Self-Forgiveness and Religious/Spiritual Struggles

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After people commit actual or perceived moral offenses, they may struggle to accept the right level of responsibility, to make reparations, and/or to release unhelpful negative emotions—all components of the process of self-forgiveness. This chapter explores how these challenges around self-forgiveness could relate to challenges around religion and spirituality. We use the term *religious/spiritual (r/s) struggles* to refer to challenges and conflicts in the r/s domain of life, which have been the focus of many psychological studies in the past 20 years (for recent reviews, see, e.g., Exline, 2013; Exline & Rose, 2013; Pargament, 2007; Stauner, Exline, & Pargament, 2016). This chapter will focus on six types of r/s struggles (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014): divine (negative thoughts or feelings about a deity), demonic (feeling attacked by the devil or evil spirits), interpersonal (conflicts or hurts involving religious people or institutions), moral (struggles to follow one's moral principles), doubt (concern about doubts or questions pertaining to religious beliefs), and ultimate meaning (questioning whether one's life has any ultimate meaning or purpose).

As highlighted in the reviews cited above, many studies have linked r/s struggles with indicators of distress, such as depression and anxiety (e.g., Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Krause, & Ironson, 2015; Stauner, Exline, Grubbs, et al., 2016), poor physical health (see Exline, 2013, for a review), and even higher mortality rates (Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001). Yet despite their clear associations with distress and poor health, r/s struggles may be a natural part of r/s life (e.g., Beck, 2007; Pargament, 2007) and may even lead to personal growth (Desai & Pargament, 2015; Wilt, Grubbs, Exline, & Pargament, 2016). As such, we

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prefer to frame r/s struggles as challenges to work through rather than as symptoms to be cured or prevented.

Aim and Structure of This Chapter

Our aim in this chapter is to explore how r/s struggles could relate to challenges and opportunities around self-forgiveness. We will focus on three components of the self-forgiveness process (Fisher & Exline, 2010): (1) accepting the right amount of responsibility, (2) repentance and making apologies/amends, and (3) releasing unhelpful negative thoughts and emotions. For each component, we suggest possible connections with r/s struggles. We aim to make our discussion of these connections illustrative rather than exhaustive. Also, we recognize that causal influences between r/s struggles and difficulties with self-forgiveness are likely to be complex and multidirectional: r/s struggles could affect the self-forgiveness process, and self-forgiveness problems could create or exacerbate r/s struggles. Tertiary factors (e.g., personality factors; mood states) could affect both r/s struggles and self-forgiveness, and reciprocal effects are also plausible. Unless otherwise specified, we intend to present our ideas about self-forgiveness and r/s struggle as speculative, testable hypotheses for future research. Although empirical work will be cited where available, many of the ideas presented here await direct empirical testing.

Two Examples of Self-Forgiveness Challenges: The Cases of Daniela and Tom

To help anchor our discussion, we will begin with two fictional examples. We will refer to these examples at various points to illustrate challenges around the self-forgiveness process.

First, consider the case of Daniela. Daniela does not identify as religious. She holds no belief in the afterlife, gods, or other supernatural beings. However, she is interested in spiritual practices such as mindfulness meditation and the cultivation of compassion, and she has had mystical experiences that brought a profound sense of connection with all living things. Daniela has served on the police force in a small town for 20 years. She is haunted by a memory from her early years on the force, when she fatally shot a man who was robbing a convenience store. The man was about 15 feet away when she confronted him. He brandished a knife and lunged toward her. Daniela responded quickly, delivering a gunshot wound to his chest. She was never reprimanded for her actions, which were seen as reasonable in the line of duty; she was clearly acting in self-defense. But in her mind she still sees the eyes of the man as he lay dying. She keeps wondering whether she could have done something differently to avoid killing him.

