

## **Psychometric and Rationalization Accounts of the Religion-Forgiveness Discrepancy**

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*World events and psychological research often fail to support a relationship between religion and forgiveness. We suggest that the gap between general religious support of forgiveness and actual forgiveness by religious individuals (the religion-forgiveness discrepancy) described by McCullough and Worthington (1999) may be partly due to methodological shortcomings. We present three studies with 452 undergraduate participants to illustrate how psychometric weaknesses can obscure the relationship between religiousness and transgression-specific forgiveness. We also propose a rationalization explanation that describes how religion might justify unforgiveness. We present a pilot study of 38 undergraduate participants that demonstrates correlations between retributive and compassionate religious beliefs, and transgression-specific forgiveness. We discuss future research directions addressing the religion-forgiveness discrepancy on psychometric and theoretical levels.*

Although many different world views can serve as meaning systems, religion is unique in its ability to provide a transcendent reality with concomitant moral standards, making it a potentially exceptional structure for guiding people's

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interpretation of and interaction in the world. One value that seems to be encouraged by many world religions is forgiveness (e.g., Rye et al., 2000). Because the major world religions place a high importance on forgiveness, it comes as no surprise that highly religious individuals report valuing forgiveness more and seeing themselves as generally more forgiving than less religious individuals (see McCullough & Worthington, 1999, for a review).

Despite religious prescriptions of forgiveness and compassion (Ayoub, 1997; Dorff, 1998; Witvliet, 2001), a look at the world around us demonstrates that people often have difficulty forgiving, despite their religious backgrounds. For example, the conflict in the Middle East between Israel, a Jewish state, and the Palestinian people, who are predominantly Muslim, continues to escalate (e.g., Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998), and discord in Northern Ireland between Irish Catholics and Protestants still remains (e.g., O'Donoghue & O'Donoghue, 1981; Stringer, Cornish, & Denver, 2000). Following the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and with ongoing terror attacks against U.S. soldiers in Iraq and other locations abroad, many Americans have begun to grapple more intensely with issues such as forgiveness, compassion, and vengeance (e.g., Higgins, 2001; Rice, 2001/2002), and the relationship of these concepts to religion. It may be relatively easy to endorse religious teachings on forgiveness in the abstract, but when, for example, one's life is transformed by a terrorist attack, forgiveness may be harder to implement.

Psychological research also has suggested that religiousness has little or no effect on actual forgiveness for specific transgressions (e.g., McCullough & Worthington, 1999). We call this gap between the general religious doctrine on forgiveness and the actual forgiveness by religious people of specific transgressions the *religion-forgiveness discrepancy*.

In the present article, we review the ways in which religion as a meaning system might influence forgiveness, and outline the corresponding empirical evidence. We then present two explanations to account for the apparent religion-forgiveness discrepancy. First, we address measurement issues that may obscure a positive relationship between religiousness and forgiveness. To clarify these measurement problems, we present data from three studies illustrating the importance of using aggregate measures and reducing recall biases in order to uncover the relationship between religiousness and forgiveness. Second, we propose a rationalization explanation of the religion-forgiveness discrepancy. The rationalization explanation posits that religions can provide people with multiple, often competing, meaning systems that individuals can use selectively to rationalize preexisting motives antithetical to forgiveness. We also describe a preliminary study testing the rationalization hypothesis. Finally, we suggest that addressing the religion-forgiveness discrepancy on both psychometric and theoretical levels should aid researchers in further elucidating the complex relationship between religion and forgiveness.

### Forgiveness in the Context of Religious Meaning Systems

As a meaning system, religion would be expected to influence individuals' beliefs, emotions, actions, and goals (Silberman, this issue). These components of the religious meaning system are relevant to understanding how religion might influence forgiveness. For instance, the major world religions prescribe *beliefs* regarding the value of kindness and forgiveness (e.g., McCullough & Worthington, 1999; Rye et al., 2000). Religion can sanctify the act of forgiveness and present adherents with a world view that allows individuals to interpret events and relationships in ways that facilitate forgiveness (Pargament & Rye, 1998). Religions also encourage *emotions* such as compassion and empathy (e.g., Enright, Eastin, Golden, Sarinopoulos, & Freedman, 1992), which may foster forgiveness (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Forgiving *actions* are modeled in many religious scriptures (Pargament & Rye, 1998), and forgiveness is often integrated into religious ritual—for instance, Catholic individuals are supposed to experience forgiveness from God during confession (e.g., Borobio, 1986). These components of belief, emotion, and action may combine to create *goals* of forgiveness by increasing individuals' motivation to act in a more forgiving manner.

