Chapter 16
Religion and Forgiveness of Others

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Forgiveness is a positive psychology construct that relates to a variety of beneficial health outcomes. For instance, forgiveness relates to lower blood pressure, fewer self-reported illnesses, less fatigue, better sleep quality, and decreased cardiovascular reactivity (Lawler et al., 2003, 2005). With respect to mental health, forgiveness relates to decreased depression (Rye, Folck, Heim, Olszewski, & Traina, 2004), less hopelessness (Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson-Rose, 2008), lower levels of suicidal behavior (Hirsch, Webb, & Jeglic, 2011), and greater existential well-being (Rye et al., 2004).

Given these findings, researchers are trying to understand factors that promote forgiveness. Because major world religions encourage forgiveness and many individuals draw upon their faith when forgiving (Rye et al., 2000), a comprehensive understanding of forgiveness can only be obtained by taking into account religious perspectives. However, basic and applied researchers often ignore religious dimensions of forgiveness (McCullough & Worthington, 1999; Worthington et al., 2007).

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of research about the role of religion in forgiveness. Although religion is relevant to many types of forgiveness (e.g., forgiving oneself, seeking forgiveness from others), this chapter will focus on forgiving others. We will begin by discussing how religiosity and religious affiliation impact the conceptualization and practice of forgiveness. Particular attention will be paid to religious rationales for forgiveness, prayer and meditation, sanctification, and congregational support. We will also describe religiously based forgiveness interventions. Finally, we will discuss implications of research findings for clinicians and researchers working with religious individuals who want to forgive.

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16.1 Religious Rationales for Forgiving Others

Religions offer rationales for why it is important to forgive others. Although denominations within the same religion may interpret doctrine differently, some broad generalizations can be made. We will briefly discuss rationales for forgiveness among Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and Buddhism, although it is important to note that many other religions similarly value and encourage forgiveness (e.g., Hinduism, Jainism).

16.1.1 Forgiveness and Judaism

Judaism emphasizes that people should forgive others because God is forgiving (Rye et al., 2000). Forgiveness is an important theme in both the Written Law (i.e., Torah and other scriptures) and the Oral Law (i.e., Mishnah, Babylonian Talmud, Shulhan Arukh, rabbinic commentaries) (Dratch, 2002). In addition, forgiveness is a central focus of the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), which is the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. However, as noted by Rabbi Elliot Dorff (1998), forgiveness is not required unless the offender has met the conditions of *teshuvah* (i.e., the process of return) as outlined in the *Mishneh Torah* by Maimonides. According to Maimonides, before asking for forgiveness, the offender must acknowledge the wrongdoing, make a public confession, express remorse, offer compensation, request forgiveness, avoid circumstances that precipitated the offense, and act differently in the future (Dorff, 1998). Rabbi Mark Dratch wrote, "The righting of wrongs and the exacting of justice are prerequisites for achieving forgiveness" (p. 13) and "most Jewish authorities are of the opinion that there is no absolute obligation to forgive in all circumstances" (p. 14). However, according to the *Mishneh Torah*, victims who refuse to forgive after the offender has met the conditions of *teshuvah* are considered to be sinners (Dorff, 1998).

Jewish perspectives on forgiveness have undoubtedly been shaped by experiences of religious persecution. Jews have wrestled with whether or not forgiveness is a possible or desirable response to atrocities, such as those committed during the Holocaust. Perhaps no book better illustrates the challenge of forgiving severe transgressions than Simon Wisenthal's (1998) *The Sunflower*. While imprisoned in a concentration camp, Wisenthal listened while a Nazi solider, who lay dying in his hospital bed, asked for forgiveness after recounting horrendous crimes he had committed against Jews. Wisenthal walked away without offering forgiveness. The last section of the book contains differing opinions from scholars as to whether or not he made the correct decision.

16.1.2 Forgiveness and Christianity

Forgiveness is central to Christian theology (Jones, 1995; Marty, 1998). Christians consider forgiveness to be part of the *ethos* of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit (Marty, 1998), and it is a reoccurring theme in Christian scriptures. According to the New Testament, Jesus spoke about forgiveness through parables. One of the best known examples is the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32, New Revised Standard Version), in which a father welcomes his son back with open arms after his son left home and squandered his inheritance. In Matthew 18:23–35, Jesus recounted a story about a king who grants mercy to a servant who could not pay his debts. When the servant subsequently fails to show mercy to a fellow servant, the king reprimands him.

