

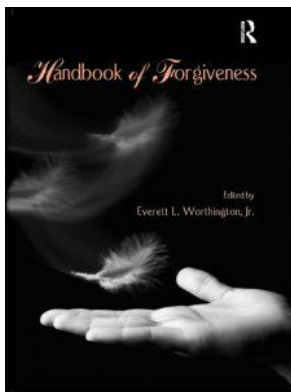
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Chapter Six

Anger Toward God: A New Frontier in Forgiveness Research

Julie Juola Exline
Alyce Martin

The experience of anger is not limited to the interpersonal domain. When suffering occurs that seems uncontrollable and unfair, individuals sometimes blame God and become intensely angry toward God. However, people often believe that it is morally inappropriate to feel angry toward God, which implies that they may be reluctant to admit such feelings or even to discuss the possibility (Novotni & Petersen, 2001). But taboo or not, anger toward God appears to be common. In the 1988 General Social Survey, a broad-based survey of American households, 63% of respondents reported that they sometimes felt anger toward God. Frequent or unresolved anger toward God has been linked with emotional distress (e.g., Exline, Yali, & Lobel, 1999; Pargament, Zinnbauer, et al., 1998), suggesting that the topic has clinical relevance. Because research on anger toward God is in its infancy, our goal here is to describe the handful of studies that exist while highlighting many questions that still need to be addressed.

PERSONAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT ANGER TOWARD GOD

Suffering can prompt a variety of negative emotions regarding God, including confusion (Exline, 2002a), mistrust (Murray-Swank, 2003), and a sense of being punished (Pargament, Zinnbauer, et al., 1998). Positive feelings toward God can also occur in the wake of negative events. For example, undergraduates in one study typically reported moderate levels of love, trust, and closeness toward God after a crisis (Exline, 2002a). Because our goal for this chapter is to suggest comparisons with interpersonal anger and forgiveness, we will focus on anger toward God.



People can conceivably feel anger toward God even if they view God as an impersonal source of energy or power, as in many Eastern faiths. However, our discussion will apply most directly to belief systems that emphasize personal relationships between humans and God.

Although we suggest parallels between anger toward God and interpersonal anger, we have chosen not to use the terms *forgiving God* or *forgiveness of God*. Most forgiveness definitions emphasize the moral culpability of offenders. Many people do not believe that God is capable of moral wrongdoing, rendering the term *forgiveness* inappropriate (see Moon, 1999). To avoid confusion, we will speak of resolving anger toward God, rather than forgiving God.

The topic of anger toward God is not entirely new in psychology. Ideas relevant to anger toward God appear in research on God images (e.g., Benson & Spilka, 1973), spiritual development (e.g., Hall & Edwards, 2002), “amazing apostates” (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997), religious conflict (e.g., Nielsen & Fultz, 1995), negative religious coping and spiritual struggles (e.g., Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001; Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2004; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998; Pargament, Zinnbauer, et al., 1998), spiritual risk (e.g., Fitchett, 1999a, 1999b; Fitchett, Rybarczyk, & DeMarco, 1999), and spiritual injury (Lawson, Drebing, Berg, Vincelle, & Penk, 1998). Although all of these literatures are relevant to our topic, space constraints dictate that we emphasize ideas and findings that focus specifically on anger toward God. Readers seeking an overview of religious and spiritual struggles more generally are referred to other recent overviews (e.g., Exline, 2002b; Exline & Rose, in press; Fitchett, 1999a, 1999b; Pargament, 1997, 2002; Pargament et al., 2004).

REVIEW OF THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

We have organized this section as follows. First, we suggest some predictors of anger toward God. Second, we briefly discuss potential consequences of anger toward God. Finally, we outline some means that people may use to resolve anger toward God.

Predictors of Anger Toward God

Although empirical research remains sparse, studies have identified some situational and individual difference factors that predict anger toward God. Many of these factors parallel predictors of interpersonal anger and unforgiveness, as reviewed below. We also suggest some potential predictors that have not yet been empirically tested.

Undeserved Suffering as a Dominant Theme. Most discussions of anger toward God center on a common theme: God’s willingness to cause or permit undeserved suffering (Kushner, 1981; McCloskey, 1987; Novotni & Petersen, 2001; Smedes, 1984; Yancey, 1998). In some situations, people attribute blame to God because there is no evident

human cause. For instance, people often blame God for untimely deaths, illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters. Yet even when it is easy to identify human causes of suffering, people may hold God responsible for failing to prevent the harm. Examples include atrocities such as the Holocaust (Brenner, 1980), the private pain of sexual abuse (Murray-Swank, 2003), and common offenses, such as infidelity and divorce (Exline, 2002a).

