Religion and the Forgiving Personality

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ABSTRACT   Forgiveness is a concept with deep religious roots. It is also a basic social and psychological phenomenon. In this article, we explore the links between forgiveness and religion by surveying how they are linked in the major monotheistic world religions, and how they appear to be linked empirically. In attempting to account for the current body of empirical findings, we propose four potential substantive and methodological explanations that should be explored in future studies. Because the concept of forgiveness is (a) both spiritual and social-psychological in nature, and (b) possibly linked to some measures of human health and well-being (concerns that have traditionally been of interest to both researchers in personality and researchers in religion), the concept of forgiveness could be an important common ground for future research on the interface of religion and personality.

The concept of forgiveness has dual natures: a common one and a transcendent one. In the common, material world, forgiveness is just one more social-psychological phenomenon. We can think about it and study

it dispassionately. We can investigate why some people appear to be relatively forgiving, while others seem vindictive, vengeful, and bitter. We can examine why people find it easy to forgive some offenders, but almost impossible to forgive others. We can investigate whether forgiveness might be related to better health and well-being. The common nature of forgiveness can be studied—and is being studied—with standard psychological methods.

But forgiveness has another nature as well. It is spiritual, transcendent, timeless. It has been a topic of philosophical and theological inquiry for millennia (Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1997). It has inspired great art, poetry, and music. It causes people to revisit religious or spiritual memories that have been long forgotten. When the word "forgiveness" is uttered, people envision the churches, synagogues, and mosques of their childhood; confessions that they attended, or failed to attend; high holy days. When people forgive (or feel forgiven) the experience evokes religious and spiritual thoughts, images, and affects. To raise the issue of forgiveness is to beg questions about human fallibility and human vulnerability. The transcendent nature of forgiveness is profound, difficult to pin down.

Perhaps because of these two natures—because forgiveness seems both so common and, at times, so transcendent—people have a difficult time capturing the essence of forgiveness. Among social scientists, there is some debate about what forgiveness is (see, e.g., Enright, Eastin, Golden, Sarinopoulos, & Freedman, 1992). Even among researchers who agree that forgiveness involves relationship-constructive psychological changes regarding an offending relationship partner, some researchers focus on motivational change regarding an offender as the primary defining feature of forgiveness (e.g., McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997), with others taking more global approaches (e.g., Enright et al., 1992) that emphasize cognitive, behavioral, and emotional changes as necessary aspects of an adequate definition of forgiveness.

Rather than attempt to offer a comprehensive definition of forgiveness—the kind of definition that philosophers highly prize—we propose that interpersonal forgiveness rests on three crucial features. First, interpersonal forgiveness occurs in the context of an individual's perception that the action or actions of another person were noxious, harmful, immoral, or unjust. Second, these perceptions typically elicit emotional responses (e.g., anger or fear), motivational responses (e.g., desires to avoid the transgressor or harm the transgressor in kind), cognitive

responses (e.g., hostility toward or loss of respect or esteem for the transgressor), or behavioral responses (e.g., avoidance or aggression) that would promote the deterioration of good will toward the offender and social harmony. Third, by forgiving, these negative emotional, motivational, cognitive, or behavioral responses are modulated, so that more prosocial and harmonious interpersonal relations can possibly be resumed. This is a common definition for a construct that is both common and transcendent.

Despite the centrality of forgiveness to the theology and piety of the great Western monotheistic traditions, it was not until the last decade that psychologists began to give serious conceptual or empirical attention to the concept of forgiving (see Enright & Coyle, 1998; McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1997; McCullough & Worthington, 1994a, 1994b, for reviews). Psychological scholarship on forgiving has increased during the last 10 years, especially from developmental and clinical perspectives (see Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1997; McCullough & Worthington, 1994a, 1994b). Personality and social psychology also has addressed interpersonal forgiving (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Heider, 1958; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991).

Interestingly, most of the empirical treatments of forgiveness that have appeared in the literature in the past decade have tended to overlook the deep religious roots of the concept of forgiveness. We think that this oversight is unfortunate, because basic research on forgiveness could probably be enriched considerably by examining the ways that religious traditions, beliefs, and rituals—people's psychological connections to the transcendent element of forgiveness—influence their interpersonal thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and personality processes—the common, earthy aspect of forgiveness. Thus, we think there is a boon to be gained for basic research on forgiveness by revisiting the religious roots of forgiveness, just as the field of personality has much to gain by reflecting on the religious side of human nature in general (Emmons, this issue; Piedmont, this issue).