As a second example, consider the case of Tom, a lifelong Catholic who attends mass almost weekly, although he sometimes has trouble seeing God as loving rather than as a harsh or disapproving judge. Tom and his wife, Cindy, have been married for 9 years. Cindy is very focused on the needs of their four children, and in Tom's opinion she has begun to neglect him as well as her own physical appearance. Their sex life has become virtually nonexistent. When they are together, Cindy often complains to him about how he is not earning enough money or doing his share of the child care and housework. Over time, Tom begins to have an increase in erotic dreams and sexual fantasies about other women, and he has been indulging in more pornography use than usual. One day at a cocktail party with work colleagues, Tom meets Sophia, a warm and attractive woman, one who also shares several of his interests not shared by his other friends, including wine-tasting. Tom and Sophia begin spending considerable time together, ostensibly as friends. However, Tom finds himself reluctant to mention these visits to his wife. One day, after drinking too much wine and enjoying a deep personal conversation with Sophia, he tells her that she is beautiful, then reaches over and kisses her.

Challenges Around Accepting Responsibility

When people have committed actual or perceived transgressions, they may experience significant moral struggles around determining whether an offense was actually committed and determining the right amount of responsibility to attribute to oneself vs. other agents. Making such determinations can be difficult even if people try to evaluate their actions objectively. Moreover, because it can be so disturbing to consider one's own moral failings, it can be tempting to try to evade responsibility for personal offenses. In a process sometimes called *pseudo-self-forgiveness* (Hall & Fincham, 2005; Wenzel, Woodyatt, & Hedrick, 2012; Wohl & McLaughlin, 2014), people avoid the pain of self-blame by doing something (whether consciously or not) to reduce their sense of responsibility for an offense, perhaps by excusing or condoning it (see Fisher & Exline, 2006; Tangney, Boone, & Dearing, 2005) or by blaming others. Other individuals, in marked contrast, may accept too much personal responsibility for their offenses, suffering more guilt, shame or regret than their actions would seem to warrant (Fisher & Exline, 2010; Worthington, 2013).

Struggles Around Personal Values and Religious Teachings Even though moral struggles may be unpleasant, they can form a critical part of a morally engaged response to personal transgressions. In the wake of a serious offense, a lack of moral struggle could suggest callousness or even antisocial tendencies, whereas the presence of struggle could be seen as a sign of an earnest attempt to engage one's deeper values. In the case of Daniela, even though others in authority did not challenge the morality of her actions, she still struggled because she felt the moral gravity of ending a man's life.

When trying to evaluate their own potential offenses, people may draw on values or guidelines communicated to them by other people such as parents, teachers, or friends, or by broader influences such as the media. In religious contexts, teachings about right and wrong could also come from sacred texts, traditions, religious leaders, or members of the religious community. When people are evaluating their own moral behavior, any of these social influences could provide helpful guidance; but they might also introduce additional conflicts. These conflicts could be with other individuals, or they may center on the belief systems themselves.

Tom's case suggests the potential for conflict around both personal values and religious teachings. On the one hand, Tom could tell himself that he has done nothing wrong in his relationship with Sophia. All that he did was spend some time with her and kiss her; he did not have sex with her, so technically he has not committed adultery. And even if he does see his actions as a betrayal of his wife's trust, he might see them as warranted based on her actions. On the other hand, if Tom is predisposed toward internalizing guilt, he might trace his wrongdoing back to his sexual fantasies. He might worry that he opened the door to temptation by simply having such thoughts, especially if he indulged them rather than simply letting them pass or immediately rejecting them (see Cohen & Rozin, 2001). Or he might see moral errors at other, intermediate steps of his situation. He might regret his pornography use (e.g., Grubbs, Exline, Pargament, Hook, & Carlisle, 2014), a behavior that he intentionally engaged in that focused his attention on other women. Or he might blame himself for allowing the relational tie with Sophia to deepen while choosing not to tell his wife about it.

The degree to which Tom takes responsibility for wrongdoing should depend, in part, on his personal values about sexual behavior, marriage, and monogamy—values that may, in turn, have been shaped by his lifelong membership in the Catholic Church. At an interpersonal level, Tom may worry about whether others in his faith community would judge him harshly if they found out about his behaviors with Sophia. But regardless of whether he has these interpersonal concerns, he may still struggle internally with the Church's teachings.

Holding oneself to extremely high moral standards could promote exemplary moral behavior; however, it could cross the border into unrealistic scrupulosity if people hold themselves to unattainable standards of purity and moral perfection (Abramowitz & Jacoby, 2014). For example, some might view Daniela's guilty response to the shooting as overly scrupulous. She takes heavy blame for a single harmful action, one in which she was trying to protect people (including herself) and enforce the law. She had to make rapid decisions in a fast-moving, frightening, ambiguous situation in which her own life and other lives were at stake.