Evidence of these forgiveness-promoting structures can be identified in the major world religions (McCullough & Worthington, 1999; Rye et al., 2000). Judaism defines forgiveness as the removal of a violation, which enables the transgressor to become a candidate for renewed relationship with the offended person (Dorff, 1998). According to Jewish scripture and tradition, God commands that people forgive their transgressors, and followers of Judaism are encouraged to forgive because of the belief that God has forgiven them (Dorff, 1998; Enright et al., 1992). Yet, forgiveness is not required under all circumstances. The offended individual is obligated to forgive only if the transgressor has gone through the process of *teshuvah*, or “return,” which requires the expression of remorse and compensation to the victim, as well as a commitment from the transgressor to refrain from repeating the offense. Reconciliation (i.e., the actual restoration of the broken relationship) is not a necessary part of the forgiveness process (Rye et al., 2000).

As in Judaism, Christianity considers forgiveness to be foundational to its doctrine (e.g., Witvliet, 2001). In the Christian religion, God and Christ serve as role models of forgiveness (Marty, 1998). According to some scholars, forgiveness, in the form of having compassion for a transgressor and releasing him/her from the offense, does not necessarily require reconciliation (Rye et al., 2000; cf. Marty, 1998). Also similar to Judaism, Christian believers are encouraged to forgive because God forgave them (Enright et al., 1992). However, unlike Judaism, forgiveness is not conditional upon the transgressor's repentance (Rye et al., 2000).

Forgiveness is also of great importance in Islam (Ayoub, 1997); in fact, one of Allah's appellations is *Al-Ghafoor*, the Forgiving One (Rye et al., 2000). Both Allah and his messenger, Mohammed, are the role models of forgiveness within Islam. Islam places importance on individual forgiveness so that one can receive forgiveness from Allah for one's own sins (Ayoub, 1997), and can have happiness in the present life (Rye et al., 2000).

The Buddhist emphasis on forbearance and compassion is also relevant to forgiveness (Enright et al., 1992). Forbearance within the Buddhist tradition is both the endurance of transgression, and the relinquishing of resentment toward the transgressor. Forbearance is contrasted with forgiveness, which usually incorporates relinquishing, but not endurance (Rye et al., 2000). Forbearance along with compassion is embedded within the larger focus in Buddhism on the amelioration of suffering (Higgins, 2001). Compassion is used to ease the suffering of others, while forbearance functions to prevent further suffering (Rye et al., 2000). Forbearance and compassion are possible within the Buddhist meaning system by focusing believers' awareness on the interconnectedness of all things. There is not an "enemy" to be forgiven; the victim and the transgressor are united rather than separate entities (Higgins, 2001). Buddhism also embraces the concept of *karma*, according to which good actions are rewarded with good, and evil actions with evil. In the context of *karma*, holding on to one's resentment after a transgression will bring resentment from others toward the self in the future (Rye et al., 2000).

Forgiveness is one of the concepts necessary to follow the path of *dharma*, or righteousness, in the Hindu religion (Klostermaier, 1994). As with Buddhism, Hinduism emphasizes a version of *karma*, which would state that lack of forgiveness in this life will be repaid with negative outcomes in a subsequent life (Rye et al., 2000). Forgiveness in the Hindu religion can be defined as the absence of anger or agitation in the face of a transgression (Temoshok & Chandra, 2000). Though some Hindu traditions are nontheistic (Rye et al., 2000), versions of Hinduism that do incorporate belief in a supreme being or beings also provide examples of divine forgiveness for believers to follow (Zaehner, 1962). The Hindu religion asserts that all people have the power to forgive, because each person has divinity within his or her being (Saraswati, 1995).

The centrality of forgiveness in these major world religions suggests that they could serve as meaning systems that facilitate forgiving behaviors and attitudes toward transgressors—systems that shift the goals of their followers from revenge to the repairing of relationships.

### **Psychological Research on Forgiveness and Religion**

In comparison with the rich theological history of forgiveness, the psychological study of forgiveness has emerged only recently (for reviews, see Enright & Coyle, 1998; McCullough, 2001). A number of definitions of forgiveness have

arisen to accompany this recent surge in research. For example, Enright, Gassin, and Wu (1992) defined forgiveness as “the overcoming of negative affect and judgment toward the offender, not by denying ourselves to such affect and judgment, but by endeavoring to view the offender with compassion, benevolence, and love . . .” (p. 101). Exline and Baumeister (2000) defined forgiveness as the “cancellation of a debt” by “the person who has been hurt or wronged” (p. 133). Common to the various definitions is the idea of forgiveness as prosocial motivational change: The offended individual feels less negatively toward the transgressor, and/or begins to feel more benevolent motivations toward that person (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). We therefore define forgiveness as transgression-related motivational change toward one’s transgressor, with revenge- and avoidance-related motivations subsiding and being replaced with restored motivations toward benevolence (McCullough et al., 1997).

McCullough and Worthington (1999) reviewed the research on the relationship between religiousness and forgiveness. They demonstrated that forgiveness can be measured on a dispositional level by presenting individuals with self-report items about the value they place on forgiveness and perceptions of how forgiving they actually are. Forgiveness can also be measured at the level of the transgression by assessing the extent to which individuals forgive specific transgressions that have occurred to them. The distinction between dispositional and transgression-specific measures of forgiveness, they argued, could be important for understanding the relationship between religion and forgiveness.