In the present article, we revisit the religious roots of forgiveness, from both historical and empirical standpoints. This article consists of four basic sections. First, we briefly outline the importance of forgiveness within the three major monotheistic traditions in the West—Judaism,

Christianity, and Islam. Second, we examine the existing body of research on religion and forgiveness to evaluate the extent to which the two concepts are connected in human functioning. Third, we examine some substantive and methodological explanations that account for the existing body of research on religion and forgiveness. Fourth, we briefly introduce the possibility that investigating forgiveness might be an important way to illuminate the well-established links between religion and certain measures of health and well-being.

Theological Connections Between Religion and Forgiveness

Of the various religious accounts of forgiveness, it is most thoroughly articulated by the world's great monotheistic traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (see Enright, Eastin, Golden, Sarinopoulos, & Freedman, 1992, for another review of religious conceptualizations of forgiveness). One of the most important distinctives of early Judaism was a belief that God was capable of forgiving humanity for its sins (Klassen, 1966; McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1997; Telfer, 1959). Indeed, ascribing forgiveness as a central element of God's character was an important religious innovation that distinguished Judaism from the other early religious traditions of Palestine. The context in which God forgave people was the context of repentance (Dorff, 1997; Jones, 1995). The possibility of *teshuvah* (Hebrew for "return" or "repentance"), which could lead to the receipt of forgiveness from God, became the centerpiece of Jewish moral life (Dorff, 1992, 1998; Neusner, 1997; Telfer, 1959).

Repentance is a complex of intentions and actions involving (a) intellectual regret, (b) regret over the moral and interpersonal consequences of an action, and (c) the resolve not to repeat the actions in the future (Dorff, 1992, 1997; see also Golding, 1984–1985). Judaism teaches that God forgives on the basis of repentance (although not in a cause-and-effect fashion), and that people should be similarly persuaded to forgive repentant offenders as well (Dorff, 1992, 1998; Neusner, 1997). For this reason, forgiving one's transgressors following true repentance is not a moral prerogative within Judaism, but a religious duty (Enright et al., 1992; Neusner, 1997; Newman, 1987).

While Christian teachings regarding forgiveness were continuous with the teachings of Judaism, they differed considerably. Judaism's emphasis on repentance as a condition for receiving divine forgiveness, for example,

was recontextualized in terms of the Kingdom of God (Jones, 1995; Marty, 1998)—announced through the appearance of Jesus in human history—which altered people's orientations toward each other and God. God's ability to forgive people through Christ was seen as a statement that a new epoch in human history was beginning. Rather than being a precondition for receiving forgiveness, repentance was seen as a step in the direction of obtaining, declaring, and practicing one's membership in the Kingdom of God (Jones, 1995).

Christian scriptures appear to place more explicit emphasis on the importance of interpersonal—that is, human-to-human—forgiveness than do the Hebrew scriptures. The earliest Christian writings give the impression that in its early apocalyptic roots, Christianity taught that divine forgiveness occurred once and for all through baptism (Bråkenhielm, 1993). People who had received divine forgiveness through baptism, it was believed, could thereafter avoid committing sin (Telfer, 1959; Williams, 1942/1984). Later Christian writings suggest that the belief in postbaptismal sinlessness was modified in Christian doctrine as it became painfully but abundantly clear that Christians were still capable of sinning following baptism. Thus, most Christian theologies continue to emphasize the continual need to seek forgiveness from people and from God—and to grant it to one another—as an exercise in learning to live as citizens in God's kingdom (Mackintosh, 1927).

God's ability to forgive all sins is a foundational element of God's character in Muslim theology as well (Ayoub, 1997). Indeed, the Qur'ān frequently associates God's unlimited forgiveness with the prevailing human tendency to commit transgressions (Ayoub, 1997). Islamic scripture and piety also encourage Muslims to forgive others to the same extent that they themselves desire to be forgiven. Some scholars interpret the Qur'ān as indicating that the search to be forgiving is "more virtuous and nearer to God" than is the search for justice (Hathout, 1997). Those who forgive instead of retaliating (as justified as their indignation might be) can expect a special blessing from God (Rye, et al., in press).

Empirical Links Between Forgiveness and Religion

Given the historical links between religion and forgiveness, at least in the monotheistic traditions of the West, it would be unsurprising to find that people higher in religious involvement tend to be more forgiving than

people lower in religious involvement. After all, if the great world religions emphasize the value of forgiveness, then people who have internalized the beliefs and rituals of those religions would probably be more forgiving. The available data on the association of religion and forgiveness, however, tell a more complex story.

