

Pargament, K.I., & Rye, M. (1998). Forgiveness as a method of religious coping. In E. Worthington, & M. McCullough (Eds.), *Dimensions of Forgiveness: Psychological research and theological perspectives* (pp. 57-76). Philadelphia: Templeton Press.

♦ CHAPTER 3 ♦

Forgiveness as a Method of Religious Coping

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ACCORDING TO THE "LAW OF THE INSTRUMENT," if you have a hammer in your hand, you are likely to see nails all around you (Kaplan, 1964). This law applies to social scientists as well as those they study.

For example, one of our colleagues was conducting an evaluation of a spiritual intervention group for women with breast cancer to compare the spirituality group with a cognitive-behavioral comparison group. In her effort to obtain a sample of patients, she approached a major university-based hospital for support. However, the review committee refused, stating that the design failed to control for expectancy effects. They maintained that those in the spiritual group could improve, not because of the treatment itself, but because of the *expectancy* that the spirituality intervention would be helpful. The research committee went on to recommend the addition of a "sham-spirituality" group to control for this effect.

We believe that the research committee erred. They applied an experimental methodology (a "hammer") derived from the natural sciences to something other than a "nail," a topic that requires a different instrument of study.

Science is not a value-free business, but the illusion that it is can damage our deepest values. Complex human phenomena must be approached

with sensitivity and appropriate paradigms of concepts and methods. We suggest that forgiveness is a method of religious coping for many people. Although this is not the only way to conceptualize forgiving, our task as scholars and professionals interested in advancing this topic of study is not to zero in on the single best perspective, definition, or measure of forgiveness, but to identify valuable theories and methodologies that can shed some light on this multifaceted construct. We believe that conceptualizing forgiveness as a way of religious coping does justice to the richness of this construct, links it to an established body of research, raises interesting insights, and points to potential pitfalls and important questions to guide further study.

Two key points are implicit in our thesis: (1) forgiving is a method of coping, and (2) forgiveness is, in some sense, a religious pursuit.

FORGIVING AS A METHOD OF COPING

A Definition of Coping

We begin with the definition of coping as *a search for significance in stressful times.*¹ This definition makes the assumption that everyone is engaged in a search for significance.

Significance is both subjective and objective. Subjectively, it involves the experience of caring or attraction. Objectively, significance can be attached to a variety of things—physical (houses, cars, money, our bodies, physical health); psychological (a sense of meaning,² personal identity, comfort, growth); social (children, closeness with others, social justice, a commitment to making the world a better place); or spiritual (closeness to God, sacred matters). But significant objects are not necessarily good; we can care about things that aren't very good for us—such as drugs, alcohol, or social status at the expense of others.

By referring to coping as a “search,” we mean that people try to find and hold onto (conserve) or, when necessary, transform the things they value. Coping involves the steps people take to conserve or transform significance in the face of situations that pose a challenge, threat, or potential harm to the things they most care about.

Conservational and Transformational Methods of Coping

In difficult situations, our first reaction is *conservational*. This is not a new idea. Many years ago, Jean Piaget observed this tendency in his studies of children. But children aren't the only ones who try to hold onto their ways of viewing and dealing with the world. Adults also try to find ways to conserve the things they want.

Take the example of one young couple that badly wants to have their own children. Faced with the trauma of infertility, the couple may take a number of coping steps to protect their cherished goal: gathering information about infertility, committing to expensive infertility treatments, going to an infertility support group. Fortunately, in many instances, conservational methods of coping work; the couple of this example may succeed in their efforts to have children. But in other cases, old dreams are no longer viable; then, goals have to be changed.

Such situations call for transformation. The couple above may fail in all of their efforts. Their task for coping is to come to terms with their inability to have their own biological children. What will they do? Perhaps they will be able to transform their desire for children from a biological to a general, more psychological goal and seek to adopt a child or become foster parents. Or, perhaps they will shift to entirely new objects of significance in life. Examples of coping methods that may facilitate this process include psychotherapy, prayer for new religious direction, or involvement in a ritual of loss (i.e., a grieving process).