Some potential offenses are difficult to evaluate because they are not rooted in widely held moral principles, but instead violate more idiosyncratic rules of a particular group or institution. In religious contexts, violations of dietary laws, dress codes, or guidelines about ritual practices are ready examples. Yet religious communities also vary in their views on more emotionally charged issues such as those from our examples: sexual behavior and the justifiability of killing. Even widely held moral principles may not provide a ready guide, because in some situations

clear moral guidelines may conflict with each other (e.g., killing one person to protect another). When a potential offense falls in a gray area, discerning whether one has done wrong might be especially challenging for people who are unclear about what their religious tradition teaches on the issue. Discernment of wrongdoing might also particularly challenge those who are questioning their religious foundations, such as those who are having serious doubts about their beliefs, exploring other religions, or exiting from religion altogether. Conflict with the views of one's religion about a personal wrongdoing could spark broader religious struggles, potentially undermining trust in one's religion as a moral compass.

Blaming Supernatural Forces For people who believe in supernatural entities, attributing negative events or struggles to these entities may help to resolve dissonance while maintaining pre-existing belief systems. Thus, in addition to blaming themselves, other people or groups, or religious institutions, people sometimes attribute harmful events to adverse circumstances or to impersonal forces such as fate, nature, karma, or luck. Other attributions could focus on supernatural agents such as God or the devil. We will briefly consider each of these in turn. As part of this discussion, it is important to note that people can blame supernatural agents alongside natural agents (Legare, Evans, Rosengren, & Harris, 2012); a supernatural attribution does not rule out a natural one. Even if people blame themselves or others for negative events, they may still see supernatural agents as being involved indirectly, perhaps by planting certain dispositions or thoughts within people or by influencing events in the situation.

Blaming God   When reflecting on negative events, many people assign some blame to God (Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey, 2011). In Tom's case, it might seem counterintuitive that he could blame God for his romantic entanglement with Sophia. Yet studies have shown that some do blame God for their own actions, particularly if they believe that God ultimately caused the personal disposition, vulnerability, or circumstances that set them up for later moral failure (Grubbs & Exline, 2014). As such, Tom might protest to God with questions like these: "Why did you let Cindy get pregnant so many times? Why didn't you increase her sexual desire or remind her to pay more attention to me? Why didn't you stop Sophia from tempting me? Can't you help me control my sexual urges or the amount of wine that I drink? Why did you create me with these weaknesses?" Blame and anger focused on God should be stronger among people with a strong sense of divine entitlement, who expect exceptional amounts of divine favor and protection (Grubbs, Exline, Campbell, Twenge, & Pargament, in press).

Psychologically, people could experience some benefits from attributing (at least partial) responsibility for negative events to God. Blaming God could reduce a person's shame and remorse, along with any perceived need to take corrective action. People might also see God's ultimate intent as benevolent (e.g., Hale-Smith, Park, & Edmondson, 2012; Wilt, Exline, Park, & Pargament, 2016), which could bring a sense of comfort. Yet attributing responsibility to God could also carry costs. Because many people see anger at God as morally wrong (Exline, Kaplan, & Grubbs, 2012), blaming God could create a new source of guilt and fear. Those who remain angry at God may feel burdened by their anger, and they may feel as though

they have cut off a powerful source of support. But even if people do not feel anger toward God, seeing God as the ultimate cause of a damaging event could lead to a sense of mistrust in God's motives or power (Hale-Smith et al., 2012; Wilt, Exline, Lindberg, Park, & Pargament, 2016). In addition, a heavy emphasis on God's perceived causal role could work against a sense of personal autonomy and control, instead breeding a sense of passivity or helplessness.