It is important to distinguish among the levels of specificity with which forgiveness can be measured. At the least specific level, forgiveness could be assessed as people's attitudes, values, or beliefs about their own "forgivingness" (Roberts, 1995). Such measurements would refer to a general personality disposition, trait, or response tendency. At a more specific level, forgiveness could be assessed as a general response tendency within a given relationship (e.g., within one's marriage or romantic relationship). Measurements of the extent to which a person tends to forgive his or her spouse for specific transgressions would assess this intermediate level of specificity. At the most specific level, forgiveness could be measured as a response to a single, isolated transgression. As we will see, the data suggest that religious involvement seems related to people's scores on measurements that assess forgiveness at a general, abstract level, but is not as strongly related to forgiveness in specific, real-life circumstances.

The Evidence for a Religion-Forgiveness Relationship: Dispositional Measures

Religion and Forgiveness as a Value

Over 25 years ago, Rokeach (1973) reported data indicating positive association between religious involvement and the value people ascribed to being forgiving. Rokeach reported results from Tate and Miller (1971) and Rokeach (1969), in which college samples and national samples of adults completed single-item measures of frequency of church attendance, self-rated religiousness, and Allport and Ross's (1967) Religious Orientation Inventory (ROI), which measures intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for religious involvement. Participants also completed the Rokeach Value Survey, a scale that instructs people to rank a set of 18 terminal values and a set of 18 instrumental values (including the value of being "forgiving") according to the priories given to these values in their value systems. People who were high in church attendance, high in self-rated religiousness, and who were categorized as intrinsically religious

or indiscriminately proreligious (i.e., those who endorsed both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for being religious) by the Religious Orientation Scale placed being "forgiving" higher in their personal rankings of the 18 instrumental values than did people who attended church less frequently, or who considered themselves less religious, or who were categorized as extrinsically religious or indiscriminately antireligious by the ROI.

Shoemaker & Bolt (1977) conducted a follow-up study to Rokeach's (1973) work to examine highly religious people's ideal values. They instructed 51 Christian students to rank the 18 terminal values and 18 instrumental values on Rokeach's (1967) Value Survey according to how they believed a Christian should live. Among the 18 instrumental values, "forgiving" was rated second only to "loving" ("imaginative," "intellectual," and "clean" were rated lowest among the 18 values) as an ideal value for Christians to espouse. Shoemaker and Bolt's (1977) findings demonstrate that religious people not only claim to value being forgiving more than less religious people, but they also are conscious that highly religious people *should* value forgiveness highly.

Years later, Poloma and Gallup (1991) reported similar findings. They reported data from a national survey indicating that a variety of measures of religious involvement (e.g., importance of religion, church membership, frequency of religious attendance, feeling close to God, and several measures of personal prayer) were positively associated with people's attitudes toward forgiveness (e.g., the statement, "It is important for a religious person to make an effort to forgive others who have deliberately hurt them in some way"). Taken together, these data indicate that the relationship between religiousness and people's self-reported values and attitudes regarding forgiveness appears to be robust and stable over a 20-year period in American history. As well, religious people (at least Christian students) are conscious of the fact that they that they should be forgiving in order to be faithful to the teachings of their religion.

Religion and Reasoning About Forgiveness

Some evidence also suggests that religious involvement is positively associated with people's moral reasoning regarding forgiveness. Enright, Santos, and Al-Mabuk (1989) examined the conditions that influenced people's reasoning regarding the propriety of forgiveness for addressing interpersonal transgressions. To assess reasoning regarding forgiveness,

Enright et al. (1989) presented children, adolescents, and adults with two dilemmas from Rest's (1979) Defining Issues Test that were followed by interview questions designed to elicit respondents' judgments of whether and why forgiveness was an appropriate response to the dilemmas presented. Participants' responses were used to determine participants' standing on a six-stage developmental model of reasoning regarding forgiveness. This six-stage model is not unlike Kohlberg's (1976) six-stage model of reasoning about justice. In Enright et al.'s model, as people develop more sophisticated skills in taking the perspective of individuals, systems, and societies, their views regarding forgiveness become more complex and sophisticated as well.

Participants also completed a version of Allport, Gillespie, and Young's (1953) Religious Belief Scale. Enright et al. (1989) found that individuals who were high in religious belief had, on average, more sophisticated reasoning regarding forgiveness than did those who were lower in religious beliefs. Specifically, those who were highly religious were more likely to view forgiveness as being motivated by the recognition of all persons as ends in themselves (who should be respected and cared for even if they commit hurtful actions). The less religious people were more likely to understand forgiveness as being primarily motivated by other considerations, such as the value of forgiveness in maintaining social harmony, the need to forgive out of obedience to legal or religious authorities, or pressure from other people.