It is important to stress that transformation—change in the things we strive for in life—is exceptionally difficult. Think about how you would respond if asked to give up one of the objects of greatest significance in your life. Often transformation is a last resort, a method of coping used only when all attempts to conserve what matters most fail.

Researchers and theorists ^{of} coping have generally focused more on methods of conservation than on methods of transformation (see Aldwin, 1994; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The emphasis has been on how people resolve problems or how they maintain themselves emotionally in response to major life crises rather than on how they let go of previously cherished objects and find new things to care about. Methods of trans-

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formation, however, deserve further study. Forgiving is one such method of transformation.

Forgiving as Transformational

In the case of forgiving, we are talking about coping with the stressor of abuse, betrayal, or victimization. As with other stressors, the initial reaction of most people is not transformational, but conservational, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Forgiving as a Method of Transformational Coping		
	MEANS OF COPING	ENDS OF COPING
PHASE ONE: CONSERVATION	Anger Fear Hurt Resentment	Self-Protection Justice
PHASE TWO: TRANSFORMATION	Reframing Humanizing Empathizing Reappraisal Social Facilitation	Peace

Although we may not think of emotions in a functional sense, feelings do serve important purposes. Anger, fear, hurt, and resentment are, at least in part, conservational strategies (Simon & Simon, 1990). Anger can be a source of energy and power that counteracts feelings of paralysis and loss of control that often accompany mistreatment. Fear and suspiciousness serve to "protect" the individual from the repeated pains of the past. Feelings of hurt can be a source of comfort, a reminder that

the individual is a decent person who deserves better out of life. Resentment can bring with it a clear explanation for the person's present predicament. And expressions of all of these feelings remind others of the individual's plight.

Unfortunately, these strategies are only partially successful. With anger comes the realization that the person was powerless in the past. With fear comes the reality that terrible things could happen again. With hurt comes the question of one's own true value. And with resentment comes an underlying sense of shame. In each of these expressions of distress, the pain from the past continues to intrude on the present. Empirical studies also suggest that quite a price is paid for the protection offered by the negative emotions of anger, fear, hurt, and resentment (e.g., Diamond, 1982).

From a coping perspective, forgiving is transformational in both the ends that are sought and in the means that are used to reach these ends. Forgiveness involves a transformation in motivation (see also McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Implicit in the act is the effort to change direction from self-protection as the object of greatest significance to what Kolnai (1968) called a "boldly, venturesomely, aspiring, and active pursuit of Value" (cited in Rowe et al., 1989, p. 236). Put another way, forgiving is an attempt to shift from a life devoted to avoiding further pain and the memory of injustice to one dedicated to pursuing peace. Forgiveness offers the possibility of two types of peace: peace of mind, the potential healing of old emotional wounds, and peace with others, the possibility of new, more gratifying relationships in the future.

Forgiveness involves more than a transformation of ends or motivations. The means or methods of forgiving are also transformational in nature. This is not as simple as saying "I forgive you." Augsberger (1981) described forgiveness as one of the hardest things in the world to do. To let go of justified anger and hurt, to think about the betrayal and the betrayer in a new light, to give up the well-deserved right to hurt back—all of these call for change at many levels: cognitive, affective, relational, behavioral, volitional and spiritual.

Forgiving actually encompasses many subtypes of coping. Enright and colleagues have identified several psychological variables involved

in this process (Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1991). They include emotional ventilation, a reframing of the offender and victim, empathy with and humanization of the offender, and reappraisal of the costs of not forgiving and the benefits of forgiving.

Another implicit, but often overlooked, ingredient of forgiving is social facilitation. Much of what we know about the process of forgiving comes from studies in which we have tried to facilitate forgiveness through education, encouragement, and therapy. It is reasonable to ask whether forgiveness, in the transformational sense used here, can take place outside of a facilitative context. Radical change isn't easy.

It may not be surprising then that forgiveness is a complex method of coping, one that subsumes many subtypes of coping. Radical change requires many methods.

We should add a qualification here. Once an individual has made this type of radical change, forgiveness may become something less radical, more a way of life, a method that is regularly practiced without as much tumult and turmoil. In fact, forgiving may become relatively automatic, a response that quickly mitigates the offensiveness of egregious acts. In this sense, a forgiving attitude, once deeply established, may become a form of anticipatory coping that preempts mistreatment.