Blaming Evil Forces Daniela may wonder whether some dark, potentially evil force fed into her decision to shoot to kill; but because she does not believe in demons, she might be more likely to see this force as a part of herself. Tom, in contrast, might assign some blame to demons, the devil, or other supernatural evil forces (see Harriott & Exline, 2016, for a review), holding them responsible for creating temptations or orchestrating circumstances that set the stage for moral failure. Psychologically, demonic attributions could have some advantages: Not only could Tom minimize his sense of personal responsibility, but he could preserve a more uniformly positive view of God (Beck & Taylor, 2008). He is also likely to find anger toward the devil to be more morally acceptable than anger toward God. As with blaming God, however, a heavy focus on the role of the devil or demons would keep Tom's attention focused on powerful external agents, which could lead to a sense of personal passivity or helplessness. He might also find it frightening to see himself as being under the influence of powerful, malevolent forces. Depending on his personal theology or that of his community, he might also face blame or ostracism for opening the door to evil influences through his earlier thoughts or behaviors.

Summary and Next Steps Determining whether a moral offense occurred—and, if so, who or what was responsible—can be a challenge, a process that can entail serious reflection on both personal values and religious teachings. In some cases, evaluation might suggest that no offense was committed or that it was excusable. But if there was some moral violation, accepting responsibility for one's own role could provide a sense of empowerment and control, helping people to see themselves as autonomous agents rather than helpless victims of outside forces. By owning an appropriate level of responsibility, people can pave the way for relational repair (with themselves, others, and perhaps God) and foster an ability to integrate the transgression experience into their life narratives in a redemptive way (see, e.g., McAdams, 2006). One challenge here is that one's personal theology or belief system may not easily accommodate these processes of integration and change. As a result, some people may remain bound by extreme shame and guilt, while others may release themselves from responsibility too readily.

Challenges Around Repentance and Relational Repair Attempts

Although it can be painful to take personal responsibility for wrongdoing, the associated feelings of remorse and regret can serve a valuable function by motivating repentant behaviors such as apologies, amends, and positive behavior change

(Fisher & Exline, 2006, 2010; Hall & Fincham, 2005, 2008); in fact, even shame can serve some of these relational repair functions (Cibich, Woodyatt, & Wenzel, 2016). When people take these steps toward relational repair, they greatly increase the odds of being forgiven by those they have harmed (e.g., Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013a). Repentant actions also facilitate self-forgiveness (Carpenter, Carlisle, & Tsang, 2014; Exline, Root, Yadavalli, Martin, & Fisher, 2011) and reduce the odds of later regret (Exline, DeShea, & Holeman, 2007). However, challenges can arise when there does not seem to be a low-cost, easy way to make things right.

Seeing Damage as Irreparable   Unfortunately, in some situations there is simply no way to undo or fully repair the damage caused by an offense (see, e.g., Cibich et al., 2016). Daniela cannot restore the life of the man she shot. Similarly, if Tom's wife finds out about his new relationship, he risks losing her trust and being unable to regain it. When people cannot see any way to undo harm that they have caused, some may feel helpless and give up the attempt to self-forgive, perhaps turning to substance use or distractions to numb their pain. Others may turn to self-punishment as an attempt at retributive justice, punishing themselves emotionally (e.g., abusive self-talk) or physically (e.g., deprivation of food or sleep; self-injury). Religious beliefs emphasizing the need for personal atonement could feed into self-punishing practices. When people are unable to satisfy their own internal demands for justice, they could also project this unforgiving attitude onto other people or God, making it difficult to seek or receive forgiveness.

Seeing Repair Attempts as Costly   Even if people can identify repair attempts that seem appropriate and effective, they may resist taking these actions because they appear dangerous or costly to the self. Admitting wrongdoing entails a certain degree of vulnerability, especially if care is taken to avoid excuses and justifications. And attempts at relational repair or self-improvement could come at great personal cost—costs that could in some cases be exacerbated by religious/spiritual beliefs or commitments.

Fears of Judgment and Rejection   People cannot control how others will respond to expressions of repentance. Although an apology might be met with warmth, reassurance, or an expression of forgiveness, it might also be rejected coldly (e.g., Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013b) or interpreted as a sign of weakness. People may worry about these outcomes not only when interacting with those they have harmed, but also when debating about whether to confess their wrongdoing to others—including God, religious authority figures, or members of religious communities. Some might fear judgment, shaming responses, or outright rejection or aggression by religious people or institutions. Further, people might fear that withdrawal of God's love and approval could lead to devastating consequences, all the way up to the level of eternal damnation. Believing that one has committed an unforgivable sin could make redemptive action feel pointless, if the point of trying to repent is to seek God's forgiveness.