Jesus also directly discussed forgiveness with his disciples. In Matthew 18:21–22, Peter asked Jesus whether he should forgive his brother as many as seven times. Jesus replied that he should forgive his brother "seventy-seven times," which implies that forgiveness should be a way of life. Jesus also emphasized the importance of forgiving one another before receiving forgiveness from God in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:14–15). Thus, it is not surprising that many Christians believe that God's forgiveness is contingent upon whether people forgive each other (Exline, 2008).

Jesus also taught about forgiveness by example. As recounted in John 3:8–11, the Pharisees brought a adulterous woman to Jesus and asked whether she should be stoned. After stating, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7), Jesus told her that he did not condemn her (John 8:11). Jesus also asked God to forgive those who crucified him, even as he was hanging on the cross (Luke 23:34). In John 21:15–17, the risen Jesus communicated forgiveness to Peter even though Peter denied him on the night of his arrest (Jones, 1995). Taken together, Christian scriptures suggest that forgiveness should be practiced without preconditions.

16.1.3 Forgiveness and Islam

Consistent with other Abrahamic religions, Islam encourages forgiveness of others. Rye et al. (2000) summarized some of the ways that forgiveness is highlighted in Islam. For example, *Al-Ghafoor* (i.e., The Forgiving One), is one of the 99 attributes of God. Furthermore, forgiveness is an important theme in the Qur'an. Examples include, "…though if a person is patient and forgives, this is one of the greatest things" (42: 43, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem), and "…but if you overlook their offences, forgive them, pardon them, then God is all forgiving, all merciful" (64:14). Furthermore, the Prophet Muhammad forgave those that persecuted him and his followers while he lived in Makkah (Mecca).

Although forgiveness is valued within Islam, seeking justice following mistreatment is also emphasized. In fact, the Qur'an suggests that taking revenge to the extent of the original injury is allowed (42:40). However, the same verse also suggests that those who forgive will be rewarded by God. Moreover, if the victim exceeds the original damage then he/she becomes an offender (Rye et al., 2000). Consequently, many Muslims view forgiveness as a preferred strategy that brings rewards from God, improved relationships with others, and happiness to the victim (Rye et al., 2000).

16.1.4 Forgiveness and Buddhism

Forgiveness is also consistent with Buddhism, which considers both forbearance and compassion as *paramitas* (i.e., perfections cultivated by those who are awake) (Rye et al., 2000). Buddhism is devoted to overcoming suffering and teaches that anger increases suffering for both the victim and the offender. The Dhammapada contains numerous passages related to overcoming anger. Examples include "Abandon anger, give up pride; overcome all attachment" (17:1, trans. T. Cleary), "Speak the truth, do not become angered…." (17:4), and "Do not say anything harsh; what you have said will be said back to you. Angry talk is painful; retaliation will get you" (10:5). These passages are consistent with the laws of Karma, which suggests those who pursue retaliation and revenge are likely to experience future suffering. Buddha and bodhisattvas (i.e., people whose aim is enlightenment) serve as role models for compassionate living, and Buddhist practitioners seek to follow their examples. In the foreword to Helen Whitney's (2011) book entitled *Forgiveness: A Time to Love and a Time to Hate*, the Dalai Lama wrote, "Someone once asked me if there was anything I thought was unforgivable? And I think the answer is that the only thing I might find unforgivable would be if I myself were unable to forgive. In fact, in Mahayana Buddhism, not to forgive, especially when someone has offered you an apology, is considered a serious transgression of the bodhisattva's altruistic pledge" (p. x).

16.1.5 Comparing Forgiveness Across Religious Traditions

Religions differ with respect to when forgiveness is encouraged. In general, Christianity and Buddhism encourage forgiveness without conditions whereas Judaism outlines specific steps that offenders must take prior to being granted forgiveness. According to Islam, forgiveness following an offense is a preferred strategy that will be rewarded by God but revenge to the extent to which one has been harmed is allowed. Rationales for forgiveness also differ across religions. Among Abrahamic religions, the most important rationale is that God is forgiving and humans are expected to emulate God. In contrast, Buddhists encourage forgiveness because it can alleviate suffering and because failure to forgive can have negative consequences for subsequent reincarnations. In spite of these differences, all of these religious traditions

deeply value and encourage forgiveness and researchers have begun to examine whether individuals practice forgiveness in accordance with the teachings of their faith.