What empowers this sort of change? Let us suggest here that forgiving is often empowered by religion.

FORGIVING AS A RELIGIOUS PURSUIT

A Definition of Religion

It is important to preface this discussion with a definition of religion. Few terms elicit stronger and more diverse reactions among people in society than this one (see Pargament et al., 1995). For some, religion refers to a set of beliefs; for others, it is a set of practices; and for still others, it is a way of life. Some view religion as a force for good, and others see it as a source of repression and pain. Historically, psychologists have defined religion as a broadband construct, a multifaceted phenomenon made up of institutional, behavioral, affective, cognitive, experiential,

and motivational dimensions. Moreover, psychologists have remarked on religion's capacity for both good and bad. More recently, however, "religion" has taken on a narrower meaning. It is increasingly used to refer to institutionalized beliefs and practices that restrict and inhibit human potential (see Zinnbauer et al., ¹⁹⁹⁷ ~~in press~~). Now, the term "spirituality" is becoming differentiated from "religion" as an expression of the greatest of human capacities.

We believe that these recent developments are overly simplistic and polarize processes that are fundamentally interrelated (see Pargament, ~~in press~~, for discussion). Religion has both individual and institutional expressions and offers the potential for both good and bad. Thus, we return to the classic broadband tradition and define religion as *a search for significance in ways related to the sacred* (Pargament, 1997).

There is a close connection between religion and times of stress, as we hear in old sayings and aphorisms, such as "Man's extremity is God's opportunity" and "There are no atheists in foxholes." Our favorite is: "Dear God, help me get up; I can fall down by myself." Social scientists have also noted the connection between religion and stressful times, but they have tended to view religion stereotypically as a source of conservation rather than transformation.

Religion, according to Freud (1927/1961), is merely a defense against anxiety and uncertainty, a refuge people seek in response to powerful, uncontrollable forces in the universe. And there is some truth to this notion. The religions of the world provide their adherents with a number of methods of coming to grips with the most basic—and terrifying—of life's problems. Theologies offer ways to sustain a sense of meaning even in the face of the most seemingly incomprehensible events. Rituals of purification help people who may have strayed from their paths return to lives of integrity. The services of most religious congregations are filled with hymns, prayers, and stories of solace and consolation that offer support for the suffering. And, we should add, a number of empirical studies have shown that these methods of religious coping are uniquely helpful to people in their efforts to keep themselves together through life's most difficult trials (see Pargament, 1997, for a review).

But the power of religion goes beyond conservation. Earlier in this century, psychologist George Coe (1916) wrote: "Possibly the chief thing

in religion...is the progressive discovery and reorganization of values" (p. 65). Religion is often intimately involved in the search for new sources of significance when old ones are lost or no longer tenable. Through religious rites of passage, people are encouraged to give up old social roles (e.g., through Bar/Bat Mitzvah) or loved ones (e.g., through mourning rituals). Through mystical or conversion experiences, individuals may find new visions and purpose to replace shattered dreams and lives. Forgiving can be another method of religious transformation.

Religious Characteristics of Forgiveness

What makes forgiving religious? Virtually every religious tradition places extraordinary value on love, kindness, and compassion and warns against the unbridled emotions of hatred and bitterness. Forgiveness is explicitly addressed within Judaism and Christianity. Both traditions encourage their adherents to return good for evil and practice acts of forgiveness. The great Jewish sage Maimonides said that the failure to forgive someone who sincerely requests it is as offensive as the original transgression (Minkin, 1987). Within the New Testament, the reader is frequently encouraged to forgive others: "Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man may have a quarrel against any; even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye" (Col. 3:13, King James Version [hereafter KJV]). Empirical studies indicate that people who are more religiously involved continue to place more value on forgiveness than their less religious counterparts (Gorsuch & Hao, 1993; Rokeach, 1973).