Religion and Self-Reported Practices Regarding Forgiveness

Gorsuch and Hao (1993) analyzed Gallup data from a sample of 1,030 respondents who responded to items regarding their own motivations and self-reported practices regarding forgiveness. Forgiveness-related items were divided into four sets: (a) self-reports of what respondents do when someone wrongs them, (b) their motivations for these actions, (c) self-reported reasons for not forgiving, and (d) self-reported practices when they wrong someone else. These items were factor analyzed and were used to create four distinct indexes related to forgiving. A forgiving motive factor consisted mostly of prosocial and religious motivations that were cited as reasons for forgiving. Religious response and forgiving proaction factors described a variety of religious and prosocial actions after offending or being hurt by someone else. A hostility factor described

people's feelings of resentment and desires for punishing or seeking revenge from their offenders.

Respondents also completed several measures of religious belief and practice that were summarized in two indexes: (a) a personal religiousness factor, and (b) a measure of religious conformity, which assessed people's adherence to the beliefs of their religious faith. Gorsuch and Hao (1993) found that personal religiousness (but not religious conformity) was significantly related to the forgiving motive, religious response, and forgiving proaction factors, suggesting that people higher in personal religiousness reported themselves as having more motivation to forgive others and actually working harder to forgive others than did those who were lower in personal religiousness. In addition, people high in personal religiousness were less likely to cite feelings of resentment and desire to see harm come to a transgressor as reasons for not forgiving. Religious conformity was not related to any of the four forgiveness-related measures.

Using different arrangements of both the religion items and the forgiveness items from the same data set, Poloma and Gallup (1991) also found that measures of religiousness (e.g., self-rated importance of religion, church membership, church attendance, and a variety of measures of prayer experiences) were positively related to people's self-reported tendencies to forgive others and act in other positive ways when offended. The measures of religiousness were negatively related to people's self-reported tendencies to act negatively (e.g., try to get even or hold on to resentments) following interpersonal transgressions.

Finally, Mauger, Saxon, Hamill, and Pannell (1996) found that scores on the Forgiveness of Others Scale (a short self-report measure that assesses the disposition to be forgiving) was correlated with a measure of spiritual coping resources in a sample of 90 psychotherapy clients ($r = .31$, $p < .001$) and a sample of 231 adult nonpatients ($r = .38$, $p < .001$). Although little information is given about the nature of the measure of "spiritual support" used in this study, the evidence is nevertheless consistent with the other evidence reviewed here: People higher in religiousness highly value forgiveness, believe that they should be forgiving, believe that people should forgive out of the recognition of the common worth of all persons, and claim to be highly forgiving people.

The Evidence Against a Religion-Forgiveness Relationship: Transgression-Specific Measures

In contrast to the robust and positive associations found between religious involvement and dispositional measures of forgiveness, research on the association of religious involvement with transgression-specific measures of forgiveness (that is, self-reports of people's forgiveness of specific offenders for specific transgressions) suggests that the influence of religious involvement is negligible. An example of a transgression-specific measure of forgiveness is the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI; Subkoviak et al., 1995). The EFI is a 60-item self-report measure with which an offended person indicates the extent to which he or she experiences or manifests positive and negative affect, positive and negative cognition, and positive and negative behavior toward someone who offended him or her in the past.

Subkoviak et al. (1995) examined the correlation between people's EFI total scale score and religiousness. They found a modest correlation of $r = .09$ between people's self-reported religiousness (measured in terms of frequency of seven religious behaviors) and their self-reported forgiveness for the people who had transgressed against them. Subkoviak and his colleagues found that people who were affiliated with *any* religion had slightly higher EFI scores than did people who were not affiliated with a religion. As well, among a small subset of participants—people offended by an employer or a distant relationship partner—the association of scores on the multi-item measure of religious involvement and forgiveness was significant. In summary, though, there was little unqualified evidence that religious people are more forgiving for specific transgressions.

Similarly weak findings regarding religious involvement and forgiveness come from Rackley (1993). He found that among 170 married individuals, self-reported forgiveness for one's spouse for a particular transgression (as measured with the Enright Forgiveness Inventory) was not significantly associated with a multi-item measure of religious involvement. Thus, these findings suggest modest associations between religiousness and forgiveness for specific transgressors.

Why the Discrepancy?

As we look at the research on religion and forgiveness, then, it appears that religiousness is associated with people's values and self-reported dispositions to forgive—and even their willingness to forgive (at least hypothetically). Religious people appear convinced that they *should be* forgiving people. However, at the level of individual offenses, religious involvement seems to play at best a small role in determining who will and will not forgive. There seem to be at least four potential explanations for this disjunction.