### **Religion and Dispositional Measures of Forgiveness**

Research has shown a positive relationship between religiousness and valuing forgiveness. Religious variables such as frequency of church attendance, self-rated religiousness, intrinsic religious orientation, importance of religion, feeling close to God, and measures of personal prayer, have been positively linked to people’s self-reported values, attitudes, and behaviors regarding forgiveness (Edwards et al., 2002; Poloma & Gallup, 1991; Rokeach, 1973). Additionally, when asked how a Christian should live, Christian students ranked “forgiving” second only to “loving” as an ideal Christian value (Shoemaker & Bolt, 1977). These findings suggest that religious individuals place a high value on forgiveness.

Similarly, religiousness seems to be related to moral reasoning about forgiveness. Enright, Santos, and Al-Mabuk (1989) examined the factors that affected individuals’ maturity in reasoning about forgiveness. These researchers first gave children, adolescents, and adults two dilemmas from Rest’s (1979) Defining Issues Test, and then interviewed these individuals on their thoughts about forgiveness in the context of these dilemmas. Participants’ responses were later rated using a six-stage developmental model of reasoning about forgiveness, similar to Kohlberg’s (1976) six-stage model of justice reasoning. Participants also

completed a questionnaire about their religious beliefs. Enright et al. (1989) found that individuals with stronger religious beliefs tended to reason in a more sophisticated way about forgiveness than those individuals with weaker religious beliefs.

Religiousness is also related to people's self-reported tendencies to forgive. For example, Gorsuch and Hao (1993) found that individuals high in personal religiousness saw themselves as both more motivated to forgive and working harder to forgive others, when compared to individuals lower in personal religiousness. Mauger, Saxon, Hamill, and Pannell (1996) found that a forgiving disposition was related to the use of spiritual coping resources in both clinical and nonclinical samples. These studies suggest that highly religious people tend to report themselves as being especially forgiving.

### **Religion and Transgression-Specific Measures of Forgiveness**

In contrast, studies using *transgression-specific* measures of forgiveness have found few associations between religiousness and forgiveness (McCullough & Worthington, 1999). Transgression-specific measures of forgiveness assess an individual's forgiveness of an offender for a specific transgression. Subkoviak et al. (1995) reported a weak correlation ( $r = .09$ ) between self-reported religiousness and a measure of transgression-specific forgiveness. Similarly, Rackley (1993) found no significant relationship between religiousness and self-reported forgiveness of one's spouse for a specific transgression.

We therefore see an inconsistency in the existing research on forgiveness: Religious people report themselves to be more forgiving in the abstract, but not more forgiving of specific interpersonal transgressions. The existence of this religion-forgiveness discrepancy is especially disturbing because religious doctrines purport to encourage compassion and forgiveness. Though religion may cause its adherents to report that they value forgiveness more, this would be of limited social value unless religious individuals also behaved in a more forgiving manner in specific transgression situations.

We offer two distinct accounts for the religion-forgiveness discrepancy: a psychometric explanation, and a rationalization explanation. The psychometric account posits that the religion-forgiveness discrepancy is an artifact reflecting measurement shortcomings, whereas the rationalization explanation presupposes a real discrepancy between religious doctrine and religious individuals' actual motivations and behaviors in the context of forgiveness.

### **Accounting for the Discrepancy: Psychometric Issues**

It is important to begin by addressing any psychometric shortcomings that previous studies on religion and forgiveness may have had. Measurement issues

are fundamental because failures to measure a phenomenon properly undermine subsequent theoretical explanations for that phenomenon.

A measurement explanation for the forgiveness-religion discrepancy was first presented by McCullough and Worthington (1999). First, they mentioned that differences in the aggregation and specificity of measures assessing religion and forgiveness might mask a relationship between religiousness and forgiveness. Single samples of behavior may be influenced by many factors, both dispositional and situational, which can mask the influence of any one particular dispositional variable such as religiousness. However, when behaviors are aggregated across situations, theoretically expected correlations between dispositions and relevant behaviors are more likely to emerge (Epstein, 1983). McCullough and Hoyt (2002) reported that people's self-reports of how much they have forgiven a specific transgressor contain fairly little dispositional variance. Between 22% and 36% of the variance in such reports is due to personality, with the remainder attributable to nondispositional sources, such as the nature of the transgression. As a result, several self-reports of forgiveness for specific transgressions should be aggregated to increase the likelihood of obtaining theoretically expected correlations with individual traits such as religiousness.

Second, McCullough and Worthington (1999) pointed out that methods used to assess transgression-related forgiveness might introduce recall or encoding biases, again obscuring the potential relationship between religiousness and forgiveness. Transgression-specific forgiveness is usually measured by having participants freely recall a past transgression, and then complete a questionnaire about the transgression event. These free recall procedures may introduce error. If we assume that forgiven offenses are more difficult to recall than unforgiven offenses, then a more forgiving individual might have a difficult time recalling a transgression during a forgiveness study. In contrast, a less forgiving individual would more easily recall a salient transgression. Yet, both individuals may end up recalling situations that have been forgiven to approximately equal extents, making it seem like they are equally forgiving people, when, in fact, they are not. Errors such as these might attenuate the extent to which participants' reports of their forgiveness for specific transgressions might correlate with other variables, including religiousness. If, for instance, the more forgiving individual in the above example was also more religious, recall bias would make it seem as if the religious individual and the nonreligious individual were equally skilled at forgiving, even if they were not.

