Forgive Us Our Trespasses:
Priming a Forgiving (but Not a Punishing) God Increases Deviance

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Very little psychological research has examined the effects of religious beliefs on behavior (Inzlicht, 2009). Sociologists have examined the impact of religion on immoral behaviors, by examining crime rates, but with inconsistent results. Some sociological studies indicate that religious communities have less crime (e.g., Bainbridge, 1989; Pettersson, 1991; Stack & Kanavy, 1983). Other studies have found no effect for religion on crime (e.g., Hirschi & Stark, 1969; Middleton & Putney, 1962). But other studies indicate that religion decreases crime only under specific circumstances (Tittle & Welch, 1983). Because these studies were correlational, it is difficult to ascertain the direct cause and effect relation between religion and crime.
Christians’ focus on God’s forgiveness may affect their behavior.

- Christian prayers such as the “Our Father” implore God to “forgive us our trespasses”.
- 80 variations of the word “forgive” can be found in the Bible.
- Catholics believe that forgiveness is the centerpiece of Reconciliation—a sacrament which grants them unconditional forgiveness from God.

Because forgiveness is the act of ceasing resentment and anger towards someone for an offense, perhaps Christians feel their sins may be readily excused by God.

In a quasi-experimental study, participants who self-reported that they believed God was more forgiving than punishing were more likely to act (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2011).

**Primary hypothesis:** Focusing on God’s forgiveness will increase deviance, as exhibited through cheating and stealing.
Participants
  o 32 Christian undergraduates (56% women, 53% Caucasian)

Religious Study
  • Forgiving God: “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.” (James 3:17).
  • Punishing God: “The Lord will never be willing to forgive him; his wrath and zeal will burn against that man. All the curses written in this book will fall upon him and then the Lord will blot out his name under heaven.” (Deuteronomy 29:20).

Problem Solving Study (Stealing Measure)
  o Completed 5 practice anagrams
  o 10 test anagrams
    • $1 for each anagram they solved in 15 minutes.
    • Participants received 10 one-dollar bills, and were instructed to keep $1 for each correctly solved anagram (formed a common word), but return one dollar for each anagram they did not solve.
    • Only 5 anagrams had a solution.

The experimenter debriefed the participants, probed for suspicion, and gave the full $10 for the anagrams.
A $t$-test indicated that participants assigned to the Forgiving God condition stole significantly more money than participants in the Punishing God condition, $t(30) = 2.21, p < .05$, Cohen’s $d = .81$. 
Experiment 2

Participants
- 78 Christian undergraduates (42% women, 58% Caucasian)

Priming Task
- Identical to Experiment 1, but added 3 more conditions:
  - Forgiving Human: “Patty asked Martha to keep a secret but she did not. Afterwards, Patty forgave Martha for telling everyone her secret.”
  - Punishing Human: Patty asked Martha to keep a secret but she did not. Afterwards, Patty punished Martha for telling everyone her secret.”
  - Control: “Patty and Martha went to the store. Afterwards, Patty drove Martha to the movie theater.”

Stealing Measure
- The anagram task provided the participants the opportunity to steal up to $10.
ANOVA indicated that the five experimental groups differed in the amount of money stolen during the anagram task, $F(4, 73) = 3.47, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .16$.

A planned contrast revealed that the participants who read about a forgiving God stole more money than the average of the other groups, $t(73) = 3.69, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = .86$. 

![Mean Dollars Stolen](image)
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Additional contrasts found that, replicating the effect found in Experiment 1, participants in the Forgiving God condition stole significantly more money than those in the:

- Punishing God condition, $t(73) = 2.81$, $p = .006$, Cohen’s $d = .66$
- Forgiving Human condition, $t(73) = 2.85$, $p = .006$, Cohen’s $d = .67$
- Human Punishment condition, $t(73) = 2.85$, $p = .006$, Cohen’s $d = .67$
- Control condition, $t(73) = 3.23$, $p = .002$, Cohen’s $d = .76$. 
Possibly, focusing on any authority figure’s forgiveness (such as God or the experimenter) would increase the likelihood of acting immorally.

In the following experiment, we utilized control conditions that included forgiving and punishing authority figures.

To examine if our findings apply to other immoral acts, we assessed cheating as the dependent variable in Experiment 3.
Participants
- 71 self-identifying Christian undergraduate students (85% women, 86% African-American)

Priming task
- Forgiving God: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the LORD forgave you.” (Colossians 3:13).
- Punishing God: “The Lord will never be willing to forgive him; his wrath and zeal will burn against that man. All the curses written in this book will fall upon him and then the Lord will blot out his name under heaven“ (Deuteronomy 29:20).
- Forgiving Authority: “The researchers in this lab have been studying the effects of forgiveness. They realize that everyone makes mistakes and no one is perfect. Their research has led them to be more forgiving in their everyday lives.”
- Punishing Authority: “The researchers in this lab have been studying the effects of punishment. They realize that everyone makes mistakes and no one is perfect. Their research has led them to believe that when people are punished, they will learn from their mistakes.”

Cheating Measure
- Must correctly solve at least 5 of 8 math problems within 10 minutes – or they would stay another 10 minutes to solve an additional 8 math problems.
- Provided an answer sheet placed face down on the table - participants used the answer sheet to grade themselves by marking which questions they responded to incorrectly.
- 5 of the 8 answers on the answer key were wrong.

