgiveness from God, but less self-forgiveness, and less forgiveness from their victims, than when they imagined seeking forgiveness from the victim (i.e., confessing the wrong, apologizing, and asking forgiveness). This suggests that thinking about one's harmful behavior may lead to a sense of divine forgiveness, but it may deter one from engaging in interpersonal behaviors that would facilitate interpersonal forgiveness. Conversely, focusing on how one can repair the relational damage probably encourages one to seek forgiveness directly from the victim. Wirtz et al. also found that when participants focused on seeking forgiveness they experienced (1) increased hope; (2) reduced sadness, anger, guilt, and shame regarding the transgression; and (3) smaller increases in corrugator (frown) muscle tension, compared to when they simply thought about their harmful behavior. Together, these results suggest that seeking forgiveness directly from the victim may ultimately reduce negative affect, even though the prospect of seeking forgiveness itself is associated with some psychological stress in the short term (as shown by increased corrugator tension relative to baseline).

Religion and Humility: A Psychological Pathway to Seeking Forgiveness?

The above results suggest that intrinsically religious individuals are more likely to use interpersonal routes (e.g., confessing, seeking forgiveness from the people whom they in-
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When Do People Deliberate about Forgiving God?

What do people mean by the notion of "forgiving God?" This is a third area in which the religious contours of forgiveness have been explored. Many religious people will disagree on theological or philosophical grounds that God can be forgiven, since forgiveness presupposes the ability to commit moral errors, which a perfect God, by definition, cannot possess. But philosophical or theological questions about whether God is a conceptually appropriate target for forgiveness aside, people do seem to feel a need to ask questions about forgiving God, especially when they have difficulty explaining life experiences that they perceive as highly painful or unfair.

The 1988 General Social Survey revealed that only 36% of respondents reported that they "never" felt angry toward God; anger toward God is common and may set the stage for people to ask questions about whether they need to "forgive" God to move on with their lives after they encounter great pain or tragedy. When people's suffering violates their own standards of justice or mercy, they may feel angry with God, and they may conclude that God has betrayed them. Indeed, undeserved suffering is a dominant theme in people's accounts of why they are unforgiving toward God (see Exline & Rose, Chapter 17, this volume).

Some of the events that can make people feel unforgiving toward God include negative experiences that seem to involve no direct human agency (e.g., innocents who suffer, evil acts that go unpunished, untimely death or illness, freak accidents, natural disasters); those that involve human agency but seem avoidable or preventable by God (e.g., murder, war atrocities, assault, sexual abuse, divorce, and betrayal); and even common misfortunes that simply seem ill-timed (e.g., rain on a wedding day; Exline, 2004).

Empirical research on forgiving God is scant and has focused on conditions in which these dilemmas arise (as described above) or the personality variables that are relevant to forgiving God. In a review of this literature, Exline (2004) described the main predictors of difficulty forgiving God and discovered that they largely mirror the predictors of anger and unforgiveness toward other people: (1) belief that God intentionally caused severe suffering; (2) an elevated sense of narcissistic entitlement; (3) less closeness to God or insecure attitudes toward religion prior to the negative event; (4) insecure attachment with one's parents or with other important relationship partners; and (5) a larger pattern of emotional and spiritual distress in one's life.

Forgiving God: Links with Well-Being

Exline (2004) also reviewed research on the outcomes of unforgiving toward God. She noted that other research suggests that people who are associated with low spiritual well-being, which may lead to psychological distress more generally (see Pargament et al., 1998). Exline, Yali, and Lobel (1999) also conducted research on the negative outcomes of being unforgiving toward God. They administered self-report measures of negative emotion (i.e., depressed mood, anxious mood, and trait anger), religiosity (i.e., religious beliefs, religious participation, and feelings of alienation from God), and forgiveness (i.e., general difficulty forgiving God, forgiving God for a specific incident, and difficulty forgiving the self and others) to 200 people of various ethnicities and religious backgrounds. They found that difficulty forgiving God was associated with higher levels of anxious and depressed mood and that difficulty forgiving God was distinct from difficulty forgiving the self or others in leading to these outcomes.

Exline et al.'s (1999) study provides preliminary evidence that dilemmas of forgiving toward God are associated with low psychological well-being. They also are important because of their implications for religious functioning. Dilemmas of forgiveness toward God can be turning points where people question their faith in God and must resolve to make fundamental changes to their philosophy of life—for example, whether to seek ways to strengthen their belief in God or, on the other extreme, abandon their belief in God altogether (see Park, Chapter 16, this volume). More research on this topic would be extremely valuable for understanding religious means of coping with suffering and the implications of such means of coping for religious and psychological well-being.