16.2 How Religiosity Relates to Forgiveness

Researchers have examined the relationship between religiosity and forgiveness. We will first describe studies examining how religiosity relates to dispositional forgiveness and forgiveness of a specific offense. Next, we will discuss research concerning the extent to which individuals draw upon their religious faith when forgiving. This will be followed by a summary of studies comparing forgiveness across religious groups.

There is evidence that religiousness is positively related to forgiveness. For instance, a telephone survey of randomly selected individuals living in the United States revealed that Christians scored higher on willingness to forgive others than nonreligious individuals (Toussaint & Williams, 2008). Another study found that willingness to forgive was associated with highly religious Muslim youths but not with comparison youth (i.e., undergraduates at a university with no religious affiliation) (Ahmed, 2009). In addition, Fox and Thomas (2008) compared forgiveness between individuals from Abrahamic religious traditions and secular educational groups. Religious participants scored higher on valuing forgiveness (i.e., general attitudes toward forgiveness, willingness to forgive hypothetical future offenses) than those in the secular group. Interestingly, prayer and belief in God were better predictors of willingness to forgive hypothetical transgressions than religious affiliation. Moreover, Mullet et al. (2003) found that regular church attenders reported greater willingness to forgive than participants who did not attend church or believe in God.

Studies have also found that religiosity is positively related to forgiveness of a specific offense (e.g., Orathinkal & Vansteenwegen, 2007). However, the associations between religiosity and transgression specific forgiveness tend to be weaker than those between religiosity and dispositional forgiveness (McCullough & Worthington, 1999: Tsang, McCullough & Hoyt, 2005). When considering possible explanations, Tsang et al. posited that measurement problems, such as recall biases, may be a factor. Specifically, they noted that offenses that have not been forgiven may be more difficult to recall than forgiven offenses. Moreover, forgiving individuals may have a harder time remembering transgressions than less forgiving individuals. They also suggested that complex religious systems of meaning motivate some adherents to rationalize motives that are contrary to forgiveness.

Researchers have also examined the extent to which individuals draw upon their religious faith when forgiving. Covert and Johnson (2009) conducted an online survey comparing motivations for forgiveness between individuals enrolled at a Christian University and other adults (recruitment method unspecified). The most commonly reported motivations for forgiveness included religious reasons (43 %), relational reasons (30 %), and desire for well-being (29 %). Participants who indicated they forgave for religious reasons scored significantly higher on religious commitment than those who reported forgiving for other reasons. Similarly, Krumrei, Mahoney, and Pargament (2008) found that about 75 % of divorced individuals reported

looking to God for assistance with forgiveness. Interestingly, the extent to which one reported turning to God for help with forgiveness was related to increased verbal aggression toward the ex-spouse 1 year later. The authors suggested that calling upon God may have also been accompanied by a "spiritual one-up position" (p. 309) that could have contributed to decline in civility in communications. Also, the authors note that those who experienced the highest levels of distress about the divorce were more likely to turn to God.

Qualitative studies have similarly shown that many individuals rely upon their faith when they forgive. Kidwell, Wade, and Blaedel (2012) explored how religious beliefs impact forgiveness by interviewing adherents of a variety of religions (i.e., Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim). When asked about how they forgive, participants cited both religious (e.g., relying upon God for strength, praying, reading religious texts) and nonreligious strategies (e.g., developing empathy for the offender, paying attention to offender's positive qualities, focusing on growth following the offense). Jewish participants emphasized that Yom Kippur helped them work toward forgiveness.

In two studies, Barnes and Brown (2010) examined why religious individuals predict that they would forgive others. In study 1, university students completed measures of attitudes toward forgiveness, tendency to forgive, and forgiveness of hypothetical transgressions. Positive views of forgiveness mediated the relationship between religiosity and predictions of forgiveness. In study 2, university students were asked to predict whether they would be able to forgive the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks. Results showed that participants considered their religious values when predicting future forgiveness and this was a better predictor than past forgiveness experience.