Regardless of the specific form of suffering, the notion of injustice emerges as a core theme in cases of anger toward God. Anger toward God parallels interpersonal anger in this respect. Worthington uses the term *injustice gap* to describe this discrepancy between how things are and how they would be if things were fair (Worthington, 2003). The larger the injustice gap, the more anger a person is likely to feel, and the more difficult it will be to resolve the anger.

Severity of Harm and Beliefs About Underlying Motives. Severe offenses create larger injustice gaps than do mild offenses (Worthington, 2003). Forgiveness research suggests that the more severe and intentional an offense, the more difficult it is to forgive (e.g., Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). Parallel findings are starting to emerge from studies of anger toward God. In one recent study (Exline & Bushman, 2004), undergraduates were asked to recall a negative event in which they believed that God may have played a role. Negative feelings were greater to the extent that God was viewed as responsible for the suffering—particularly when God's actions were viewed as malevolent, punitive, disappointing, illogical, or shaming. Here we see a direct parallel between interpersonal anger and anger toward God. People become angry toward others—and toward God—if they believe that they have been hurt deeply and intentionally.

Inflated Sense of Entitlement. Anger toward God may be especially characteristic of a specific group of individuals: those with an inflated, narcissistic sense of entitlement. High-entitlement persons believe that they merit special treatment, and they are highly invested in collecting on the debts they believe others owe them (e.g., Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004; Emmons, 1987). Because of its link with narcissism, entitlement also implies a desire to “save face” and a reluctance to compromise personal pride. As such, it seems likely that highly entitled persons should readily perceive injustices toward themselves, and they should hold on to anger about these events. Consistent with this reasoning, studies have shown that entitlement predicts both readiness to take offense (McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, & Mooney, 2003) and reluctance to forgive (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004).

In a recent study focused on anger toward God, entitlement predicted greater negative emotion toward God and more negative attributions about God's intentions; it decreased belief in God when negative emotions did occur (Exline & Bushman, 2004). High-entitlement individuals were especially sensitive to the issue of being repaid. If they believed that God had repaid them (even partially) for their suffering, they

tended to report a positive impact of the event on their bond with God. If they did not feel repaid, they tended to report a negative impact. Being repaid was less crucial for those scoring lower on entitlement.

Emphasis on Justice Versus Mercy. According to recent research (Worthington, 2003; Worthington, Berry, & Parrott, 2001), people differ in their relative favoring of conscientiousness-based virtues (e.g., duty, responsibility) versus warmth-based virtues (e.g., love, mercy). One might speculate that those favoring conscientiousness would hold onto anger toward God until a sense of justice was restored. On the other hand, those favoring mercy might have difficulty accepting the harsh side of divine justice—for example, biblical references to God-ordained capital punishment, war, eye-for-an-eye retribution, and the prospect of hell. These hypotheses await empirical testing.

Religiosity/Spirituality and Perceived Closeness to God. The forgiveness literature suggests various reasons why feeling close to God should protect against developing grudges toward God. First, forgiveness is more likely when two parties share a close, committed relationship before the offense (e.g., Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Second, religiosity predicts more positive attitudes about forgiveness in general (e.g., Tsang, McCullough, & Hoyt, in press). Both of these factors would suggest that people will not want to stay angry toward God if they feel close to God and want to maintain this close relationship.

Consistent with the above predictions, our survey research with undergraduates suggests lower levels of anger toward God among students who report high current religiosity and retrospectively report greater perceived closeness to God prior to the event (Exline & Bushman, 2004). However, higher religiosity was also strongly linked with belief that anger toward God was morally unacceptable. This association raised the question of whether devout followers reported less anger toward God simply because they were afraid to admit their anger. This did not appear to be the case. The negative correlation between religiosity and anger toward God remained significant when we controlled for beliefs about the acceptability of such feelings. Nonetheless, the finding that religiously committed individuals often see anger toward God as morally wrong suggests a need for careful, sensitive assessment within religiously committed samples.

Although the above findings emphasize religiosity, distinctions between organized religion and personal spirituality may be important in understanding anger toward God. For example, some people might turn away from organized religion in reaction to teachings that present harsh images of God. These spiritual (but not religious) individuals might have attributions and images of God that would differ from those of religious affiliates. Such issues await empirical testing.

Also, it seems probable that people's images of God would moderate the associations between religious or spiritual commitment and anger toward God. Those who view God as angry and punitive might find themselves in a difficult bind, fearful of admitting anger toward God but also reluctant to trust God or draw close to God. On

the other hand, those whose images of God emphasize love and mercy face a different challenge. Assuming that they hold God responsible for suffering, they need to reconcile God's role in suffering with their benevolent views of God.