Sanctification of Forgiveness. Forgiveness can be profoundly religious in two ways. First, it represents an act that can take on sacred qualities; put another way, forgiveness can be sanctified. The power of religion goes beyond belief in God or worship of the divine. Other seemingly secular objects can become imbued with divine-like qualities by virtue of their association with God (see also Emmons, in press; Pargament, 1997). And once sanctified, these objects may be sources of extraordinary power. For instance, our research group recently examined whether sanctified marriages are, in any sense, different from marriages that are less sanctified (Mahoney et al., 1997). They were. Couples who viewed

their marriages as sacred vows experienced higher levels of marital satisfaction and greater marital commitment, and they made use of more effective problem-solving strategies for dealing with marital conflict than did couples who saw their marriages as less sacred.

Similarly, forgiving can be sanctified. According to many religious traditions, human relationships are working models of an ideal relationship—that between the individual and God. From this perspective, a breach between two people that goes unhealed represents an offense against the sacred. Repairing the damage, in turn, signifies a spiritual as well as an interpersonal healing process. Forgiving then can become invested with sacred meaning, a practice that is integral to a vision of spiritual community in which we all require forgiveness and need to be forgiving (e.g., Patton, 1985).

Another kind of sanctification is directly relevant to forgiving—the sanctification of what it means to be human. Enright (1994) argues convincingly that forgiveness rests on a moral view that we all are fundamentally human in spite of differences in the ways we behave. And, as human beings, we are worthy of respect, dignity, and love. But many might ask, Why? What makes humanity inherently worthy of anything? The notion of inherent human worth is a fundamentally religious concept based on the belief that each of us contains a divine spark. Each of us is, in some sense, a manifestation of a power that goes beyond ourselves. As bearers of that divine spark, we are equally and inherently worthy of compassion, love, and respect. It is this sanctification of what it means to be human that helps make forgiveness possible.

Religious Models of Forgiveness. Religion contributes to forgiving in a second way: It provides models, methods, and resources for forgiving. From Joseph, to Hosea, to Jesus Christ, the religious literature is filled with examples of remarkable individuals who transcended their own pain and reached out to others with compassion rather than perpetuate their suffering.

Religious traditions also contain worldviews that set the stage for forgiveness. Embedded in these worldviews are new ways to think about or “reframe” offenders and their relationships to victims. On the one hand, misdeeds of the perpetrator can be reattributed to ignorance rather

than malice, as illustrated by Jesus' last words: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34, KJV). On the other hand, we are reminded that none of us is without our own foibles ("He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (John 8:7, KJV) and that each of us requires purification and forgiveness. Thus, religious worldviews can provide radically different ways of thinking that encourage the spiritualization rather than the demonization of the offender and the healing rather than the fragmentation of community (see also Batson et al., 1989).

The decision to forgive itself can be conceptualized within a religious frame of reference as a "leap of faith," an opportunity to let go of negativity. There can be no guarantee of the outcomes, just as there can be no guarantee of God's existence. But viewed as a matter of faith, the act of forgiving is placed in a larger spiritual context of hope, surrender, trust, and goodwill.

Finally, people can draw on several religious resources to facilitate the process of forgiving, such as prayer, ritual, services, and the religious congregation (see Kinens, 1989). It is important to add that, for some, forgiving is less a conscious act of self-direction than it is a revelation.

Take the case of Corrie Ten Boom (1971), who, years after her imprisonment in a concentration camp, encountered one of her former Nazi Schutzstaffel (SS) guards at a church service. When he came up to shake her hand after the service, she was unable to respond initially. But after she prayed for the strength to forgive, she recounted this experience: "From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me" (p. 238). Ten Boom experienced her forgiveness as a gift from God.

It could be argued that forgiveness is religious only for those who come from or identify with a religious tradition. But keep in mind that most people in the United States do, in fact, come from a religious tradition, and most maintain some involvement in religious beliefs and practices (Gallup & Castelli, 1989). Even those who do not, however, may continue to sanctify forgiveness and draw on religious resources to facilitate it. Although the individual may have removed himself or herself from organized religion, forgiveness may have developed a "religious

functional autonomy" of its own; it retains sacred value even though the individual has separated from the institutions and beliefs that gave birth to the value.