In summary, a psychometric explanation for the religion-forgiveness discrepancy claims that the null relationship between religiousness and forgiveness in transgression-specific studies is in part due to a lack of aggregation in measures of reported behaviors, as well as the presence of encoding and recall biases. These measurement weaknesses may obscure a relationship between religion and transgression-specific forgiveness.

### Assessing Psychometric Explanations for the Discrepancy

To address these psychometric accounts for the religion-forgiveness discrepancy, we present the results of three studies in which we examined the associations between religiousness and transgression-specific measures of forgiveness. In each sample, participants completed McCullough et al.'s (1998) Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) Inventory and at least one self-report measure of religiousness. The TRIM Inventory consists of 12 items that measure the two negative interpersonal motivations that McCullough et al. posited to underlie forgiveness: (a) *Avoidance* ("I am trying to keep as much distance between us as possible"); and (b) *Revenge* ("I want to see him/her hurt and miserable"). Lower scores on these two motivations indicate more forgiveness. In addition, participants completed at least one multi-item measure of religiousness. These three data sets allowed us to address the extent to which the religion-forgiveness relationship might be distorted by the methodological shortcomings described above.

#### *Sample 1: Religiousness and Forgiveness in a Free-Recall Procedure*

Sample 1 consisted of 224 introductory psychology students at a medium-sized Southeastern university who self-identified as Christians (McCullough & Worthington, 1995). Approximately 62% of the participants were women, and the majority of them were White/Caucasian (68%).

Participants were instructed to think of someone whom they had had trouble forgiving at some point in the past. With that specific person in mind, they completed the *Revenge* ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and *Avoidance* ( $\alpha = .90$ ) subscales of the TRIM Inventory (McCullough et al., 1998). To measure religiousness, participants were given the Shepherd Scale ( $\alpha = .96$ ) (Bassett et al., 1981). These items measure traditional (i.e., conservative) Christian beliefs and self-reports of behaviors that are considered to reflect a strong commitment to the Christian message.

We expected religiousness to be positively related to forgiveness. On the other hand, if McCullough and Worthington (1999) were correct about the possible role of measurement error created by differences in how participants select and recall transgressions for the study, then the present unrestricted measure of forgiveness would obscure any relationship between religiousness and forgiveness.

*Results.* The Shepherd Scale of religiousness was unrelated to participants' self-reported avoidance motivation,  $r(193) = -.02$ , n.s., and revenge motivation,  $r(200) = -.04$ , n.s. These results would suggest that religiousness is not related to forgiveness for specific transgressions—a conclusion also drawn by Rackley (1993) and Subkoviak et al. (1995) from studies involving similar research designs.



*Sample 2: A More Restrictive Recall Procedure*

In a second data set, we used a more restrictive recall paradigm that induced all participants to utilize similar psychological processes for recalling transgressions. We predicted that, using this restrictive recall procedure, we would uncover positive relationships between religion and forgiveness.

Participants were 91 introductory psychology students at a medium-sized Southern university (36 males and 55 females). To restrict the offenses that participants might recall, we recruited only individuals who reported having received a serious interpersonal transgression within 2 months prior to the study (for details, see McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). With their specific transgressor in mind, participants completed the TRIM Inventory (Avoidance subscale  $\alpha = .91$ , Revenge subscale  $\alpha = .92$ ). They also completed Allport and Ross's (1967) 9-item measure of intrinsic religiousness ( $\alpha = .93$ ). About 2 months later, 60 participants completed the TRIM Inventory a second time. We created residualized change scores to reflect the change in avoidance and revenge motivations between the first and second assessments. Decreases in either avoidance or revenge would be indicative of forgiveness (e.g., McCullough et al., 2003)

*Results.* Intrinsic religiousness was not significantly associated with Time 1 avoidance,  $r(90) = -.05$ , n.s., Time 2 avoidance,  $r(60) = -.08$ , n.s., or residualized change in avoidance,  $r(60) = -.01$ , n.s. However, intrinsic religiousness was significantly correlated with Time 1 revenge,  $r(90) = -.22$ ,  $p < .05$ , Time 2 revenge,  $r(60) = -.33$ ,  $p < .05$ , and (marginally) negatively related to residualized change in revenge,  $r(60) = -.22$ ,  $p < .10$ . Using this more restrictive recall procedure, intrinsic religiousness was related to initial revenge motivation and change in revenge motivation over time. This suggests that intrinsic religiousness is not only related to increased forgiveness (i.e., lowered revenge motivation), but that intrinsic religiousness may have a positive causal effect on forgiveness over time.