Weighing the Costs of Repentant Behavior   Even if people hold a generally positive self-view and/or do not feel rejected by God, and even if they believe that those they have harmed would respond well to an attempt at repentance, people may still

continue to wrestle—with their consciences or with God—if they think they are being asked to do something risky, costly, or unpleasant. For example, Tom may feel a sense of conviction, rooted in his conscience and Christian teachings about marriage, that he should pull back from his relationship with Sophia or tell Cindy about the relationship. However, these prospects might both seem costly to Tom. In deciding whether to take these actions, he might question whether he is hearing from God. If so, and even if he feels convinced that God is giving him a clear message, he might wonder whether God actually has his long-term best interests in mind: Does God want him to suffer by staying in a difficult and unrewarding marriage, one that might never again fulfill his desires for companionship and sexual intimacy? Tom might also chafe against the idea of submitting to divine authority, especially given the sacrifices and risks it would entail. Concerns such as these may make repentance difficult or unattractive regardless of one's readiness to take responsibility.

Struggles Around Identifying Long-Range Goals Successful self-regulation involves looking toward ultimate goals and purposes: What do you want your life to look like? What kind of person do you want to be? These questions may be difficult to answer if people are experiencing struggles of ultimate meaning (Wilt, Stauner, et al., 2017) such as feeling confused about their life's deeper purpose or whether such a purpose even exists. If one's sense of personal meaning is absent or vaguely defined, a person might be more inclined to pursue immediate pleasures and comforts rather than to risk potentially costly actions—such as repentance—that could entail suffering and delayed gratification (e.g., Schnell, 2010). Reflecting on primary values and long-term life goals may help people to find the confidence and motivation to right their wrongs, even if this comes at a more immediate emotional cost.

Spiritual Warfare as an Aspect of Repentance Repentance may involve a conscious decision to turn away from what is bad and return to the side of the good. As described earlier, some people might see a source of evil or sin residing solidly within themselves or human nature more broadly. In this case repentance could actually increase r/s struggle; but in this case a person would be entering this struggle intentionally, with the purpose of wrestling with their own propensity for wrongdoing and working toward redemption (see, e.g., the Muslim concept of spiritual jihad; Saritoprak & Exline, 2016). For example, Tom could carefully examine the motives and choices that led him to pursue his relationship with Sophia. Even if he sees his behavior as understandable and largely justifiable, a close examination could also unveil personal weaknesses such as self-centeredness or poor self-control. Tom could work to improve himself in these areas, perhaps in the context of trying to restore his relationship with his wife.

As mentioned earlier, some people will see a supernatural agent as a source of evil (see Harriott & Exline, 2016, for a review). In this case, part of the repentance process could take the form of spiritual warfare, as they attempt to battle against supernatural evil forces such as the devil or demons. For instance, if Tom took on the stance of a warrior engaged in an epic struggle of good and evil, he might find

this outlook to be morally engaging, exciting, and energizing—especially if he sees himself as a well-equipped fighter, clearly on the side of good, and holds an unshakeable confidence that good will ultimately triumph over evil. If any of these beliefs are in question, however, seeing himself as embroiled in a cosmic struggle could become terrifying. Also, even if Tom sees himself as a fighter who is clearly on the side of the good, interpersonal costs might arise if others begin to see him as a zealot. Another trade-off of a cosmic struggle framework may be its dualistic framing. A black-and-white, good-versus-evil worldview could promote a vigilant and aggressive emphasis on conflict, in contrast to worldviews that frame reality as harmonious, unified, and interconnected. If he holds a dualistic worldview, Tom may see the dark parts of himself simply as enemies to be fought as opposed to shadow aspects to be understood—and perhaps even welcomed and embraced at some level (Humphrey, 2015; Neff, 2011), albeit without evading responsibility for wrongdoing.