16.2.1 Comparisons Across Religious Groups

Researchers have found differences in how forgiveness is conceptualized and practiced across religions. For instance, Cohen, Malka, Rozin, and Cherfas (2006) conducted three studies that examined whether Protestants or Jews were more likely to consider offenses as being unforgivable. Study 1, which compared Jewish and Christian students enrolled in introductory psychology, found that Jews were significantly more likely than Christians to believe that some offenses are unforgivable. For Protestants, religious commitment was negatively correlated with belief in unforgivable offenses, whereas these variables were unrelated for Jews. In study 2, these results were replicated among another group of university students, even after controlling for dispositional forgiveness. In study 3, researchers presented members of university religious groups with hypothetical forgiveness scenarios that did not meet criteria for forgiveness as described in Jewish law. Jewish participants were more likely to rely on theological reasons to explain why offenses are unforgivable. Although Heim and Rye (2002) found no differences between Christian and Jewish participants on situational or dispositional forgiveness, Jewish participants were more likely to agree that forgiveness should only occur after the offender has expressed contrition.

Researchers have also studied how the Christian practice of forgiveness compares to Buddhists and Muslims. For example, Paz, Neto, and Mullet (2007) compared

Christians and Buddhists from Macau on dispositional forgiveness and found that Buddhist participants were more likely to be resentful and less forgiving than Christian participants. However, the authors cautioned that these differences could have occurred because Christian participants more closely identified with the conceptualization of forgiveness as reflected in survey items than Buddhist participants. Another study, which compared Lebanese Muslims, Lebanese Christians, and French Christians on dispositional forgiveness, found that Muslims scored lower on unconditional forgiveness than the Christian participants (Mullet & Azar, 2009).

Taken together, these studies suggest that theological differences in conceptualization of forgiveness across religions may be reflected in forgiveness attitudes of adherents. Research suggests that Christians are most likely to favor forgiveness without preconditions. However, caution is advised when interpreting the findings from these studies. All of these studies used self-report forgiveness measures. Self-report measures are useful because forgiveness involves emotional and cognitive changes that cannot be easily observed. However, forgiveness also involves behavioral changes and psychologists need to develop reliable and valid observer measures of forgiveness behavior (Rye et al., 2005). Without objective behavioral measures of forgiveness, the possibility remains that adherents of certain religious traditions are more likely to say they value and practice forgiveness without discernable behavioral differences across groups.

Researchers should be cautious about generalizing their findings about forgiveness to the religion as a whole. Obtaining a representative sample is difficult given the wide variation in viewpoints that exist across different branches of each religion. Major branches of Judaism (e.g., Orthodox, Conservative, Reform), Christianity (e.g., Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox), Islam (e.g., Sunni, Shiite, Sufi), and Buddhism (e.g., Mahayana, Theravada) differ in ways that could impact the conceptualization and practice of forgiveness. Furthermore, religions that are practiced globally are shaped by regional language and customs (Rye et al., 2000). Replications across multiple studies using diverse samples are needed to enhance confidence that results can be generalized.

In addition to studying how forgiveness relates to religiosity, researchers are beginning to examine how forgiveness relates to particular religious practices. Specifically, we will discuss research that relates forgiveness to sanctification/desecration, prayer/meditation, and congregational support.

16.3 Forgiveness and Religious Practices

16.3.1 The Role of Sanctification and Desecration in Forgiveness

Religion can impact the forgiveness process through sanctification. Sanctification of everyday aspects of life is a common phenomenon (Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2009). Sanctification for theistic religions involves connecting aspects of life with one's experience of God, whereas for nontheistic traditions, it involves

connecting with aspects of life that are transcendent (e.g., interconnectedness of all beings, timelessness, ultimate value) (Mahoney, Rye, & Pargament, 2005). Thus, for religious individuals, forgiveness can be viewed as a means of developing a closer connection with God and/or transcendent dimensions of life.

There is evidence that sanctification of forgiveness relates to increased motivation to forgive. For instance, Davis, Hook, Van Tongeren, and Worthington (2012) found that sanctification of forgiveness was related to stronger religious commitment, less avoidance of the offender, and less desire for revenge. Moreover, sanctification predicted changes in forgiveness over time even though religious commitment did not, which suggests that religious beliefs must be engaged when thinking about the transgression. Moreover, believing one's relationship with God is adversely affected by failure to forgive was associated with more rapid forgiveness.

Religious individuals may view their relationship with the offender as being sacred. For instance, transgressions sometimes occur within marital relationships, which are often imbued with sacred qualities (Mahoney et al., 2009). If a marital partner commits a transgression, forgiveness can be viewed as an opportunity to heal this sacred relationship. In contrast, choosing not to forgive might create a sense of disconnection with the divine or transcendent.