This point was illustrated in Rye's doctoral dissertation (Rye & Pargament, 1997). Rye was interested in knowing whether a religiously integrated forgiveness intervention would be helpful to women in college who felt they had been wronged in a romantic relationship. So he compared the efficacy of this intervention to a secular forgiveness intervention that was virtually identical with the exception of the religious elements, as well as to a no-intervention comparison group. Both the religiously integrated and the secular forgiveness groups resulted in significant positive change on several dimensions, including measures of hopefulness, religious well-being, existential well-being, and three measures of forgiveness. However, the two treatment groups did not differ from each other in their degree of efficacy.

At first glance, this result might suggest that forgiving does not have to occur in a religious context to be successful. But Rye also asked the women in each of the groups how they went about the business of forgiving. Interestingly, all of the women identified religious resources as the first and third most frequent sources of assistance in the forgiveness process. The most commonly reported forgiveness strategy was to ask God for help and/or support in efforts to forgive. The second most common strategy was relying on support from friends. The third most common strategy was to pray for the person who had wronged the woman.

These women were college students at a state university in the Midwest who were not highly religious as a group. Also, participants in the secular and comparison conditions also used religious forgiveness strategies more often than other strategies. Thus, the findings suggest that it may be very difficult to remove forgiveness from its spiritual context; in fact, the notion of a secular forgiveness group may be, for many people, an oxymoron.

Implications of Forgiving as a Method of Religious Coping

Thinking about forgiving as a method of religious coping has several interesting implications. We would like to focus on two of them here.

No Single Key to Good Coping. From the perspective of coping theory, there is no single key to good coping, no single panacea for everyone or for the full range of life's problems. Coping is a transactional process, involving a complex interplay of personal, situational, and larger social forces.

There can be no single key to good coping for a number of reasons: First, the value of any coping method cannot be disentangled from the demands raised by the situation. For instance, in the early stages of a heart attack, denial (a method of conservation if there ever was) has devastating consequences. However, after the coronary, denial has been tied to lower anxiety, shorter hospitalization, and even lower risk for morbidity and mortality (Fowers, 1992). Similarly, active problem-focused efforts at coping have been found more helpful in controllable than uncontrollable situations; conversely, less active emotion-focused efforts at coping have been found more helpful in uncontrollable than controllable situations (Vitaliano, DeWolfe, Maiuro, Russo, & Katon, 1990).

We might expect forgiveness to vary in its value across situations as well. In this vein, McCullough and Worthington (1994) suggest that forgiveness may be inappropriate when the wounds from a personal assault are too fresh, when the violation is too severe, or when the mistreatment is ongoing. From the perspective of coping theory, we need to learn not only when to forgive, but when not to forgive.

Second, there is no single key to good coping because the value of any coping method is intimately tied to the values of the individual. As noted earlier, coping theory rests on the assumption that we do not seek the same ends out of life. People vary in choosing their objects of significance. The same methods of coping, then, are not necessarily appropriate to different people. Forgiveness may be a powerful method of coping for those interested in finding peace in their lives. Not everyone, however, is interested in this goal.

For instance, Baures (1996) interviewed twenty well-known survivors who had faced exceptionally difficult situations. Each of these survivors had coped successfully with their ordeals. Yet not all took the same path. Through forgiveness, some were able to let go of their pain. Others, however, did not cope through forgiveness. Rather than letting go of their pain, they used it, revisited it, reworked it, and shared it with others in an attempt to create a more compassionate, more just world. Was

their method of coping any less effective than those who forgave? We think not. They found a way of coping that was more helpful to them in their own search for significance.

There is one final reason why it is difficult to identify "panaceas" when it comes to coping. Many of the choices that we must make when confronted with major life stressors are far from simple. Any way of coping may be associated with both advantages and disadvantages. Thus, evaluations of the efficacy of any coping method should be alert to the potential for tradeoffs, both positive and negative outcomes that mirror, in essence, the difficult choices people face in times of trouble. For example, earlier we noted studies that indicate denial can be helpful to people who have suffered a heart attack when it occurs later in their recovery. There is, however, an important downside. Empirical studies indicate that, while the patient in denial may be less depressed and more engaged in life, the spouse of the patient in denial is at greater risk of emotional trouble. In essence, the spouse takes on the burden of an illness the patient refuses to acknowledge (Stern & Pascale, 1979).