First, social desirability concerns might motivate religious people to appear forgiving or to desire to be forgiving, even if religion provides no unique resources for actually being more forgiving. Second, problems with aggregation and specificity in the measurement of religion and forgiveness might prevent religious variables and forgiveness variables from correlating highly under some conditions. Third, because transgression-specific forgiveness appears to be under the control of many proximal social-psychological conditions, the influence of religion on transgression-specific forgiveness might be quite distal in the causal chain. Fourth, the methods currently used for measuring transgression-specific forgiveness might lead to recall biases or encoding biases that obscure the connection between religious involvement and forgiveness. We review each of these possibilities below.

Social Desirability

One possibility that should be given serious consideration is that religious people really are not more forgiving than other people—even if they greatly aspire to be highly forgiving as a way of living out their values. Because religion provides norms that "forgiveness is good" and that "good religious people should forgive," it would make sense that religious people have more positive attitudes toward being forgiving and should want to be more forgiving (Gorsuch, 1990), even if religion does not actually provide resources for helping people to forgive in real-life circumstances.

At issue here is more than simply whether religious people are more prone to socially desirable responding. The biasing effect of social desirability on responses to religious involvement measures does not appear to be the problem that it was once thought to be (Trimble, 1997).

Moreover, measures of social desirability contain variance that can be attributed to personality factors such as conscientiousness and emotional stability (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996), so variance in the religion-forgiveness relationship that could be explained with measures of social desirability would probably be substantive rather than artifactual (after all, a common social desirability item is, "I sometimes try to get even rather than forgive and forget!" [Paulhus, 1991]). Instead, we are suggesting that even if religious people are no more facile at forgiving in real-life situations than are less religious people, they do desire to be forgiving. For religious people, forgiving is "socially desirable." The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. This possibility could be investigated, although such a study has not been conducted to date.

Aggregation and Specificity in Measurement

A second possible explanation for the different associations of religious involvement with dispositional and transgression-specific assessments of forgiveness is related to what Gorsuch (1984, 1988) has called, after Fishbein & Ajzen (1974) and Rushton, Brainerd, and Pressley (1983) the aggregation principle. Fishbein and Ajzen (1974) demonstrated that general measures of religiousness do not correlate well with individual measures of religious behavior, but they do correlate well with scales that aggregate many self-reported religious behaviors. Aggregation is probably effective in part because it leads typically to a more reliable dependent variable (see Epstein, 1983; Hunter & Schmidt, 1990; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Aggregation and specificity.   Reliability issues notwithstanding, Fishbein and Ajzen (1974) suggested that to predict specific behavior in a particular situation, the attitude measure needed to match the behavior in terms of time, place, and specificity. Gorsuch notes that measures of religiousness that assess people's personality functioning (e.g., measures of religious attitudes, religious motivations, or self-rated religiousness) are most likely to correlate with measures of people's behavior when behavior is measured at a general level. Thus, according to the aggregation principle, broad personality-level measurements would be most strongly associated with personality-level forgiveness constructs (see, e.g., Mauger et al., 1992, 1996).

Specificity and the problem of semantic overlap. Applying the aggregation principle can cause conceptual problems, though, if researchers are not attentive to the problem of semantic overlap in the measures of the predictor (i.e., religious involvement) and the criterion (i.e., forgiveness). As an example of the aggregation principle, Gorsuch (1990) speculated that general measures of religiousness would be more weakly correlated with attitudes toward homosexuality than would a measure of people's beliefs regarding how the Bible addresses homosexuality. Similarly, one might expect measures of religiousness that include items related to people's religious beliefs and values *regarding forgiveness* to be more strongly associated with reports of forgiveness for isolated transgressions than would general measures of religiousness. When one is relying exclusively on self-report measures for both the criterion and the predictor variable, however, it is difficult to determine whether the observed correlations between measures that have substantial amounts of semantic overlap are artifactual or substantive.

Evidence that forgiveness-specific measures of religiousness might be associated with self-reported forgiveness for a specific transgressor comes from Dreelin (1994). Dreelin administered the Religious Status Inventory (RSI) to 400 church attenders and seminarians. The RSI is a self-report measure consisting of 160 items designed to assess various components of mature religiousness, as outlined in the theoretical work of Pruyser (1968, 1976). It is derived from the earlier work of Malony (1988), who developed the Religious Status Interview for assessing religious maturity through a diagnostic interview. Along with a variety of items assessing religious belief and commitment, the RSI consists of nearly 20 items that directly assess people's responses to interpersonal offenses that they have committed against someone else (e.g., "I am quick to ask for forgiveness when I have hurt someone"), or that someone else has committed against them (e.g., "If someone hurts me it makes it hard for me to trust them again").