RELIGION AND FEELING FORGIVEN BY GOD

As mentioned above, seeking God's forgiveness is a religious preoccupation for individuals from all religious faiths and cultures. Moreover, the extent to which God is viewed as loving and forgiving is a major dimension underlying people's images of God. However, the psychological dynamics of feeling forgiven by God (or other spiritual entities) has received relatively little empirical attention. Using nationally representative data, Toussaint, Williams, Musick, and Everson (2001) examined the experience of feeling for-
given by God (along with other aspects of forgiveness) among adults in three age groups: 18-44, 45-64, and 65+. Feeling forgiven by God was measured by agreement with two self-report items (i.e., “Knowing that I am forgiven for my sins gives me the strength to face my faults and be a better person” and “I know that God forgives me”). The investigators found that older adults were significantly more likely to feel forgiven by God than younger adults and marginally less likely to feel forgiven by God than middle-aged adults. Francis, Gibson, and Robbins (2001) also found that viewing God as loving/forgiving was correlated with self-worth among Scottish adolescents.

Krause and Ellison (2003) investigated in more detail the relationships between feeling forgiven by God and forgiving others. Using nationally representative data, they found that people who felt forgiven by God were less likely to expect people who had harmed them to perform acts of contrition than those who did not feel forgiven by God. This suggests an important relationship between one’s sense of having received divine forgiveness and one’s behavior toward one’s own human transgressors.

**ADDITIONAL AREAS OF RESEARCH IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND FORGIVENESS**

Two additional areas of research related to the relationships of religion and forgiveness are worthy of attention in the present chapter. First, we comment on the interrelationships of religion, forgiveness, and aging. Second, we comment on the interrelationships of religion, forgiveness, and health.

**Religion, Forgiveness, and Aging**

Longitudinal studies have shown that as people in the United States age, they tend to become more religious (Argue, Johnson, & White, 1999; see also McFadden, Chapter 9, this volume). There is also good evidence that people who are older tend to be generally more forgiving and less vengeful than are younger people (e.g., Girard & Muller, 1997; Muller et al., 2003). For example, Muller, Houdinie, Launomies, and Girard (1998) found that two dimensions of a multidimensional construct they called “forgiveness” were positively associated with age in a sample of adults. Their findings also indicated that younger adults forgive because they tend to be motivated by personal and social considerations (e.g., their mood at the time, whether family or friends think they should forgive, or because the consequences of the harm have been canceled in some way) to a greater extent than is true for older adults. This is consistent with previous research that shows that older persons tend to forgive mainly out of strong convictions that forgiveness should be practiced unconditionally (Girard & Muller, 1997).

Previously, we speculated that the common association of religiousness and forgiveness may come from the fact that as people age, they appear to become both more religious and more forgiving (McCullough & Bono, in press). Work by Carstensen and her colleagues (e.g., Carstensen, 1995; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999) helps to provide a theoretical account for why this might be so. According to Carstensen’s socioemotional selectivity theory, as people age, their goals gradually shift away from future-oriented goals such as acquiring information, and toward more present-oriented goals such as being emotionally satisfied. With the recognition that the years of life they have remaining is becoming ever smaller, people become less motivated to maintain high numbers of interpersonal relationships irrespective of the quality of these relationships and turn instead to nurtured relatively few higher quality, emotionally satisfying, relationships. Thus, as individuals pass through older adulthood, they choose social partners more and more for their emotional value, they regulate their social interactions in a way that optimizes emotionally gratifying outcomes, and they become more vested in the relationships they want to maintain.

In this light, religious concerns may become stronger in older adulthood not only to help people come to terms with their mortality, but also because the interpersonal contacts that are fostered by interaction in religious settings may be particularly satisfying and meaningful. Similarly, people may become more forgiving with age because forgiveness helps them to maintain important, emotionally satisfying relationships even though relational transgressions are probably inevitable. We therefore suspect that forgiveness and religiousness both play larger roles as people age precisely because they serve higher order goals of securing stable and supportive relationships. The relationships among religiousness, forgiveness, and aging have yet to be investigated jointly in empirical research, however.

**Religion, Forgiveness, and Health**

There is considerable evidence that religious involvement is positively associated with many indices of physical and mental health (e.g., Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Oman & Thoresen, Chapter 24, this volume; Powell, Shahabi, & Thoresen, 2003). It is possible that religious people’s tendency to forgive is one of the mechanisms by which religiousness obtains its associations with positive health outcomes (Koenig et al., 2001; Levin, 1996).

In support of this notion, researchers have found that unforgiving personality traits and/or unforgiving thoughts are associated with increases in cardiovascular arousal (Lawler et al., 2003; Wirtz et al., 2001) and increased cortisol secretion (Berry & Worthington, 2001). For example, Wirtz et al. instructed participants (undergraduate students) to engage in four types of thinking about a specific transgression they had incurred in the past: (1) thoughts about holding a grudge, (2) thoughts about revenge, (3) empathic thoughts about the transgressor, and (4) forgiving thoughts. They found that when participants engaged in grudge or revenge imagery, they exhibited increases in facial muscle tension, skin conductance, heart rate, and blood pressure compared to when they engaged in empathic or forgiving imagery regarding their transgressors. Not only did these physiological responses parallel participants’ self-reported emotions (i.e., they felt more negative, aroused, angry, and sad, and less in control when engaging in the thoughts about grudges and revenge), but they also persisted into the postimagery recovery period. In other words, the psychophysiological effects of thinking about revenge and grudges persisted even after people had been instructed to stop thinking these thoughts. Based on these findings, Wirtz et al. argued that unforgiving responses to transgressions, if chronic, might erode physical health—particularly by increasing risk for cardiovascular diseases.

