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Religious Orientation, Guilt, Confession, and Forgiveness

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Religious orientation and psychological functioning were investigated in an analog study with 83 participants. After completing the Religious Orientation Scale (Allport & Ross, 1967), participants read a continuous narrative with three scenarios in which they first committed a dishonest act, and then felt compelled to confess what they had done. The final scenario contained a manipulation of grace or no-grace, in which half of the participants were forgiven for their act and half were not. Following each scenario, participants were tested for feelings of guilt and related behavioral and emotional responses. Intrinsically religious participants were more prone to guilt, more likely to confess their wrongdoing, and more likely to forgive themselves than extrinsically religious subjects. Guilt was found to have a mediating effect between intrinsic religiousness and some, but not all, outcome variables. The potentially beneficial consequences of guilt are discussed.

In 1980 Bergin (1980b) suggested that some aspects of religious beliefs may contribute to mental health, and that psychologists need to empirically evaluate these facets of religion (Bergin, 1980a). Several studies suggest there is in fact what can appropriately be termed "good religion" that does not distract from mental health, and perhaps contributes to it (Allport & Ross, 1967; Bergin, 1983, 1991; Bergin, Masters, & Richards, 1987; Bergin, Stinchfield, Gaskin, Masters, & Sullivan, 1988; Lindenthal, Myers, Pepper, & Stern,

1970; Richards, Smith, & Davis, 1989).

The most consistent finding of "good religion" has to do with Allport and Ross's (1967) work on religious orientation, in which they make a distinction between intrinsically and extrinsically religious individuals. This differentiation has proven useful in a number of studies. Several studies propose that intrinsics enjoy a healthier religious experience than extrinsics (Bergin, 1991; Bergin, Masters, & Richards, 1987; Donahue, 1985; Watson, Morris, Foster, & Hood, 1986; Watson, Hood, & Morris, 1985; Watson, Morris, & Hood, 1988) as they tend to "find their master motive in religion" (Allport & Ross, 1967, p. 434), as compared to extrinsics who appear to evaluate their religious beliefs in light of their other needs—security, social contacts, self-justification, etc.

Though guilt has been theoretically linked to psychological disturbance, the relationships among religion, guilt, and disturbance have been debated vigorously. Guilt has sometimes been perceived as a maladaptive and self-defeating emotion accompanying religious faith (Ellis, 1960), and sometimes as an emotion that reflects empathy for others and leads to useful reparative actions (Mowrer & Veszelszky, 1980; Tangney, 1991). This distinction was highlighted in the 1980 debate among Allen Bergin (1980a, 1980b), Albert Ellis (1980), and Gary Walls (1980) in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. In his description of theistic values, Bergin (1980a) included taking responsibility and providing restitution for one's actions, and accepting "guilt, suffering, and contrition as keys to change" (p. 100). Ellis (1980) responded that while one should take responsibility for harmful and immoral acts, feelings of guilt should be minimized. Ellis defined guilt as "self-damnation in addition to denouncing one's acts" (p. 636). Elsewhere, Ellis has described the guilt resulting from the concept of sin as "the direct and indirect cause of virtually all neu-

rotic disturbance" (Ellis, 1960, p. 192).

An interesting finding reported by Richards (1991) is that intrinsically religious participants score higher on a guilt-proneness scale than extrinsic participants. However, despite being more prone to guilt feelings, intrinsics do not report more depression or less existential well-being than other participants. Similarly, Tangney and her colleagues have reported several studies suggesting that guilt-proneness, unlike shame-proneness, is unrelated to psychological maladjustment (Burggraf & Tangney, 1990; Gramzow & Tangney, 1992; Tangney, 1991; Tangney, Wagner, Burggraf, Gramzow, & Fletcher, 1991; Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992).

Thus, guilt, for the intrinsically religious, is not always a negative phenomenon. For example, when Israel's King David committed adultery and murder, he felt deep remorse:

Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. (Psalm 51: 2-4)

David's sorrowful remorse led him to marvel at God's grace rather than fall into a state of excessive self-deprecation. He later concluded: "Cleans me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:7).