While sanctification can motivate forgiveness, viewing a transgression as a desecration may make forgiveness more difficult (Mahoney et al., 2005). When transgressions are perceived as desecrations, the victim believes the offender has failed to treat a sacred aspect of life with reverence. Desecration expands the context of the transgression from a negative interaction between two or more individuals to one that involves spiritual entities or principles (Mahoney et al., 2005). This may explain why viewing negative events as desecrations relates to increased levels of emotional distress. Pargament, Magyar, Benore, and Mahoney (2005) asked a randomly selected sample of adults to consider the most difficult event that they had encountered in the previous 2 years. Participants who believed the event involved a desecration or a sacred loss experienced higher levels of intrusive thoughts and negative mood. Several factors that may influence willingness to forgive following a desecration include the degree to which the offense was intentional, whether the offender apologized and offered restitution, and whether the offender and the victim had a pre-existing relationship that was considered sacred by the victim (Mahoney et al., 2005).

16.3.2 The Role of Prayer and Meditation in Forgiveness

Many people rely on prayer when coping with interpersonal transgressions (McMinn et al., 2008). McMinn et al. used structured interviews to examine the role of prayer in interpersonal forgiveness among Christian students at an evangelical university. Beginning with open-ended questions, the researchers found that over half of the participants (54 %) spontaneously mentioned prayer as playing an important role in their attempts to forgive. When asked to describe the impact of prayer on

forgiveness, participants noted that they shared their concerns about the transgression with God, gained empathy for the offender, released emotional pain, and diminished desire for revenge.

A variety of types of prayer and meditation can be used when coping with a transgression. Prayer and meditation are not mutually exclusive and many individuals combine these spiritual coping strategies. Common forms of prayer include conversational prayer (i.e., informal discussions with God), petitionary prayer (i.e, asking God for specific outcomes), and contemplative prayer (i.e., quiet reflection) (Poloma & Gallup, 1991). Meditation comes in many forms but we will focus on those that enhance compassion. Below we examine how various forms of prayer and meditation can be applied to forgiveness.

Studies have shown that praying for an offender can help individuals forgive. Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham, and Beach (2010) conducted two studies examining the effects of petitionary prayer on forgiveness. In study 1, undergraduate psychology students who were wronged were randomly assigned to an experimental or control condition. In the experimental condition, participants were instructed to say a prayer for their romantic partner. Control participants were instructed to pretend they were describing the physical attributes of their romantic partner to a parent. Participants in the pray-for-partner condition scored significantly higher on forgiveness at posttest than those in the control condition.

In study 2, undergraduate psychology students were randomly assigned to pray for a friend, pray about any topic, or think positively about their friend. Participants from all conditions were instructed to engage in their assigned activity once per day for 4 weeks and to reflect on their experiences through journaling. Participants in the prayer-for-friend condition showed greater increases in forgiveness and selfless concern for others than those in the other two conditions. Moreover, selfless concern for others mediated the relationship between prayer and forgiveness. Thus, it appears that prayer promotes forgiveness because it enables participants to focus less on their self-interests and more on the other person's well-being.

Jankowski and Sandage (2011) investigated the relationship between contemplative prayer and forgiveness. Drawing upon a relational view of spirituality for their theoretical framework, they found that both hope and adult attachment mediated the relationship between contemplative prayer and interpersonal forgiveness. The authors suggested that contemplative prayer allows victims of transgressions to experience comfort from God following a transgression. Consequently, they are able to better regulate their emotions and are more likely to forgive the offender.

Meditation, as taught by Buddhism and other religions that originated in the East, can help the practitioner focus on the present moment rather than ruminate about the past. Rumination about negative events has been linked to anxiety and depression (McLaughlin & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011) and there is evidence that mindful meditation can decrease rumination and distress (Jain et al., 2007). Meditation can also enhance awareness of rumination and promote reflection on how negative thoughts are connected to negative emotional states.

Meditation can also focus on enhancing empathy for the offender. For example, Tonglen is a Tibetan meditation practice designed to enhance compassion by

drawing upon memories, emotions, and images that increase awareness of one's natural tendency to feel love toward others (i.e., *bodhichitta*) (Chodron, 2001). Compassion and loving-kindness meditations can increase positive affect and reduce stress (Hofmann, Grossman, & Hinton, 2011). Compassion meditation also activates areas of the brain that promote empathy and positive feelings (Engstrom & Soderfeldt, 2010). Moreover, training in contemplative practices has been shown to promote prosocial responses (Kemeny et al., 2012). Given these promising findings, clinicians and forgiveness researchers may want to consider incorporating prayer and meditation into forgiveness interventions for religious clients.