In addition to completing the RSI, Dreelin (1994) had participants recall someone who had deeply hurt them within the previous years, and then complete Wade's (1989) 83-item Forgiveness Scale to indicate their current disposition toward that offender. The median correlation of the total score on the Religious Status Inventory and the nine subscales of Wade's Forgiveness Scale was $r(178) = |.29|$, $p < .001$.

Because forgiveness-related items constitute more than 10% of the total content of the Religious Status Inventory, it is not surprising that

RSI total scores are correlated with respondents' self-reported forgiveness for a specific offender. Without more intensive psychometric research, though, we cannot determine whether religious maturity (as measured by the RSI) is related to offense-specific forgiveness only because of the forgiveness-relevant items on the RSI. If so, then it is likely that the observed relationship is artifactual. Ruling out such potentially spurious results due to semantic overlap between measures is as important in this area of research as it is in any other (e.g., Schmutte & Ryff, 1997).

Improving specificity by using event-specific religion measures. Another approach to measuring religious involvement in a forgiveness-relevant manner might be to assess the extent to which people use their religious faith to cope with specific interpersonal transgressions. Pargament, Smith, and Koenig's (1996) measure of religious coping, for example, might be good a candidate for a religious measure that would predict people's forgiveness for specific transgressions. Pargament et al.'s measure directs people to indicate the extent to which they have used a variety of religious means to cope with a particular stressor. Were this measure of religious coping completed with a specific interpersonal transgression in mind, it would yield an index of the extent to which a person marshaled religious resources in his or her efforts to cope with that specific interpersonal transgression. According to the principles of aggregation and specificity, such measures of religiousness would be optimal for identifying the relationship between religiousness and forgiveness of specific transgressors for specific transgressions.

A final approach for addressing the problem of aggregation and specificity might involve using general measures of people's religious involvement to predict an aggregated variable that represents the degree to which they forgave a specific transgressor for two or more interpersonal transgressions, rather than a single interpersonal transgression. Also, instances of forgiveness could be aggregated across both transgressions and transgressors, so that a resulting measure of forgiveness reflected people's self-reported forgiveness of a variety of transgressors for a variety of offenses. By aggregating people's self-reports of real-life forgiveness across many such transgressors or behavioral instances, reliability would be increased (Schmidt & Hunter, 1996). Personality or dispositional-level measures of religiousness have the highest likelihood of correlating with an aggregate of such real-life instances of forgiveness.

The Distal Location of Religion in the Causal
Chain Leading to Forgiveness

A third possible reason why dispositional measures of religious involvement might not correlate well with self-reported forgiveness for specific transgressions is that the influence of religious involvement on real-life instances of forgiveness might be very far back in the causal chain. A variety of studies now demonstrate that people's forgiveness of a specific person for a specific transgression is under the control of a variety of social and social-cognitive factors. Some of the studies showing that transgression-specific forgiveness (or alternatively, retaliation in response to specific interpersonal transgressions) is highly dependent on social or social-cognitive variables are summarized in Table 1.

Darby and Schlenker (1982) found that schoolchildren based their decisions to forgive others on a combination of social and cognitive factors. In particular, children's willingness to forgive was shaped by their beliefs about the offender's responsibility for his or her actions, the intentionality of those actions, and the motives behind those actions. This study, along with later studies by Weiner, Graham, Peter, and Zmuidinas (1991), also demonstrated that spontaneous, sincere, elaborate apologies from one's transgressor facilitate forgiveness.

Other studies show the power of social and social-cognitive variables as well. Betancourt and Blair (1992), for instance, found evidence that respondents' intentions to retaliate against a transgressor were related to the respondents' perceptions of the controllability and intentionality of the transgressor's action, and feelings of anger, sympathy, and pity toward the offender. On the basis of path-analytic data, Betancourt and Blair argued that participants' judgments about the controllability of their transgressors' actions *caused* their feelings of anger, pity, and sympathy, which in turn mediated their willingness to retaliate against their transgressors.

In earlier work, we also explored the power of social and social-cognitive variables in determining forgiveness. We (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997) conceptualized forgiveness as a prosocial phenomenon that, like other prosocial phenomena, was mediated in large part by empathy toward the offender. Data from two studies demonstrated that people forgave specific transgressors for specific transgressions to the extent that they experienced empathy for their transgressors.

