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Fundamentalism and forgiveness

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Abstract

Two studies investigated the associations between religious fundamentalism (RF) and aspects of dispositional forgiveness: pro-forgiveness attitudes and the tendency to forgive others. In Study 1, a direct self-report measure of RF was significantly associated with pro-forgiveness attitudes, but not with the tendency to forgive. In Study 2, we conceptually replicated these results by combining a measure of religiosity and a measure of need for structure, a cognitive style variable related to rigid, categorical thinking. A significant interaction between religiosity and need for structure revealed that the positive association between religiosity and pro-forgiveness attitudes was higher among respondents who were also high in need for structure. As expected, this pattern did not occur with the tendency to forgive, which was positively related to religiosity but negatively related to need for structure.

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1. Fundamentalism and forgiveness

Over the course of the last several decades, researchers have suggested that interpersonal forgiveness ought to be associated with religiosity (for reviews, see [McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2005](#); [McCullough & Worthington, 1999](#)). Given the high moral value that many religions place on forgiveness, the occurrence of forgiving exemplars within various religions, and the occurrence

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of theological connections between forgiving others and being forgiven by God (particularly in the Christian religion), the assumption of a religiosity–forgiveness link seems well reasoned, and some research finds empirical support for this assumption. For example, early studies by Allport and Ross (1967) and by Shoemaker and Bolt (1977) showed that highly religious individuals ranked forgiveness higher in importance than most other values, and this emphasis on forgiveness distinguished highly religious from less religious individuals. More recently, some studies report significant correlations between religiosity and self-reported forgiveness (e.g., Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001; Edwards et al., 2002), whereas other studies find virtually no such relationship (e.g., Subkoviak, Enright, Ching-Ru, & Gassin, 1995). Others have also noted that certain statistical considerations can moderate the size of this association (Tsang, McCullough, & Hoyt, 2005). Summarizing the existing empirical studies on the religion–forgiveness association, McCullough et al. (2005) have concluded that “religious individuals are, in general, slightly more forgiving than are less religious people, although this association is rather small” (p. 399).

The present study extends previous research on religiosity and forgiveness in several ways. First, we argue that the relation between religiosity and forgiveness might depend, in part, on how forgiveness is conceptualized. Specifically, whether researchers construe dispositional forgiveness in terms of typical behavioral/experiential tendencies or in terms of pro-forgiveness attitudes and values might change the degree to which a measure of forgiveness relates to religiosity. As recent research by Brown and colleagues has demonstrated, the tendency to forgive and pro-forgiveness attitudes are positively associated, but also empirically distinguishable (Brown, 2003; Brown & Phillips, 2005), just as attitudes and behaviors in general are related but distinct. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Rokeach, 1969), we expect that more religious people are likely to value forgiveness to a greater extent than are less religious people. However, what we claim to value and what we do often diverge. In the case of forgiveness, valuing is much easier than doing, and simply being very religious may not be enough to facilitate the latter.

Second, we also propose that how researchers conceptualize religiosity could make an important difference in the degree of association between religiosity and forgiveness. Indeed, across the handful of studies that have reported on the religiosity–forgiveness link over the last several decades, religiosity has been assessed variously as a categorical variable, as degrees of intrinsic or extrinsic religious orientation, and as frequency or depth of religious involvement. Although such indices of religiosity might overlap substantially, they, too, are not necessarily interchangeable.

Furthermore, one manifestation of religiosity that has yet to be assessed in this literature is fundamentalism, which is the type of religiosity on which we focus in the current research. The construct of fundamentalism has been defined in a variety of ways including, but not limited to, a boundary maintenance phenomenon (Ethridge & Feagin, 1979; Hood, Morris, & Watson, 1986), an attitude toward the beliefs one endorses (Altemeyer, 1996), and a closed belief system (Kirkpatrick, Hood, & Hartz, 1991; Rokeach, 1960). Each of these definitions has worthwhile contributions to make toward understanding the fundamentalist mindset, and research derived from these various perspectives has demonstrated a host of attitudinal and social–relational correlates of fundamentalism (e.g., Altemeyer, 2003; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Hunsberger, Owusu, & Duck, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 1993; Kirkpatrick et al., 1991; Laythe, Finkel, & Kirkpatrick, 1999).

Our reading of the literature to date leads us to adopt the view that fundamentalism may best be conceived as a joint function of deeply held convictions about one’s beliefs and a rigid cognitive

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