*Sample 3: A More Restrictive Recall Procedure With Aggregation*

In a third data set, we examined whether aggregating self-reports of forgiveness for several transgressions into a single measure of real-life forgiveness behavior would also uncover a higher religiousness-forgiveness relationship. Participants were 137 undergraduate students at a public Midwestern university (gender was not recorded in this study). On three different occasions, they were instructed to complete the TRIM inventory in response to two actual transgressions caused by peers who were related to the respondent in one of three ways: a romantic partner, a same-sex friend, or an opposite-sex friend. For each of these relationship types, participants reported (a) the worst thing that such a relationship partner ever did to

them; and (b) a time that they were seriously hurt by such a partner. This restrictive recall procedure was used to eliminate individual differences in recall bias (i.e., the tendency for some people to recall more negative transgressions than others) by focusing people on specific relationships and types of transgressions within those relationships. Participants provided a total of six estimates of their avoidance ( $\alpha = .76$ ) and revenge ( $\alpha = .86$ ) motivations in response to these six real-life transgressions (for details, see McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). The resulting forgiveness estimates involved both highly restrictive recall procedures and aggregation of forgiveness reports, both of which should increase the likelihood of uncovering substantial religiousness-forgiveness relationships.

Participants also completed Worthington et al.'s (2003) Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (RCI-10) on each occasion. The RCI-10 contains two subscales. *Interpersonal* religious commitment consists of four items assessing public or communal manifestations of religious commitment ( $\alpha = .96$ ), and *intrapersonal* religious commitment involves six items assessing private manifestations of religious commitment ( $\alpha = .97$ ). We combined the three measures of interpersonal religious commitment and the three measures of intrapersonal religious commitment that were collected on three different occasions to reduce occasion-specific error (Schmidt & Hunter, 1996).

*Results.* The range of correlations between the composite measure of interpersonal religious commitment and the six measures of avoidance motivation was  $r = (-.21, -.09)$  with a mean correlation of  $r = -.15$ . We created unit weighted aggregates of the six measures of avoidance and revenge. The aggregated avoidance measure was significantly correlated with interpersonal religious commitment,  $r = -.20, p < .05$ . The range of correlations between the composite measure of interpersonal religious commitment and the six measures of revenge motivation was  $r = (-.19, -.04)$ , with a mean correlation of  $r = -.11$ . The correlation between the aggregated measure of revenge motivation and interpersonal religious commitment was  $r = -.14, p < .10$ .

The range of correlations between the composite measure of intrapersonal religious commitment and the six various measures of avoidance motivation was  $r = (-.24, -.10)$ , with a mean correlation of  $r = -.17$ . When we aggregated the six measures of avoidance motivation, the correlation of this six-transgression composite was significantly correlated with intrapersonal religious commitment at  $r = -.21, p < .05$ . The range of correlations between the composite measure of intrapersonal religious commitment and the six measures of revenge motivation was  $r = (-.27, -.05)$ , with a mean correlation of  $r = -.17$ . The correlation of the six-transgression composite of revenge motivation with intrapersonal religious commitment was  $r = -.22, p < .01$ . Aggregating people's avoidance and revenge motivations across several transgressions led to appreciable increases in the size of the typical correlation between measures of religiousness and forgiveness,

suggesting that religiously committed people do report being slightly more forgiving of specific transgressions than their less religious counterparts.

### Conclusion from the Three Data Sets

These analyses suggest that McCullough and Worthington (1999) may have been correct regarding the psychometric shortcomings of previous studies of the relationship between religiousness and forgiveness for specific transgressions. When respondents are free to select any transgression from their past (as in Sample 1), their self-reports of forgiveness are nearly orthogonal to measures of religiousness commitment (i.e.,  $r$ s range from  $-.02$  to  $-.04$ ). When participants are constrained in the types of transgressions they can recall (as in Sample 2), correlations between religiousness and self-reported forgiveness (namely, with motivations to seek revenge) increase considerably. Finally, when self-reports of forgiveness are both based on transgressions that are recalled under restrictive procedures and aggregated across multiple transgressions (as in Sample 3), it appears that the relationships between religiousness and transgression-specific forgiveness are on the order of  $r = |0.20|$ . We conclude that one explanation for the religion-forgiveness discrepancy is the failure of researchers to use measures that assess the phenomenon properly. Based on this demonstration, we would recommend that researchers attend to psychometric issues such as restrictive recall and aggregation when studying the effects of religiousness (or any other dispositional variable) on forgiveness.

### Other Dynamics at Work? A Rationalization Model of Religion and Forgiveness

Though these psychometric issues are an important first step in addressing the religion-forgiveness discrepancy, we doubt that measurement error is the entire story. Though improved methodology seems to establish a positive relationship between religion and self-reported forgiveness for specific transgressions, this relationship is small in magnitude (Cohen, 1988). In our studies, religion accounted for only about 4% of the variance in self-reported forgiveness, even when using restrictive recall and aggregated measures. Since compassion and forgiveness are foundational to so many world religions (e.g., Rye et al., 2000), one would expect the relationship between religiousness and forgiveness to be stronger.