Forgiveness may also be associated with positive and negative outcomes simultaneously. To this point, research has focused on the impact of forgiveness on the forgiver. Important as he or she is, the forgiver represents only one relevant source of information. Forgiveness has profound interpersonal as well as personal implications (see Baumeister et al., Chapter 4 in this volume). It is critically important to determine the impact of forgiving on others. Perhaps being forgiven facilitates a transformation as powerful in the perpetrator as it does the forgiver. On the other hand, being forgiven may simply reinforce the perpetrator's negative behavior. Thus, at this time, we cannot dismiss this possible troubling scenario: a forgiveness that facilitates the well-being of the forgiver and, at the same time, supports the perpetrator's misbehavior. We know of no studies that examine the effects of forgiving on the behavior of others. We need to extend the focus of our research beyond the forgiver to the world of the perpetrator.

Forgiving is a Religious Value. A second implication of thinking about forgiving as a method of religious coping has more to do with religion than with coping. This point was illustrated in a story Baumeister told

at the American Psychological Association in 1997⁷. He was talking with a colleague about his plans to serve as a discussant on a panel focused on forgiveness. Her response was, "Oh, I don't believe in forgiveness." The belief was not stated in tentative scientific form of the kind we might expect from a social scientist. She didn't ask: What is your operational definition of forgiveness? She didn't say: I wonder what people mean by forgiveness, and I wonder about its effects. Instead, she made a statement that revealed her most fundamental beliefs and values.

This statement serves as a reminder that forgiveness is more than a method. It is a value, and, for many, a religious value. Her statement was, in certain respects, profoundly religious. This woman's view was not testable; it was not falsifiable. She simply did not believe in forgiveness, just as some do not believe in God, astrology, or the stock market.

Forgiveness should be understood within its religious context. Unfortunately, as Meek and McMinn (1997) note, many psychologists have detached forgiveness from its religious foundation, "so that it might be more acceptable to non-religious clients and therapists" (p. 60). However, forgiving is more than a therapeutic technique, and it should not be treated as simply another method of change akin to systematic desensitization, hypnosis, or autogenic training (Jones, 1995).

Clinicians who work with clients struggling with mistreatment need to be especially sensitive to the value-laden questions that accompany this topic. It is important to remember that clinical interventions that promote forgiving are also encouraging fundamental changes in significance. We are not saying that we shouldn't be doing just that at times; helping is not value-free. But helping professionals must be very explicit with clients about their professional values and respectful of their clients' right to accept or reject these values.

In a related sense, it is important to be aware of the differences in value and meanings of forgiveness to different religious groups. Members of different religious traditions may have generally favorable views towards forgiving. But they may think about and approach forgiving in different ways. For instance, for many Christians, forgiveness may be an unconditional value, an act of love and compassion offered to others regardless of the context or situation (Phillips, 1986). Many Jews, however, may see forgiveness more conditionally, dependent on whether the per-

petrator has shown remorse, the severity of the violation, or the length of time since the assault (Friedlander, 1986).

We need to learn more about how different religious and nonreligious groups view and approach forgiveness. In the process, we may find that religiously integrated forgiveness interventions are especially helpful to highly religious individuals. We may also find that forgiveness interventions should be tailored to fit within the worldviews of particular religious groups. And we may find that forgiveness interventions are simply inappropriate for some groups that place other values higher within their hierarchy of significance.

It is also important to remember that forgiveness is a value for researchers and practitioners as well as those they study and help. Our own models of forgiveness are embedded within our particular worldviews and values. We should be especially sensitive to the dangers of espousing as universal any models of forgiveness that grow out of specific faith traditions.

Two other potential value-related dangers exist. First, some, like Baumeister's colleague above, may be likely to reject the study of forgiveness out-of-hand. Indiscriminate *anti*-forgiveness values represent one potential roadblock to progress in this area of study. But indiscriminate *pro*-forgiveness values represent another potential pitfall. Researchers and practitioners who view forgiving as an "unqualified good" may be less than open to the hard questions and critical scrutiny that are so necessary to advance the field. Similarly, they also run the risk of overlooking other important values. What, for instance, happens to values of justice, fairness, and equity if we focus on forgiveness to the exclusion of these concerns? Enright's (1994) efforts to address the interface between the values of justice and forgiveness are particularly important here. To say that for too long we have focused on justice concerns to the exclusion of forgiveness is certainly true, but to substitute one set of imbalanced values for another seems a poor solution.