Summary and Next Steps   Apologies and other repentant acts can be a crucial part of the repair process after an offense. However, decisions around repentance can raise challenges—including the potential for a variety of r/s struggles—as people weigh costs and benefits of different courses of action. On the bright side, repentant actions and successful navigation of r/s struggles might evolve as a dynamic process. For instance, people who are experiencing moral struggles might consult God (e.g., via prayer, meditation) for guidance about how to atone for wrongdoing. Granted, people may experience substantial difficulties in trying to discern what they believe God is saying, or they may be unsure whether they have successfully followed God's guidance. Nonetheless, if people try to follow what they believe God is recommending, and especially if they see benefits from these actions, they may begin to feel closer to God. They might also see themselves firmly taking the side of good in a larger struggle against evil. Even without any perception of supernatural involvement, reparative action should help to provide people with a sense of moral efficacy, hope, and purpose by helping to point them in a relationally and ethically positive direction. To the extent that people are able to learn from mistakes, restore relationships and a sense of community, integrate their self-views and deeply held beliefs, and make positive, future-oriented choices, they can set the stage to release lingering negative emotions that are no longer serving a useful function.

Difficulty Resolving Negative Emotions Such as Shame, Guilt, and Regret

Another aspect of the moral struggle surrounding self-forgiveness centers on deciding when to try to release oneself from negative emotions (Fisher & Exline, 2010; Wohl & McLaughlin, 2014). If people release negative feelings too soon, or if they avoid them altogether, they may not be motivated to take on the difficult tasks of repentance. Yet sometimes, even if people have done all they can to make things

right, they remain caught up in strong negative emotions of shame, guilt, and regret. They can find themselves stuck, unable to move past the offense. In the context of this greater moral struggle, other r/s struggles could arise as well.

Feeling Unforgiven by God Among those who believe in God, there is a close link between self-forgiveness and receiving God's forgiveness (Martin, 2008; McConnell & Dixon, 2012; Worthington, 2013). It thus seems plausible that feeling unforgiven by God could make self-forgiveness more difficult, and vice versa. Strong feelings of shame or guilt could accompany an image of an angry, punitive God who is vigilant to catch people in wrongdoing. This issue could be a problem in Tom's case, as he has often struggled to see God as loving. Some people, perhaps due to negative self-views or depressive thinking, might see themselves as unworthy of God's forgiveness or vulnerable to demonic attack, thus adding the weight of divine or demonic struggles to their existing burden of guilt and moral struggles. A threatening or harshly judgmental religious upbringing could also contribute to these difficulties.

Difficulty Receiving God's Forgiveness A different type of divine struggle could arise if people are unable or unwilling to receive God's forgiveness (e.g., Kim & Enright, 2014), even if they see it as freely offered. Even if they receive God's forgiveness, they may hold on to guilty feelings: "Even if God forgives me, I need to hold myself accountable." Such thinking could serve internal requirements of justice and could help to maintain a sense of personal control—and perhaps even some pride about holding oneself to a high moral standard. In such cases, people may actually reject offers of forgiveness, mercy, or grace because they would see it as a sign of weakness to accept these gifts. For those who do not hold a secure, positive self-view, the prospect of receiving forgiveness or releasing guilty feelings may be too threatening to seriously consider; it may seem more morally appropriate to continue punishing the self.

Adopting a self-compassionate stance (Neff, 2011) may be one means to help people resolve shame, excessive guilt, and feelings of insecurity, thereby potentially relieving divine or moral struggles. Self-compassion entails taking a kind, balanced, non-judgmental attitude toward oneself despite acknowledgment of personal flaws, based on acceptance of the premise that such flaws are a universal and understandable part of the human condition. Some people may resist the idea of self-compassion because it brings up threatening thoughts of weakness. One possible way to work around this problem might involve the use of another spiritual lens: a sense of connectedness with something larger than oneself, perhaps induced by a sense of awe, gratitude, or self-transcendence. In Daniela's case, drawing on views of an interconnected universe could help her feel more connected with humanity and humbled by the grandeur of existence beyond her own troubles. A resulting sense of self-compassion could, in turn, promote self-forgiveness.

Identity Threats and the Quest for Redemption   In the wake of serious offenses, people could be shocked to see that they are capable of causing such harm. Being confronted with one's dark side could be frightening, confusing, and shaming, and it could represent a profound threat to one's moral identity: "What kind of person am I, really, deep down?" If an offense does not fit in readily with the rest of a person's identity or life narrative, it may be difficult to accept and integrate (e.g., McAdams, 2006; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013a). For example, imagine that after kissing Sophia, Tom is horrified. He realizes that he may have just taken a serious step down the road toward an extramarital affair, and he decides to end the relationship. But even years later, he continues to see the relationship with Sophia as a dark stain on the story of his life. He might experience ongoing r/s struggles as he wrestles with his desires and his inability to manage them in a way that fits with his belief system. Alternatively, imagine that as a reaction to his transgression, Tom loses faith in his own willpower. If Sophia reciprocates his affection, and if Tom cannot forgive himself enough to begin rebuilding confidence in his self-control, he might allow himself to transgress further against his wife, deepening his own cycle of self-condemnation and threatening a sense of family identity that he had begun to take for granted.