Furthermore, the multitude of stubborn, bloody religious conflicts around the world speak to a different relationship between religion and forgiveness. In many places, individuals who consider themselves to be devout followers of their religions actively work to maintain centuries-old stances of bitterness and hate toward their enemies. The long-standing conflicts between Palestinians and Israelis (e.g., Bar-Tal, 1990; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998), Irish Catholics and Protestants

(e.g., O'Donoghue & O'Donoghue, 1981), and the Azerbaijanis and Armenians (e.g., Fraser, Hipel, Jaworsky, & Zuljan, 1990) are just a few examples of religion's failed influence on compassion and forgiveness.

In these, as well as other, more mundane cases, rather than promoting forgiveness, religion appears to fuel resentment and revenge. The rationalization explanation for the religion-forgiveness discrepancy suggests that the discrepancy may occur because religion as a meaning system may be abstract enough to provide people with justification for both vengeful and forgiving behaviors. Religious individuals who are highly motivated *not* to forgive might use religion to rationalize their unforgiving actions, just as religious individuals who are motivated to forgive can find ample justification for forgiveness. This could account for circumstances in which religion does not promote forgiveness, and it might also explain why the empirical relationship between religion and forgiveness is not as strongly positive as religious doctrines would prescribe.

More explicitly, the three assumptions underlying the rationalization explanation for the religion-forgiveness discrepancy are the following: First, rather than providing only a single meaning system, religion can present individuals with multiple meaning systems that may be called into service to address different issues in people's lives (Paloutzian & Smith, 1995). Second, behavior (e.g., forgiving behavior) is more proximally determined by whichever motivation is predominant at the time (e.g., forgiveness vs. revenge), and is less directly influenced by moral and religious principles and values (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Third, if a person's more immediate motivation conflicts with one's religious or moral principles, then that individual may choose to rationalize his or her behavior to fit the relevant principles. We call this process *moral rationalization*—the use of different cognitive methods to convince the self and others that one's seemingly unethical actions actually fall within one's valued moral standards (Tsang, 2002). These three assumptions are discussed in further detail in the following sections.

### *Religion as Multiple Meaning Systems*

Many individuals might possess multiple concrete religious schemata, rather than a single global religious schema (Paloutzian & Smith, 1995). Furthermore, we suggest that religion contains both an overarching meaning system, along with multiple meaning systems subsumed under the general doctrine. Some lower-order meaning systems can be viewed as being in opposition with one another. For example, many religions teach that God is infinitely forgiving, but the same religions can also promote belief in the existence of a just world in which God's justice insures that people get what they deserve (Lerner, 1965; Lerner & Simmons, 1966).

Themes of retributive justice coexist with themes of forgiveness in the major world religions. In both Judaism and Christianity, believers are told to take an "eye

for an eye, tooth for a tooth.” Christianity’s New Testament also has many examples of retributive justice, such as “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you” (NIV: 2 Thessalonians 1:6). Similarly, in Islam’s Koran, it is written, “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 Buddhist and Hindu ideas of *karma* and *dharma* also contain indirect elements of retributive justice: all of our actions, both good and bad, have consequences for us in this life or the next. Whereas doctrines of compassion in these religions could lead religious individuals toward forgiveness, doctrines of retribution in these same religions might encourage revenge.

### *Motivational Determinants of Forgiving Behavior*

There are a number of ways in which competing meaning systems within religions might affect forgiveness in religious individuals. One possibility is that different meaning systems might have attentional effects on forgiveness. In this case, a believer would interpret a transgression situation within whichever religious meaning system that happened to be most salient at the time. Similarly, religious groups that emphasize one competing meaning system over another would be expected to have doctrine-specific effects on forgiveness. Groups that emphasize compassion would be more likely to encourage forgiveness, and denominations that emphasize retributive justice would be more likely to encourage revenge.

Although this causal relationship from the religious meaning system to forgiveness is quite plausible, the rationalization model suggests that people’s proneness to forgive might also influence them to endorse a particular meaning system. For example, religious individuals who support capital punishment as a tool for retribution might justify their opinion on the basis of “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.” However, individuals who prefer more forgiving alternatives to capital punishment point out that God calls people “to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us” (Higi, 1997). In this way, people may select different religious meaning systems to justify their desire for revenge or forgiveness.

This selective endorsement of religious meaning systems can be explained within the framework of Kunda’s (1990) theory of motivated reasoning. Kunda proposed that the voice of reason is not always cool and objective, but can be swayed by a person’s wishes and desires. The theory of motivated reasoning specifies that if individuals are motivated to arrive at a particular conclusion when making a decision, this motivation will bias the cognitive processes used in reasoning. Reason can be used to rationalize an individual’s biased motivations, to oneself and to others, under the guise of objectivity. Kunda posited limits to this process, stating that motivated reasoning would only function successfully if the individual could find enough evidence to support his or her biased conclusion. Applying this theory to the context of religion and forgiveness suggests that religious individuals’

forgiving versus vengeful motivations may influence the cognitive processes used in accessing relevant aspects of the religious meaning system.