Christian authors have used these biblical examples to note a positive role for remorse or certain forms of guilt. Narramore (1984) distinguishes between constructive sorrow, a remorseful response leading to confession and reconciliation, and guilt, a self-focused response that damages one's self-image. Richards (1991) exhorts counselors to make a similar distinction in their work with religiously devout students:

Thus, although religiously devout students may be more prone to guilt, counselors should not assume that this is dysfunctional for them. In their desire to help clients feel better, practitioners have at times indiscriminately attempted to neutralize clients' guilt without giving sufficient consideration to whether the guilt was an appropriate emotional response to actual wrongdoings. (p. 194)

Such divergent conclusions, coupled with Bergin's (1980a) suggestion that psychologists conduct empirical investigations on the effects of religious beliefs, warrant further investigation concerning the effects of religious orientation and guilt on emotions and behaviors. The present study was designed to explore the relationship between reli-

gious orientation, experiences of guilt and forgiveness, and self-reported well-being. We hypothesized that intrinsically religious participants will be more likely than extrinsically religious participants to feel guilt and to have more reparative responses to their transgressions.

Method

Participants

Participants in the study were 64 women and 44 men recruited at Loyola University of Chicago. Of the 108 participants, 53 were recruited from a campus chapter of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and 55 from undergraduate psychology classes. The InterVarsity students participated on a voluntary basis and the undergraduate students received class credit for their participation.

Manipulation

Participants were informed that the study was designed to assess dating and work attitudes of college populations. After completing an informed consent form, participants were given a packet of questionnaires and hypothetical scenarios in the following order: a measure of religious orientation, a narrative description of a hypothetical scenario, a set of Likert-scale items on which participants rated their likely response to scenario, a second hypothetical scenario, a second set of Likert-scale items, a third hypothetical scenario, and a third set of Likert-scale items.

The three hypothetical scenarios developed for this study comprise the experimental manipulation. All participants received identical scripts for the first two scenarios, except that gender references were matched with the gender of the participants. The first scenario was designed to induce feelings of guilt by creating a situation in which the person reads that he/she chose to lie to his/her boss by calling in sick in order to go on a date with a person he/she has been interested in for 2 months. The second scenario added information to the first, and was designed to increase feelings of guilt by hypothetically placing the person at the scene of the date, a party, in which he or she runs into a co-worker who is close to the boss. This co-worker informs the person that he/she has been working extra hours in order to have this day off and naturally assumes that the person has done the same. The scenario ends with the person hypothetically waking up the day after and realizing that there is no alternative but to

call the boss and confess the untruth.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions for the third scenario. Half the participants were given a "grace" scenario in which they hypothetically call their boss to confess, apologize, offer various forms of compensation, and ask for forgiveness. In this "grace" scenario the boss is readily understanding and forgiving, demanding no compensation except a promise to come to him or her in the future first if a similar situation should arise. The other half of the participants were given a "no-grace" scenario in which they call their boss and offer the same confession as the first group. However, in this scenario the boss is harsh, overtly angry, and unforgiving. The "no-grace" scenario ends with the boss telling the worker that if he or she (the boss) weren't so short staffed, he or she (the worker) would definitely be fired.

After reading and completing the packet, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Instruments

The Religious Orientation Scale (Allport & Ross, 1967) was used to measure intrinsic and extrinsic religiousness. Those scoring above the median on the intrinsic scale and below the median on the extrinsic scale were classified as intrinsic. Those scoring above the median on the extrinsic scale and below the median on the intrinsic scale were classified as Extrinsic. Some participants ($n = 27$) were dropped from the analysis because they either scored above the median on both the intrinsic and extrinsic scales (what Allport and Ross called proreligiousness) or because they scored below the median on both scales (nonreligious), leaving 42 intrinsically religious and 41 extrinsically religious participants.

Likert-type scales were used after each hypothetical scenario to assess whether intrinsics and extrinsics differ in perceptions of guilt, grace, and forgiveness, and likelihood of committing and repeating the wrongful act. Participants indicated their response to each statement on 10-point Likert scales, where 1 is "not at all likely" and 10 is "extremely likely." After the first scenario, they answered the following questions:

1. How likely are you to feel guilty about calling in sick?
2. How likely are you to have called in sick?
3. How likely are you to have talked to your boss earlier and tried to get the day off?

4. How likely are you to call back and tell the truth?
5. How likely is it that you would do this again in the future?
6. How likely are you to feel good about getting the day off?

After reading the second scenario, participants responded to a similar set of questions, rated on the same Likert-scale format as the first set of questions:

1. How likely are you to feel guilty about calling in sick?
2. How likely are you to call your boss and confess the truth?
3. How likely are you to repeat this action in the future?
4. How likely are you to feel good about getting the day off?