Obviously, our own values are showing here. We believe that the single-minded devotion to any end can become a problem when that end is defined narrowly or to the exclusion of other values (see James, 1902). A need for intimacy unbalanced by a need for autonomy can turn into a desperate dependency. The search for control can turn into fanaticism

when it is unbalanced by a concern for others. The pursuit of meaning can become cold and obsessive when it is removed from other interests. And, we believe, the search for peace through forgiveness can become destructive when it is unbalanced by the values of responsibility and justice. Ultimately, forgiveness cannot be studied effectively if it is isolated from other values and methods of coping.

Thinking about forgiving as a way of religious coping, then, alerts us to a host of terribly important value-related questions—not only for those we study and serve, but for ourselves as well.

CONCLUSIONS

Forgiveness is unlike other methods of coping in one important respect—the way it has been studied. Within the coping literature, literally hundreds of studies have addressed basic questions: How do people cope? What situations elicit coping? How does coping change over time? What forms of coping are associated with beneficial and detrimental outcomes? Only recently, however, have researchers begun to develop coping interventions. The situation is just the reverse for forgiveness. A limited number of forgiveness interventions have been conducted, but very little in the way of basic research has been conducted. Of course, we don't need to know why a solution works to go ahead with it anyway. (John Snow was able to prevent cholera without an understanding of the etiology of the disease.) But if this area of study is to advance, we will need to lay a deeper foundation of basic knowledge.

Exciting basic questions about forgiving persist: What do various groups of people mean by forgiveness? Just how common is forgiving in the profound sense that we are using here? When does forgiveness occur, and under what conditions? Who is likely to forgive? Who is not? What are the implications of forgiving for ourselves, for those we forgive, for marriages, families, communities, and society more generally?

We would like to conclude with a more general comment about our own discipline—psychology. At the risk of stereotyping, American psychology is largely a psychology of personal control (Pargament, 1997). As a profession, we have developed a number of ways to enhance our

control over what is not controlled. Psychodynamic practitioners try to make the unconscious conscious. Behaviorists try to help people master the contingencies of their lives. Cognitive therapists teach people how to gain control over their thoughts and feelings. Wonderful advances have been achieved in many areas. But our field is less knowledgeable and helpful when it comes to the uncontrollable—when we face situations that are less amenable to further action when we have to come to terms with fundamental human limitations.

Religion is more helpful here. Religion speaks a language unfamiliar to psychology—fear, surrender, letting go, conversion, faith, finitude, suffering, meaning, hope—and, of course, forgiveness. These terms grow out of the confrontation with the deepest crises of existence. They are terms that reflect our response to human frailty and mortality.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, these different worldviews, psychology (with its focus on the controllable) and religion (with its focus on the uncontrollable) have much to offer each other. Our capacities and our limitations are both part of the human condition; and, as we cope with life's most troubling problems, we have to struggle with both the possible and the futile.

Perhaps one of the reasons why psychology has largely overlooked the potential for significant transformation in coping is because many of the most powerful transformational mechanisms—from rites of passage to conversion—are rooted in religion. But psychology has much to gain by broadening its boundaries to include religious values and methods of coping. In opening itself up to these methods, new to psychology, but very old to the world, the field of psychology may be in for some surprises; paradoxically, it is through some of these methods of religious coping that people may be able to achieve their most profound changes.

Psychology has something to offer the religious world, in turn, when it shifts its sights to religious methods of coping, such as forgiving. By applying its critical thinking skills, research methods, and background in psychological intervention to the topic of forgiving, psychology may be able to work in concert with the members of many religious communities searching for significance in stressful times. In this sense, the study of forgiving may help to build a bridge between psychological and religious worlds, two worlds that have been separated for too long.

NOTES

1. Much of the discussion is a shorthand description of material presented in Pargament's book on the psychology of religion and coping (1997).

2. Note that the concept of "significance" is broader than the concept of "meaning," a construct that has a cognitive and favorable connotation; in our framework, meaning is only one possible object of significance.

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