In cases of intense guilt and harsh self-judgment, it may be useful for people to re-examine their motives in the offense situation through a redemptive lens: Did their actions, even though wrong or misguided, reflect any healthy or life-giving motives? Even though they made poor choices, was there some sort of important—or at least understandable—personal need that they were trying to meet? For example, Daniela might reframe her offense by reflecting on how she was trying to protect her own life and the lives of others who might have been killed by the robber. Even if Tom continues to regret his relationship with Sophia, he might reflect on how he was trying to form a loving, meaningful, enjoyable relational bond with another human being. Granted, in some situations it may not be possible to see any redemptive value in one's actions. But when it is possible, seeing some merit in the motives underlying one's actions may help people to integrate experiences of personal offense into their lives more readily, neither absolving themselves of responsibility nor identifying themselves too strongly with the offense. In addition, an ability to uncover something good in one's underlying motives could help a person consider different ways that they could meet related goals and needs in the future.

Summary and Next Steps   After committing serious offenses, people may never fully free themselves from all feelings of remorse or regret. But once there has been earnest self-examination and serious attempts to right wrongs, releasing negative emotion can free people to move past the offense and integrate it into their lives. A self-compassionate stance, along with a willingness to receive forgiveness from God or others, may help to provide relief from shame and feelings of self-condemnation. Granted, it could be difficult for people to find redemptive aspects of their motives if they have labeled their behavior as bad or sinful and tried to rid

themselves of it without closer examination. But if people are willing and able to identify redeemable aspects of their behavior, these insights should help them to integrate the stories of their offenses into their larger life stories without seeing themselves as incorrigible villains.

Conclusions and Final Thoughts

Our aim in this chapter was to explore areas in which challenges around self-forgiveness could interface with r/s struggles. People who believe in supernatural agents such as God and the devil may believe that God or the devil caused their misdeeds, albeit possibly in an indirect way. Their attempts to make things right may also involve these supernatural agents. For example, people may turn to God for guidance or forgiveness, and they may find great comfort in believing that God is providing these benefits for them. Some may also see themselves as taking part in a cosmic struggle against evil, which could provide a sense of strength, energy, purpose, and motivation focused on constructive action. We would propose that attributions to supernatural agents such as God and the devil should be most beneficial if they can be made while still preserving a sense of personal autonomy and responsibility.

Religious people and institutions could play a complex role in struggles around self-forgiveness. When people are trying to evaluate their moral behavior, religious texts, teachings, and traditions could provide guidance. However, some people may find that they doubt or disagree with these teachings. They may also be troubled by past, current, or imagined future encounters with those interpreting religious teachings in a rigid or severe way. Yet religious teachings and communities could also provide social support and guidance to help people to work through struggles with self-forgiveness. For example, teachings about forgiveness of sins or the beauty and interconnectedness of life could help people to hold themselves morally accountable for transgressions and also encourage repentance. Teachings on divine or natural grace and forgiveness, self-compassion, or redemption could provide hope for people who are having difficulty releasing themselves from intense feelings of shame or guilt. Institutions can also gain by owning their mistakes and practicing restorative justice rather than denial or scapegoating.

Regardless of whether r/s themes are explicitly involved, the self-forgiveness process can trigger a variety of moral struggles. When people face difficult decisions about how to assign responsibility for offenses, when they debate about whether and how to attempt repentance, and when they struggle to manage or release their negative emotions, the associated moral struggles often engage people's deepest values about what is most important in their lives. Seeing and acknowledging one's own potential for wrongdoing may indeed be one of the most painful aspects of the human experience. Yet, if people are able to honestly recognize, accept, and work through their moral failures, these difficult but courageous actions can lay the groundwork for both interpersonal reconciliation and personal growth.

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