After the final scenario, participants responded to the following questions on a Likert scale where 1 is "to a very small extent" and 10 is "to a very great extent":

1. To what extent do you feel better about calling?
2. To what extent do you feel happy about calling?
3. To what extent are you prone to repeating this action?
4. To what extent do you feel good about the date?
5. To what extent do you feel good about getting an extra day off?
6. To what extent do you feel guilty?
7. To what extent do you feel forgiven?
8. To what extent do you forgive yourself?
9. To what extent do you feel that telling the truth is enough for you to go back to work with a clean conscience?
10. To what extent do you feel that God has forgiven you?

Analysis

First, three 2 x 3 split-plot Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were computed to investigate the effects of religious orientation on self-reported emotions and predicted behaviors. Religious orientation was the between-subjects and level of information (scenario 1–scenario 2–scenario 3) was the repeated-measures factor. To control for the increased probability of Type I error resulting from multiple hypothesis tests, we selected a conservative alpha level of .01. Second, to assess likelihood of confession, another

Table 1

Mean Ratings and Standard Deviations on Likert-Scale Items by Religious Orientation Following Each of the Three Scenarios

Items	Scenario 1		Scenario 2		Scenario 3	
	I	E	I	E	I	E
Guilt						
<i>M</i>	9.41	7.66	9.81	8.66	7.38	6.83
<i>SD</i>	1.08	2.60	0.55	1.65	3.07	2.68
<i>n</i>	42	41	42	41	42	41
Likelihood of committing similar act in the future						
<i>M</i>	2.07	3.59	1.55	2.73	1.64	2.83
<i>SD</i>	1.76	2.39	1.33	1.88	1.53	2.31
<i>n</i>	42	41	42	41	42	41
Feeling good about getting day off						
<i>M</i>	2.81	4.37	1.95	3.17	2.02	3.63
<i>SD</i>	2.93	3.05	2.01	2.48	1.99	2.67
<i>n</i>	42	41	42	41	42	41
Likelihood of confessing action						
<i>M</i>	6.19	3.02	7.52	5.32	–	–
<i>SD</i>	3.03	2.25	2.56	2.56		
<i>n</i>	42	41	42	41		

Note. "I" indicates intrinsic religious orientation, "E" indicates extrinsic orientation. Scores range from 1 to 10 with higher scores reflecting higher degrees of guilt, likelihood of confessing and repeating wrongful act, and likelihood of feeling good about the day off.

split-plot ANOVA was computed with religious orientation as one factor and level of information (scenario 1–scenario 2) as the repeated-measures factor. Third, to assess the effects of the scenarios, additional 2 x 2 Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were performed with religious orientation (intrinsic-extrinsic) as one factor and case outcome (grace–no grace) as the other. Again, a conservative alpha level of .01 was used to control for the inflated likelihood of Type I error that comes with multiple hypothesis tests. Fourth, we used correlations and multiple regression to determine if guilt plays a mediating role in the relationship between intrinsic religiousness and various outcome measures.

Results

Several interesting main effects emerged when the 2 x 3 split-plot ANOVAs were used to evaluate self-reported emotions and predicted behavior for intrinsically- and extrinsically-religious participants. No significant interaction effects were observed.

When self-reported guilt was used as the dependent variable (see Table 1), we found that intrinsics reported higher levels of guilt than extrinsics, $F(1,81) = 13.3, p < .001$. There was also a main effect for level of information, $F(2,80) = 29.2, p < .001$, as all participants increased their guilt ratings after the second scenario (talking to co-worker), $t(82) = 4.1, p < .001$, and decreased their guilt ratings after the third scenario (calling to confess act), $t(81) = 6.5, p < .001$.

When likelihood of committing a similar act in the future was the dependent variable (see Table 1), we found a significant main effect for religious orientation, $F(1,81) = 17.0, p < .001$, with intrinsics reporting less likelihood of repeating the behavior than extrinsics (intrinsics also reported less likelihood of calling in sick in the first place, $t(80) = 3.4, p < .005$). There was also a main effect for level of information, $F(2,80) = 5.8, p < .005$, as all participants reported decreasing their likelihood of calling in sick in the future after reading the second scenario.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Final-Scenario Forgiveness Items in Which Significant Differences Were Observed Between Intrinsic and Extrinsic Participants

Items	Intrinsics	Extrinsics
Likelihood of forgiving self**		
<i>M</i>	6.98	5.15
<i>SD</i>	2.50	2.35
<i>n</i>	42	41
Likelihood of feeling forgiven by God***		
<i>M</i>	9.38	7.12
<i>SD</i>	1.04	3.00
<i>n</i>	42	41

** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

When using participants' likely feelings about getting the day off as a dependent variable (see Table 1), we found a main effect for religious orientation, $F(1,81) = 9.8, p < .005$, with extrinsics reporting themselves likely to feel better about having the day off than intrinsics. Again, there was also a main effect for level of information, $F(2,80) = 8.8, p < .001$, with participants reporting themselves likely to feel worse about getting the day off after talking to the co-worker (Scenario 2).