Table 1
Social and Social-Cognitive Variables That Facilitate
Transgression-Specific Forgiveness

Study	Variables That Facilitated Forgiveness or Reduced Retaliation
Darby & Schlenker (1982)	Apology (more elaborate vs. less elaborate) Consequences of transgression (low vs. high) Transgressor's responsibility for transgression (low vs. high) Good vs. bad motives when apology is offered (motive × apology interaction) Intentionality (no vs. yes)
Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas (1990)	Confession (especially when offered before an accusation and when the exact cause of the transgression is unclear)
Boon & Sulsky (1997)	Intentionality Severity Avoidability
Kremer & Stephens (1983)	Early account for transgression (offering mitigating circumstances) rather than delayed account for transgression
Gonzales, Haugen, & Manning (1994)	Concessions and excuses vs. justifications and refusals Unintentional vs. intentional transgressions
Zillman & Cantor (1976)	Mitigating explanation for the transgression (vs. no mitigating explanation)
McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal (1997)	Apology Empathy
Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie (1989)	Apology Evaluations of perpetrator's personality Degree of harm caused by transgression (mild vs. severe)

In Study 1, McCullough et al. (1997) showed that the well-established relationship between apology and forgiveness was mediated, at least in

part, by the increased empathy that appeared to be facilitated by the apology. In Study 2, we also found that the efficacy of a psychosocial intervention designed to promote forgiveness was mediated, at least in part, by the efficacy of the intervention in promoting empathy for participants' transgressors. The empathy-forgiveness link has been replicated more recently (McCullough et al., 1998). Thus, empathy for the offender appears to be a crucial determinant of people's capacities to forgive offenders for specific transgressions. Other studies (e.g., Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Gonzalez, Haugen, & Manning, 1994; Kremer & Stephens, 1983; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Weiner et al., Zillman & Cantor, 1976) also demonstrate that forgiveness is largely shaped by features of the offense such as degree of harm, whether an explanation, confession, or apology is offered, and social-cognitive variables such as the victim's perceptions of the intentionality of the transgressor's actions.

In a recent study involving 236 participants between ages 15 and 96, Girard and Mullet (1997) presented participants with 64 scenarios involving an interpersonal transgression, which participants were instructed to read. After reading each scenario, participants indicated their likelihood that they would forgive the transgressor if they had been the protagonist in the scenario. Girard and Mullet manipulated six variables in the 64 scenarios: (a) intimacy of relationship between transgressor and protagonist; (b) intentionality of the transgression; (c) severity of the consequences; (d) extent to which the transgressor apologized; (e) attitude of a significant other regarding whether the protagonist should forgive; and (f) whether consequences of the offense persisted. Across scenarios, these accounted for approximately 70% of the variance in participants' ratings of the likelihood of forgiving the transgressor.

The good news is that even with a few initial studies, psychology has demonstrated that forgiveness in specific instances can be predicted on the basis of only a few variables. Given the apparent primacy of such social-psychological considerations, it is not clear whether religiousness influences transgression-specific forgiveness. However, if religion positively influences people's ability to empathize with others or make more generous attributions for people's transgressions (or, alternatively, to predispose people to interact with nice, apologetic, sensitive people) then religious involvement might help to facilitate forgiveness in an indirect way—by assisting in the development a cognitive style that helps people to forgive (or by predisposing people to choose social environments where forgiveness is normative).

Another possibility: Could religious involvement make transgressors feel more guilty, more likely to apologize, and more likely to repent? If so, then the effect of religion on transgression-specific forgiveness might, paradoxically, take place on the side of the transgressor, rather than on that of the forgiver. Some research (Meek, Albright, & McMinn, 1995) demonstrates that people high in intrinsic religiousness are more likely to feel guilty and seek forgiveness after they have committed a transgression. Because apologizing and seeking forgiveness are major facilitators of the victims' likelihood of forgiving, one direct way that religion might influence forgiveness is via the behavior of the perpetrator following an offense.

Recall Bias

A final explanation involves the possibility of recall bias. In the typical paradigm for studying transgression-specific forgiveness, researchers instruct participants to recall an incident in which they were offended, and to complete a questionnaire about the event. By nature of this free recall task, a variety of recall biases might limit the validity of inferences about the personality processes (e.g., religiousness) that could influence people's self-reported forgiveness for specific transgressions.