16.3.3 Congregational Support for Forgiveness

Another way religion contributes to the forgiveness process is by providing adherents with opportunities to interact with others who value forgiveness. Wuthnow (2000), in a study examining how religious groups facilitate forgiveness of others, found that 61 % of participants believed their religious group helped them to forgive an offender. Results also showed that those who attended religious groups weekly were 1.5 times more likely to indicate the group helped them forgive than those who attended less frequently. Group activities that related most strongly to forgiveness included praying, studying the bible, and sharing personal problems.

16.4 Religious Forgiveness Interventions

Forgiveness interventions have generally been effective at facilitating forgiveness and improving mental health (Rainey, Readdick, & Thyer, 2012; Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005). However, only a few forgiveness interventions have explicitly incorporated religious elements (Rye & Pargament, 2002; Rye et al., 2005; Stratton, Dean, Nonneman, Bode, & Worthington, 2008; Toussaint & Worthington, 2012). Below, we review research on both group and community based forgiveness interventions that explicitly incorporate religion.

16.4.1 Group Forgiveness Interventions

Rye and Pargament (2002) compared the effectiveness of secular and religious forgiveness interventions for college women who had been wronged in a romantic relationship. Participants were randomly assigned to a secular condition, a religiously integrated condition, or a no-intervention comparison condition. Both of the interventions consisted of six weekly sessions lasting 90 min each and were facilitated by advanced clinical psychology graduate students. Both interventions included discussion topics designed to facilitate forgiveness (e.g., feelings about the

transgression, strategies for coping with anger, definition of forgiveness, obstacles to forgiveness, relationship of forgiveness to mental health, development of empathy for the offender, self-forgiveness). The session content differed only with respect to the emphasis on religion/spirituality. Components unique to the religious intervention included consideration of how one's religious/spiritual life had been affected by the wrongdoing, examination of relevant scriptures, discussion of religious role models for forgiveness, and exploration of religious/spiritual coping techniques. Participants in both intervention conditions improved significantly more than those in the no-intervention condition on forgiveness and existential well-being. There were no differential treatment effects between the secular and religiously integrated conditions, suggesting that adding religious elements to the forgiveness intervention did not enhance the effectiveness of the intervention. Interestingly, participants in both intervention conditions reported using religious strategies when working on forgiveness.

In a similar study, Rye et al. (2005) compared the effectiveness of secular and religious group interventions designed to help divorced individuals forgive their ex-spouse. Participants were randomly assigned to a secular intervention condition, a religious intervention condition, or a wait-list condition. Both intervention conditions consisted of eight weekly sessions lasting 90 min in which participants engaged in exercises and discussions designed to facilitate forgiveness. Only participants in the religious intervention were encouraged to draw upon their faith when forgiving (e.g., examination of theological rationales for forgiveness, utilization of prayer, consideration of scripture passages, reliance on religious role models for forgiveness). Participants in both intervention conditions increased significantly more than comparison participants on self-reported forgiveness of an ex-spouse and understanding of forgiveness. Participants in the secular condition also showed a greater decrease in depressive symptoms than comparison participants. Consistent with the findings of Rye and Pargament (2002), participants in both intervention conditions reported using religious strategies when working on forgiveness.

Another outcome study of a religious forgiveness intervention used the REACH model developed by Worthington (2001). REACH is an acronym for the following forgiveness steps: recall the hurt, empathize, altruistic gift of forgiveness, commit publically to forgive, and hold on to forgiveness. Stratton et al. (2008) compared the effectiveness of the 5–6 h religious REACH workshop with a forgiveness essay writing exercise. Participants were randomly assigned to a workshop condition, an essay writing condition, a workshop and essay writing condition, or a control condition. Participants assigned to the essay writing condition wrote an essay about the transgression that they experienced, the extent to which they forgave the offender, the role that their Christian beliefs played in their decision to forgive, and what benefits, if any, were experienced after forgiving. Participants completed measures at pretest, first posttest, and second posttest. By the second posttest, participants assigned to the workshop plus essay writing condition showed more forgiveness than those assigned to the essay only condition and the control condition. This study did not include an intervention condition that excluded religious content so it is not possible to discern whether the religious content made the intervention more effective.