Thus, as participants received more information they reported themselves likely to experience greater feelings of guilt until they were told they confessed their misdeed, at which point the guilt decreased. Similarly, participants reported less likelihood of repeating the offense, and less probability of feeling satisfaction with getting the day off after reading the information in Scenario 2. Intrinsics reported more likelihood of guilt, less likelihood of repeating the offense, and less probable satisfaction with getting the day off than extrinsics.

We were also interested in knowing if participants would report themselves as likely to confess their action after the first and second scenarios (see Table 1). This could not be assessed after the third scenario because confessing was given as part of the scenario. A 2×2 ANOVA was computed for perceived likelihood of confession (as the dependent variable) with religious orientation as one factor and level of information (Scenario 1–Scenario 2) as the repeated-measures factor. Intrinsics reported them-

selves as more likely to confess to their boss after the first and second scenarios than extrinsics, $F(1,81) = 26.7, p < .001$. All participants, regardless of religious orientation, reported themselves as more likely to confess their wrong after the second scenario than after the first, $F(1,81) = 55.0, p < .001$. No significant interactions were found.

In order to assess reported likelihood of confession, forgiveness, and the emotional consequences of the scenarios, several additional 2×2 Analyses of Variance (ANOVAS) were performed with religious orientation (intrinsic–extrinsic) as one factor and case outcome (grace–no grace) as the other. Several differences between intrinsics and extrinsics were noted.

Following the last scenario, intrinsics expressed a greater likelihood of forgiving themselves, $F(1,79) = 11.7, p < .005$, and were more inclined than extrinsics to report the likelihood of feeling forgiven by God, $F(1,79) = 23.1, p < .001$ (see Table 2). No main effects for case outcome and no significant interactions between religious orientation and outcome of the scenario were found.

Differences were also observed on the reported feelings after calling the boss in Scenario 3. Those in the grace condition reported that they would likely feel better that they had called than those in the no-grace condition, $F(1,79) = 79.0, p < .001$. In addition, intrinsics reported feeling better about calling than extrinsics, $F(1,79) = 15.7, p < .001$. Extrinsics reported being more likely to feel good about the date than intrinsics, $F(1,79) = 36.8, p < .001$. There

Table 3

Correlations of Selected Variables With Intrinsic Religiousness, Guilt, and Intrinsic Religiousness After Partialling Out Variance Associated With Guilt

Dependent Variable	Intrinsic Religiousness	Guilt	Intrinsic Religiousness after partialling out guilt
TIME 1			
Feel good about getting day off	-.353**	-.445**	-.186
Likelihood of doing this again in the future	-.414**	-.415**	-.275*
TIME 2			
Feel good about getting day off	-.253*	-.475**	-.050

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

was no interaction between religious orientation and case outcome for feelings about the date.

Finally, we were interested in knowing if guilt mediates the relationship between intrinsic religiousness and the self-reported dependent variables (likelihood of confessing, feelings of enjoying the date, and so on). We used a method of identifying mediating variables adapted from that described by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, we determined which Likert-scale dependent variables were significantly correlated with intrinsic religiousness. Second, we determined if there was a significant correlation between self-reported guilt and intrinsic religiousness. If both these correlations were significant, we entered guilt and intrinsic religiousness (in that order) into a hierarchical multiple regression equation attempting to predict scores on the dependent variable. If guilt had a significant correlation with the dependent variable and intrinsic religiousness did not (after partialling out the variance due to guilt), then guilt was taken to have a mediating effect on the outcome variable. Using this method, we found guilt to have a significant mediating effect on respondents' feeling good about getting the day off after scenarios 1 (Guilt: $t = 3.3$, $p < .005$; Intrinsicness: $t = 1.7$, ns) and 2 (Guilt: $t = 4.1$, $p < .001$; Intrinsicness: $t = 0.5$, ns). There were no other dependent variables for which guilt completely

mediated the effects of intrinsic religiousness. However, guilt partially mediated the relationship between intrinsic religiousness and the likelihood of repeating the offense, reported after scenario 1 (Guilt: $t = 2.6$, $p < .05$; Intrinsicness: $t = 2.6$, $p < .05$ —see Table 3).