In addition, researchers have posited that forgiving one’s transgressors has a positive effect on psychological well-being. Interventions designed to help people forgive have been shown to improve psychological well-being, yielding reduced anxiety and depressive symptoms, as well as increased self-esteem and hope (for a review, see Enright & Coyle, 1998). In addition, studies have demonstrated positive correlations between people’s self-
reported global tendencies to forgive and measures of psychological well-being (e.g., Malbry, Macaskill, & Day, 2001).

Given the empirically established links between religiousness and forgiveness, and their independent associations with measures of health and well-being, it seems plausible that some of the beneficial influence of religion on health and well-being occurs because religion encourages people to practice forgiveness in their relationships with friends and family. However, the research that directly explores the connections among these three concepts simultaneously has not yet been conducted.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Research has begun to show a clearer picture of how religion can influence people's seeking and granting of forgiveness in the interpersonal realm. In addition, research has begun to shed light on how people seek forgiveness from God and on the notion of "forgiving God." Although the proposition that God might be an appropriate target for forgiveness is theologically and philosophically problematic from some perspectives, it may nonetheless be experientially real for many people. In this chapter, we have also described some preliminary thoughts about how the religious contours of forgiveness might emerge through cultural evolution.

To remain intact, all cultures—especially large ones that are vulnerable to fusing because of pressures exerted upon them by outside threats—must develop norms for socially acceptable behavior among their members, along with the means to enforce those norms. Recently, researchers have presented findings that suggest that belief in moralizing gods (i.e., gods who tell people what they should and should not do) is especially useful for this purpose (Roes & Raymond, 2003). Wherever societies face high degrees of external threat in the form of wars or droughts, for instance, belief in moralizing gods tends to arise. Belief in moralizing gods is useful in such contexts because the belief can be used to (1) explain why the norms exist in the first place, and (2) enforce the norms more efficiently because people can be convinced that they may receive spiritual sanctions (e.g., being haunted, illness, death, hell) if they violate the norms, and that they may receive spiritual rewards (e.g., wealth, fertility, safe passage to the next life) if they honor them.

However, because some individuals will inevitably violate the norms of these religiously prescribed moral systems, it seems likely that religious systems with moralizing gods will also need to provide adherents with means for seeking forgiveness from these moralizing forces, and by extension, from other individuals (Wilson, 2002). Without the possibility of forgiveness, after all, how is someone who violates the precepts established by a moralizing god (or gods) able to rejoin his or her community as a member in good standing? Religious systems with moralizing gods must be clear and strict in order to foster the desired level of group cohesion, to be sure, but they must also provide an outlet for reintegrating individuals whose behavior falls below the articulated standards. For some infractors, a community will decide that a permanent exclusion of a transgressor is warranted (i.e., the some sins are unforgivable), but for other infractors, it is more advantageous to rehabilitate the transgressor than to expel him or her through ostracizing or death. The possibility of forgiveness not only allows a reaffirmation of the culture's standards and the rehabilitation of the offending member, but may also make the offending member less self-centered than he or she might have been otherwise (for a nonreligious, modern-day example of this phenomenon in action, see Kells & Ellard, 1999). Because the belief that people can be forgiven by their moralizing gods might have served this reintegrative function, we tentatively propose that the belief that people can be forgiven by their gods, given the proper demonstrations of contrition or sacrifice, will arise in any religious system in which belief in moralizing gods is also present, although the circumsstances under which forgiveness is likely to be perceived to be available as a religious option will no doubt vary across cultures.

Although interpersonal (rather than divine) forgiveness no doubt served adaptive functions for our ancestors (e.g., fostering positive relations among close friends and family members, thereby maximizing inclusive fitness) quite apart from its connections to religion, it seems likely that many of people's ideas about seeking and granting forgiveness will be modeled upon their understandings of how their own forgiveness transactions with their god or gods are believed to occur. Specifically, when people are in a position to forgive individuals who have harmed them, or to seek forgiveness from others, it seems likely that their religious systems will encourage them to model their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors after the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that their god or gods might experience. If so, then it seems likely that we can shed considerable light on
contemporary differences in forgiveness across religions and cultures (e.g., the substantial differences between Jewish and Christian practices regarding forgiveness) by integrating research findings from modern psychological science with historical and anthropological research that provides a deeper view of particular religions and cultures.

The few paragraphs above are hardly a comprehensive evolutionary account of religious forgiveness. In presenting these ideas (which may turn out upon scientific scrutiny to be completely incorrect), we have merely tried to illustrate some of the issues that might be addressed by evolutionary theorizing. Incorporating an evolutionary paradigm for studying forgiveness, and in particular its religious contours, could provide the field with a better framework for making sense of what we already know about the religious contours of forgiveness. It might also inspire new questions that could lead to a deeper understanding of the many connections between religion and forgiveness.

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