16.4.2 Community Forgiveness Interventions

Researchers have also designed religiously based interventions to facilitate forgiveness among communities. For instance, Toussaint and Worthington (2012) examined whether an intervention could facilitate forgiveness across a Christian college campus. The intervention consisted of both passive programming (e.g., chalk messages, Facebook messages, student newspaper articles, brochures, forgiveness t-shirts) and active programming (e.g., lectures on forgiveness, chapel services, college ministries, residence life programs). Participants completed a variety of measures related to forgiveness and religious commitment at pretest and posttest. Following the program, forgiveness ratings improved across a variety of types of relationships (i.e., friends, roommates, parents). Moreover, participants showed less anger toward God.

Magnuson and Enright (2008) recommended a multidimensional approach to helping Christian church communities foster forgiveness. According to this approach, development of a forgiving church community must start with the leadership. First, the pastor becomes educated about the forgiveness process and delivers at least five sermons each year on the topic of forgiveness. Second, the pastor and associate ministers work closely with lay volunteers in addressing issues related to forgiveness in everyday church life. Third, music ministers reinforce the theme of forgiveness through music selection for worship services. Fourth, youth and singles ministers implement forgiveness education and foster a forgiving attitude among those with whom they work. This model also emphasizes the importance of training pastoral counselors and lay volunteers in the forgiveness process so they can better assist individuals in the community with forgiveness.

16.5 Implications for Clinicians and Researchers

Studies summarized in this chapter have important implications for clinicians and researchers. To begin, clinicians and researchers should be aware that religious adherents may be more likely than nonreligious individuals to pursue forgiveness as a therapeutic goal. Research findings are less clear as to whether religious individuals are more likely than nonreligious individuals to forgive a specific transgression. Researchers should work on developing reliable and valid observer-report measures of forgiveness that could be used to corroborate self-reported forgiveness of specific transgressions. Replication is needed for studies showing differences in how adherents of various religious traditions conceptualize and practice forgiveness, with careful attention paid to whether samples are representative of major denominations of each religion. The finding that Jews are more likely than Christians to believe that forgiveness should be contingent upon the offender's willingness to express remorse and provide restitution has been replicated and may be a reflection of basic theological differences. Consequently, clinicians working with religious clients on forgiveness should inquire about their basic assumptions concerning when forgiveness is appropriate.

Research has generally failed to find that religiously based forgiveness interventions are more effective than nonreligious forgiveness interventions. However, it

should be noted that individuals in both religious and secular interventions often report drawing upon their religious faith when forgiving, irrespective of the intervention content. An important question that has not been adequately examined is whether religious clients are more likely to be satisfied with forgiveness interventions that contain religious content. If so, this could lead to less attrition and would provide an important reason to integrate religious strategies into forgiveness interventions for religious clients. Encouraging religious clients to draw upon their faith when forgiving is also consistent with the goal of honoring and respecting the worldview of clients when possible. Worthington et al. (2007) provided several suggestions for adapting secular interventions for use in spiritual or religious communities including maintaining central components of the secular program, ensuring that adaptations fit the religious community, and evaluating the effectiveness of the adapted program.

Studies have shown that individuals who pray for their offender tend to improve more on forgiveness than those who do not. Mindfulness meditation may help victims decrease rumination and develop compassion for the offender. Based upon these preliminary findings, clinicians may wish to explore whether religious clients would like to use prayer and/or meditation as a strategy when working toward forgiveness. However, additional studies are needed to understand when incorporating prayer and/or meditation into forgiveness interventions is most likely to be beneficial.

Another important question that has not adequately been addressed by researchers is the extent to which religious perspectives can impede the forgiveness process. As noted earlier, viewing a transgression as a desecration might be particularly difficult to forgive and could motivate acts of revenge. Furthermore, religious individuals who have a propensity to demonize people who insult their religious beliefs might be more likely to retaliate rather than forgive. Another interesting question is whether belief in a punishing God, which generally relates to poor adjustment (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000), impacts willingness to forgive others.

In conclusion, researchers are only beginning to understand the role of religion in forgiveness. However, it is clear that individuals from diverse religious backgrounds often rely on their faith to provide them with inspiration and comfort when trying to forgive. Consequently, clinicians and researchers should strive to learn as much as possible about the ways in which religious beliefs and practices can facilitate or impede forgiveness of others.

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