Discussion

This study supports Richards' (1991) somewhat surprising report that intrinsically religious individuals are more prone to guilt than extrinsically religious individuals. A reflexive interpretation of Richards' findings and these data might be that intrinsically religious people are more guilt-prone and therefore more likely to disturb themselves with self-condemning thoughts and beliefs (Ellis, 1960, 1971, 1983, 1992a, 1992b). However, these results suggest that guilt may play a partially instrumental role for the intrinsically religious. This is consistent with Tangney's (1991) findings that guilt-proneness is often related to empathy for others and reparative actions. Tangney and others (e.g., Wicker, Payne, & Morgan, 1983) have noted that guilt and shame are distinct emotions despite their commonalities.

The present study provides evidence that guilt among intrinsically religious individuals is not necessarily destructive. Intrinsically religious participants, with their heightened guilt response, were more

likely to forgive themselves and feel forgiven by God, and reported feeling better about calling the boss in Scenario 3. Despite their heightened guilt-proneness, intrinsically religious individuals have consistently been found to experience greater emotional health than their externally religious counterparts (Donahue, 1985; Richards, 1991).

One possible explanation is that stronger internal beliefs in self-forgiveness and forgiveness from God following confession help protect intrinsics from internalizing negative feelings. Extrinsic are less protected by beliefs of forgiveness and, therefore, may be more likely to convert their guilt feelings to emotions of depression, anxiety, hostility, and so on. For the intrinsically religious, feeling forgiven is more related to doing the right thing and less related to the response of others.

Intrinsic religiousness appears to inhibit certain behaviors and emotions. Intrinsics reported themselves as less likely than extrinsics to have committed the dishonest act, less likely to repeat it in the future, and less likely to have experienced enjoyment of the date and the day off. Responses on most of these variables appear to be due to factors other than, or in addition to, the guilt they reported likely to experience. However, guilt played a mediating role in causing intrinsics to feel worse about hypothetically getting the day off.

Guilt and religious orientation are also associated with confession. Across all scenarios, intrinsics were more likely than extrinsics to confess their misdeed. This suggests that intrinsics' confessions may be more related to internal factors, and less influenced by external events. For the intrinsically religious, it may be that violating internal standards leads to a desire for confession. The emotional and physical benefits of confession (Pennebaker, Hughes, & O'Heeron, 1987) then reinforce the process. It should be noted that violating these internal standards also appears to lead to greater feelings of guilt for the intrinsically religious. However, we see no evidence here that increased guilt brings about an increased likelihood of confession. Rather, guilt is associated with other factors that lead to confession.

There are several limitations to this study. First, it is an analog study where participants described potential reactions to a hypothetical situation. It is difficult to know if, in an identical "real life" situation, they would respond as they reported in this study. Additional non-analog studies on this topic are necessary. Second, the social desirability of

responses was not measured in this study. It is possible that the intrinsically and extrinsically religious responded in socially desirable directions based on their understanding of the roles of guilt and confession. In future studies a measure of social desirability of response style should be included. Third, the sampling method was not ideal. In order to get sufficient diversity in the sample, two groups were used. Those participants from the campus chapter of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship were perhaps distinct from the general psychology students in ways other than religious orientation. Researchers who are able to start with a larger research pool may offer more precise findings and interpretations in future studies. Fourth, the measurement of guilt was dependent on self-reported responses to Likert-scale items. Using an instrument with known reliability and validity would enhance the generalizability of the study. One instrument that shows initial promise is the Self-Conscious Affect and Attribution Inventory (Tangney, 1990). Finally, it seems likely that guilt is a multifaceted emotion that will require further distinction in the future. Mosher (1966) suggested a distinction between sex guilt, hostile guilt, and morality-conscience guilt many years ago, but clarifying research has not followed his initial report.

The main contribution of this study is that it adds to the growing evidence that some forms of religiousness and guilt are adaptive. Clinicians who discourage guilt in their clients might be wise to consider the positive behaviors that are associated with guilt (McMinn, 1984). Richards (1991) wisely concludes:

Before intervening, counselors need to carefully assess whether guilt manifested by clients is realistic and potentially functional or irrational and dysfunctional. (p. 194)

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