### *The Phenomenon of Moral Rationalization*

Bandura's theory of moral disengagement (e.g., Bandura, 1999) places motivated reasoning within the specific context of moral behavior and motivation. Bandura proposed that people internalize moral standards and self-sanctions through socialization. Internalized self-sanctions cause individuals to anticipate self-condemnation if they violate moral standards, and self-reward if they uphold those standards. Because of these self-sanctions, and the need for people to see themselves as good and moral (e.g., Aronson, 1969; Steele, 1988), people are usually unable to violate their moral standards with impunity. Yet individuals often do desire to engage in behaviors that are contrary to their internalized standards. In order to behave unethically, but still convince themselves of their morality, people inhibit self-sanctions using different methods of moral disengagement. These cognitive mechanisms bias individuals' reasoning, allowing them to conclude that their unethical behavior is actually moral, thus disengaging moral self-sanctions and permitting them to continue violating their moral standards.

Bandura (1999) identified a number of different methods of rationalization that could lead to moral disengagement. Two methods that may be especially relevant in the context of forgiveness and religious meaning systems are moral justification, and the blaming and dehumanization of victims. With moral justification, individuals depict their unethical behavior as serving a valued social or moral purpose. These individuals ironically present themselves as moral agents while they violate moral principles. People can also blame and dehumanize others in order to rationalize immoral behavior. Dehumanization occurs when perpetrators give bestial qualities to victims, effectively diminishing empathic responses to those victims and subduing moral self-sanctions (e.g., Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975). Perpetrators can also blame individuals for their plight, portraying victims rather than the perpetrators as those who have violated moral standards.

Religious meaning systems may be employed as moral justification for an unforgiving stance. Rather than viewing themselves in violation of the almost universal religious principle of forgiveness and compassion, vengeful individuals can characterize their revenge as serving valued principles of religious justice. For example, proponents of capital punishment can rationalize their unforgiveness by stating that they are serving "God's justice." While these individuals may be violating valued principles of forgiveness, they focus instead on moral justifications of retribution (see Hunsberger & Jackson, this issue). Religious meaning systems can also be used to blame and dehumanize others. This occurs, for example, when people claim that murderers are sinners deserving of the death penalty,

allowing individuals to focus on the justice of retribution rather than the value of forgiveness.

### Current and Future Research in Forgiveness and Moral Rationalization

#### *Method*

As a preliminary test of the rationalization model, we conducted a pilot study to examine whether people's endorsement of different religious meaning systems was related to their forgiveness toward a recent transgressor. We operationalized moral rationalization as an individual's endorsement of whichever religious meaning system matched that individual's current feelings of forgiveness or unforgiveness toward a transgressor. We recruited 38 Christian participants (29 women, 9 men) from psychology classes at a medium-sized Southwestern private university. Ages ranged from 18 to 22 years ( $M$  is 19.50,  $SD$  is 1.13). Keeping our psychometric explanation in mind, we restricted participants' recall of transgression by only recruiting individuals who had experienced a transgression in the 7 days prior to their enrollment in the study. We measured forgiveness with a revised version of McCullough et al.'s (1998) Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) Inventory. Along with the *Revenge* ( $\alpha = .85$ ) and *Avoidance* ( $\alpha = .91$ ) subscales, we measured *Benevolence* with a new scale ( $\alpha = .86$ ) consisting of five positively worded items (e.g., "Despite what he/she did, I want us to have a positive relationship again") used in other research (McCullough et al., 2003). Using these three subscales, forgiveness is conceptualized as decreases in avoidance and revenge motivations, and increases in benevolence motivation (McCullough et al., 2003; Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, in press).

We measured rationalization using two religiousness scales. First, participants rated their endorsement of different Judeo-Christian beliefs using a scale modified from a section of Glock and Stark's (1966) Dimensions of Religious Commitment Scale. We altered this scale to include a *retributive justice* item ("Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, life for a life") as well as a *forgiveness* item ("Forgive as the Lord forgave you"). We hypothesized that individuals who were motivated toward retribution would give higher endorsement to the retributive scripture, whereas individuals more inclined toward forgiveness would give higher endorsement to the forgiving scripture. Secondly, we measured participants' concept of God (Gorsuch, 1968), using *justice* adjectives such as "just" and "fair" ( $\alpha = .77$ ), *forgiveness* adjectives such as "forgiving" and "merciful" ( $\alpha = .84$ ), and *wrath/retribution* adjectives such as "wrathful" and "avenging" ( $\alpha = .79$ ). We hypothesized that vengeful individuals would be more likely to endorse just and wrathful images of God, whereas a forgiving image of God would be more appealing to forgiving individuals.

### *Results*

Individuals who were highly motivated to avoid their transgressors were less likely to endorse the forgiveness scripture "Forgive as the Lord forgave you,"  $r(38) = -.34, p < .04$ . Benevolence, on the other hand, was positively related to the personal endorsement of the forgiveness scripture,  $r(38) = .37, p < .03$ , and marginally negatively correlated with endorsement of the retribution scripture "Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, life for a life,"  $r(38) = -.30, p < .07$ . There were no significant correlations between Revenge and endorsement of scripture.