Afterwards, the experimenter debriefed all participants and checked for suspicion.
2 X 2 (Forgiving/Punishing x God/Experimenter) ANOVA indicated a marginally significant main effect for focusing on forgiveness, $F(1, 67) = 3.39$, $p = .07$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$ (mainly driven by the Forgiving God group cheating the most).

Another main effect comparing the God and experimenter conditions was a significant predictor of cheating, $F(1, 67) = 5.55$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$ (mainly due to the Forgiving God group).

Critically, an interaction between the Forgiving/Punishing and God/Experimenter variables was a significant predictor of cheating, $F(1, 67) = 5.87$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. 
To further examine this interaction, a planned contrast revealed that the participants who read about God’s forgiveness cheated significantly more than the average of the other groups, \( t(67) = 3.64, p = .001, \) Cohen’s \( d = .89 \).

Similar to the findings from Experiments 1 and 2, the participants who focused on God’s forgiveness cheated significantly more than those who focused on:

- God’s punishment, \( t(33) = 2.31, p = .03, \) Cohen’s \( d = .80 \)
- Forgiving Experimenter condition, \( t(34) = 2.76, p = .009, \) Cohen’s \( d = .95 \)
- Punishing Experimenter condition, \( t(32) = 2.25, p = .03, \) Cohen’s \( d = .80 \).
With a variety of experimental designs and samples, focusing on God’s forgiveness, in sharp contrast with focusing on non-divine forgiveness (including forgiving authorities), led to more deviant, sinful behaviors.

Why would Christians’ concentration on God’s forgiveness lead to greater immorality?

- Focusing on divine forgiveness may lower the fears of God’s reprisals, making it more likely for Christians to give into the temptation to steal and cheat.
- Perhaps, the blanket promise of supernatural forgiveness may have allowed participants to rationalize their immoral behaviors.
- In our experiments, the mere reminder that God is forgiving may have reduced concern about God’s perception of their immoral acts, or perhaps God’s reaction to these acts.
Future research should examine if these findings apply to other religions.

Currently, we are examining traits, such as closeness to God, as potential moderators.

Our findings suggest some important yet controversial possibilities – specific religious beliefs may lead to immoral behavior.

Perhaps, an overemphasis on the forgiveness of our trespasses may only increase those who trespass against us.


Anagrams (Stealing)

- Practice:
  - Woetr
  - Odofs
  - Lhitg
  - Glusp
  - Rodos

- Solvable:
  - Trypa
  - Aaflt
  - Reawt
  - Natsp
  - ecekh

- Unsolvable:
  - Oneci
  - Acelo
  - Vilox
  - Umpak
  - Etiow

Math Problems (Cheating)

- Eight times a number is subtracted from 3 times the number. Afterwards, if 121 is added, the result is 10. What is the number?
- If \( y^2 - x^2 = 63 \), \( xy = 11664 \), \( y > x \), and both \( x \) and \( y \) are whole positive numbers, solve for \( x \) and \( y \).
- The cost to park at the airport $40 per day plus $8 per hour of use. What is the maximum number of hours you can park your car at the airport without exceeding $250?
### Additional Analyses

#### Experiment 1
- **Manipulation checks**
  - *T*-tests confirmed the effectiveness of the priming manipulation: Participants in the Forgiving God condition thought more about God’s forgiveness and compassion, $t(30) = 7.76, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 2.83$, whereas those in the Punishing God condition thought more about God’s vengeance and punitiveness, $t(30) = -7.32, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 2.67$.
  - A regression analysis also indicated that participants’ self-reports about their focus on God’s forgiveness led to more money stolen, $B = .06, S. E. = .03, t = 1.94, p = .06$, Cohen’s $d = .71$. (*ns* for focusing on God’s punishment)

#### Experiment 2
- **Manipulation Checks**
  - No significant difference in the extent to which the Forgiving God and Human groups thought about forgiveness – same for punishment for the Punishing God and Human groups
- **Further Priming Analyses**
  - The more participants in the God conditions reported thinking about God’s forgiveness, the more money they stole, $B = .14, S. E. = .06, t(44) = 2.35, p = .02$, Cohen’s $d = .71$. Thinking about God’s punishment, however, did not significantly affect how much money was stolen, $B = -.09, S. E. = .06, t(43) = -1.55, p = .13$.

#### Experiment 3
- **Manipulation Checks**
  - Participants assigned to focus on God’s forgiveness reported focusing more on God’s forgiveness than those assigned to focus on God’s punishment, $t(33) = 2.43, p = .02$. Analyses also confirmed that participants in the Forgiving Experimenter and Forgiving God conditions did not significantly differ in the extent to which they focused on forgiveness, $t(34) = .87, p = .39$. Additional analyses also suggested that participants in the Punishing Experimenter and Punishing God conditions were not significantly different in how much they focused on punishment, $t(33) = 1.16, p = .25$.
- **Further Priming Analyses**
  - First, a marginally significant result of a regression analysis suggests that the more people focused on God’s forgiveness, the more they cheated on the math task, $B = .31, S. E. = .17, t(34) = 1.86, p = .07$, Cohen’s $d = .64$. In contrast with Experiment 2, thinking about God’s punishment significantly decreased cheating, $B = -.32, S. E. = .07, t(34) = -4.38, p < .001$. 