If we assume momentarily (a) that religious people are indeed more forgiving of specific transgressions, and (b) that forgiven offenses are more difficult to recall for a rating task like those that are typically used in studying forgiveness, then religious people might have a more difficult time searching their memories for a transgression that is suitable for the demands of the research design. Although the less religious (and, for the sake of argument, less forgiving) participant might recall a salient interpersonal offense with ease, the more religious (and again, for the sake of argument, more forgiving) respondent might be forced to work harder to recall a salient offense. The offenses that the highly religious and less religious participant eventually do recall, however, might have been forgiven to approximately equivalent extents, making it appear that the highly religious and less religious respondents are equally skilled at forgiving the interpersonal transgressions that they encounter.

The suggestion that recall bias might artifactually deflate the observed associations among religiousness and transgression-specific forgiveness is not so much an attempt to second-guess the existing findings as it is an identification of one of the limitations on the current paradigm for

studying forgiveness. By allowing research participants to select from memory the offense that they will rate in the typical paradigm, researchers forfeit considerable control over their ability to determine which personality traits (including religious involvement), qualities of the relationship of transgressor and victim, and qualities of the offense might shape people's ability to forgive.

By applying research strategies to supplement the typical free recall paradigm for studying forgiveness, researchers could shed light on these issues. For example, presenting highly religious and less religious people with instructions to recall a hurtful or offensive event and measuring latency of response might suggest whether highly religious people recall suitable memories more or less readily. This research would shed light on the possibility that religious people have less access to painful interpersonal events (suggesting that they might be more facile at forgiving the transgressions they have encountered in the past). Laboratory experiments in which objectively identical offenses are delivered (e.g., in the form of self-esteem threats) and respondents' affective reactions and ensuing degree of forgiveness are subsequently measured could reveal whether religiousness influences people's (a) perceived severity of such interpersonal transgressions, and (b) tendency to forgive such transgressions. Other experimental paradigms, such as the directed forgetting paradigm (e.g., Cloitre, Cancienne, Brodsky, Dulit, & Perry, 1996) might also be used to examine whether religious people find it easier to avoid encoding the kinds of negative interpersonal events that occasion the need for forgiveness.

Forgiveness: A Missing Link in the Study of Religion, Health, and Well-Being?

Clearly, basic conceptual and technical issues must be resolved before we can develop reliable scientific understanding of the relationships among forgiveness, religion, and personality. However, it seems only a matter of time before these issues are resolved. Once they are resolved, researchers will be able to address other interesting empirical issues, not the least of which is the links between religion, forgiveness, and measures of health and well-being.

For many years, health and well-being have been central issues in the scientific study of personality and the scientific study of religion. Recently, several leading researchers on the religion-health interface (e.g.,

Kaplan, 1992, 1993; Kaplan, Monroe-Blum, & Blazer, 1993; Koenig, 1993; Levin, 1996) have recognized that in illuminating the mechanisms by which religion obtains its typically favorable associations with health and well-being, more light should be shed on the phenomenon of forgiveness. These scholars have posited that religion might contribute to health and well-being by providing a belief matrix in which people can both (a) seek and receive forgiveness by God and other people, and (b) develop the will to forgive other people who have damaged them in the past. Preliminary research suggests that forgiveness might be related to lower degrees of depression and anxiety (e.g., see Coyle & Enright, 1997, Mauger et al., 1992, 1996), increased hope (Freedman & Enright, 1996), better self-esteem (Freedman & Enright, 1996), better relationship adjustment (McCullough et al., 1998), and higher life satisfaction (Poloma & Gallup, 1991). As well, forgiveness might predict objective measures of physical health. If relationships between forgiveness and various measures of health and well-being turn out to be robust and nonspurious, we will have all the more reason to place forgiveness squarely in the middle of the religion-health interface.

Of course, the suggestion that forgiveness might promote mental, physical, and relational well-being is nothing new. Indeed, the sentiment is perhaps as old as monotheism itself. What is new, though, is that psychological theory and methods have nearly progressed to the point where scientific examination of the links between religion, forgiveness, and health/well-being is actually possible.

CONCLUSION

We began this article by recognizing that forgiveness has two natures—a common one and a transcendent one. Forgiveness is both "just another psychological variable" that is highly amenable to scientific study and a transcendent, timeless concept. The recognition of the dual natures of forgiveness has led us all the way from a basic survey of religion, to a review of the basics of measurement theory, and all the way back again. Perhaps the breadth of our meandering conveys what an interesting and important construct we believe forgiveness to be. Forgiveness has deep spiritual roots and links to religious functioning that suggest that understanding forgiveness better would help us to understand both religion and personality better. Moreover, the study of forgiveness might help to shed

light on human health and well-being—common ground for the scientific study of personality and the scientific study of religion.

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