Looking at individuals' images of God, avoidance motivations were negatively correlated with forgiving images of God,  $r(37) = -.38, p < .03$ , and marginally negatively correlated with justice images of God,  $r(36) = -.32, p < .07$ . Benevolence was marginally positively related to forgiving images of God,  $r(37) = .29, p < .09$ . There were no significant correlations between Revenge and the images of God subscales.

Taken together, the results of this pilot study suggest that some individuals may use religious meaning systems to rationalize their forgiving or unforgiving attitudes. Individuals who reported being less forgiving (more avoidant or less benevolent) were somewhat more likely to endorse retribution-related scripture and less likely to endorse forgiveness-related scripture. Images of God also seemed to be related to forgiveness motivations. Individuals who reported more benevolence were somewhat more likely to report forgiving images of God. Results were more mixed for individuals reporting higher avoidance motivations, who seemed to shy away from justice images of God, but also from forgiving images of God. Because of the correlational nature of this research, it is difficult to conclude the direction of causality. On one hand, a rationalization explanation posits that retributive and forgiveness motivations cause individuals to access different parts of their religious meaning systems. However, it is also possible that differences in people's religious meaning systems influence their propensity to forgive. Future research with larger numbers of participants and controlled experimental manipulations will aid in uncovering the mechanisms of moral rationalization in religion and forgiveness.

### *Future Rationalization Research*

In the above study, we attempted to use multiple measures of religious meaning systems, including endorsement of retribution- and forgiveness-related scripture, and different facets of people's image of God. Another fruitful avenue of research in moral rationalization might be the use of behavioral measures. Because participants are often concerned with self-presentation (Jones & Pittman, 1982) or may not even be aware of their true motivations (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), the use of behavioral measures to complement self-reports allows investigators to more accurately assess psychological phenomena. This is especially the case



when studying concepts like religion and forgiveness, which tend to elicit socially desirable responses. It is possible to employ behavioral measures in assessments of both forgiveness and moral rationalization. Rather than relying on self-reports of forgiveness, psychologists might use research paradigms such as the Prisoner's Dilemma to measure allocation of resources after a laboratory transgression (e.g., Batson & Ahmad, 2001). In addition, religious moral rationalization might be measured using cognitive dissonance's selective exposure design (e.g., Freedman & Sears, 1965), where individuals who are motivated toward vengeance should be more willing to expose themselves to religious information related to retributive justice than forgiveness. Additional research can shed further light on the possibility that conflicting religious meaning systems can be used to rationalize unforgiveness.

A moral rationalization explanation for the religion-forgiveness discrepancy raises an interesting possibility: Individuals are not only molded by religious doctrine, but they themselves also mold the doctrines to fit their desires. Moreover, the rationalization function of forgiveness-relevant meaning systems is not necessarily specific to religion. Any meaning system—whether religious, philosophical, or political—that presents potentially conflicting meaning systems of retributive justice and forgiveness can be used by an individual to rationalize his or her current forgiveness stance. However, because many religious meaning systems strongly promote both forgiveness and retributive justice, they may be especially easy to use as rationalizations. The discrepancy between the religious message of forgiveness, and the lack of increased forgiveness in highly religious individuals may not necessarily be due to a failure of the religious meaning system to promote the value of forgiveness. Instead, the discrepancy could arise as a consequence of the complex messages regarding forgiveness that are inherent in many religious meaning systems, combined with individuals' varied motivations in this context.

## Conclusions

Religion can function as a forgiveness-relevant meaning system, potentially affecting people's beliefs, emotions, actions, and goals related to forgiveness. Yet religion's effect on forgiveness may not be unidirectional—while religion's emphasis on universal love and compassion can work to facilitate forgiveness, the competing meaning system of retributive justice makes it possible for individuals to use religion as rationalization for revenge.

We have presented data that support McCullough and Worthington's (1999) assertion that psychometric shortcomings have obscured the relationship between religion and forgiveness. When forgiveness is assessed using restrictive recall procedures and aggregate measures of forgiveness, a small positive relationship between religion and transgression-specific forgiveness emerges. But this may not be the last we hear of the discrepancy between religion and forgiveness.

All of the studies reviewed by McCullough and Worthington (1999), as well as the data presented in this article, relied on self-reports of forgiveness. Research using behavioral measures of forgiveness is needed to rule out the confound of self-presentation.

It is also possible that religion can be used as a rationalization for unforgiving behavior. Instead of religion causing forgiveness, motivations against forgiveness might cause individuals to endorse religious meaning systems that justify unforgiving behavior. This special form of moral rationalization could explain instances where religion does not seem to facilitate forgiveness, and might also help to explain why empirical work thus far has only uncovered a weak positive relationship between religion and forgiveness. Additional research will help uncover the complex relationship between religiousness and forgiveness.

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