Parental Relationships and Attachment. Prior research and theory suggest that images of God often mirror images of human fathers (e.g., Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1975; Hall, 2004; Rizzuto, 1979). Would a strained relationship with one's father predict problems in one's perceived relationship with God as well? Consistent with this logic, studies suggest that women who suffer sexual abuse from their fathers often have negative God images and difficulty trusting God (see Murray-Swank, 2003, for a review). Complementary results emerged from an interview study of homeless men (Smith & Exline, 2002). In that study, reports of a poor current relationship with one's father were associated with (a) more problems in one's perceived relationship with God, (b) a more frequent sense that God was punishing the self, and (c) somewhat greater belief that it was morally appropriate to hold on to negative feelings toward God. The men's earlier histories with their fathers were also important, particularly in terms of the simple presence versus absence of their fathers in the home: Participants were much less likely to recall problems in their early relationships with God if their fathers had lived with them during childhood.

The data on homeless men also raised the possibility that maternal relationships may be important in predicting one's perceived relationship with God. Such a finding would be consistent with prior research and theorizing, showing links between God images and maternal relationships (Vergote & Tamayo, 1981). Only 4 of the 52 homeless men in our sample reported that their mothers had been absent during their childhood years, which renders our findings tentative. However, despite the relative rarity of a mother's absence, a statistically significant effect emerged: The absence of one's mother during childhood predicted a higher level of recollected problems in the men's early relationships with God (Smith & Exline, 2002). Also, a sense of having been treated well by one's mother was associated with fewer perceived problems in one's relationship with God—and with greater odds of resolving such problems when they did occur. Although preliminary and awaiting replication, these data suggest that both maternal and paternal relationships may be important predictors of people's perceived relationships with God.

Because parental relationships are so central to attachment bonds, it seems sensible to predict that attachment styles would be linked with a person's propensity to experience negative feelings toward God (see Kirkpatrick, 1999). Secure attachment is associated with a greater propensity to forgive others (e.g., Davidson, 2001; Luebbert, 2000). Also, some evidence demonstrates that people can turn to God as a substitute attachment figure (e.g., Hall, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 1998). Data from two studies offer some support for a link between attachment style and anger toward God. Among college students, insecure attachment predicted more negative feelings toward God after life crises (Exline, 2002a). Among homeless men, insecure attachment (in particular, avoidant attachment) was associated with greater recollection of problems in one's

early relationship with God (Smith & Exline, 2002). Though preliminary, these results suggest that secure attachment bonds predict fewer problems in people's perceived relationships with God.

Summary. These preliminary data suggest that predictors of anger toward God often parallel predictors of interpersonal anger and unforgiveness. People become angry toward God when they view God as responsible for severe offenses. Perceived closeness to God might buffer against anger, whereas insecure attachment and a sense of entitlement seem to contribute to angry feelings.

Possible Consequences of Anger Toward God: Physical, Psychological, and Spiritual

Data on the consequences of anger toward God are still sparse. However, a number of findings suggest that anger toward God may have consequences for physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being.

Physical Effects. One study of 96 medical rehabilitation inpatients showed a link between anger toward God at admission and poorer recovery (as assessed via performance on activities of daily living) at 4 months postadmission (Fitchett et al., 1999). Negative religious coping, more generally, has also been linked with negative outcomes in terms of health and well-being (for reviews, see Pargament, 2002; Pargament et al., 2004). For example, in a longitudinal cohort study of 596 medical patients aged 55 and older, religious struggle at baseline predicted greater mortality risk over a 2-year period, even when controlling for demographic factors, physical health status, and mental health indices (Pargament et al., 2001). Notably, two of the religious struggle items that predicted mortality risk were relevant to anger toward God: They assessed feelings of abandonment by God and of questioning God's love for the self.

Psychological Correlates. Frequent or prolonged anger toward God has been linked with global indices of distress and poor adjustment, although the causal relationships remain unclear. In a study of 92 caregivers of terminally ill patients, seeing one's situation as unjust, as unfair punishment from God, or as desertion by God was associated with greater reports of depression and anxiety (Mickley, Pargament, Brant, & Hipp, 1998). Studies of college students suggest that frequent or unresolved anger toward God correlates with low self-esteem (Pargament, Zinnbauer et al., 1998), depression (Exline et al., 1999), anxiety (Pargament, Zinnbauer et al., 1998), trait anger (Exline et al., 1999), poor problem-solving skills (Pargament, Zinnbauer et al., 1998), and insecure attachment (Exline, 2002a; Hall & Edwards, 2002). Unfortunately, because studies to date have used cross-sectional, correlational designs, we cannot determine the direction of causality.

Spiritual Effects: Angry Withdrawal and Unbelief. It seems likely that anger toward God would often appear as part of a constellation of spiritual distress. Consistent with this logic, correlational studies have revealed that frequent anger toward God tends to co-occur with other spiritual struggles, including guilt and interpersonal conflict surrounding religious issues (e.g., Nielsen & Fultz, 1995; Pargament, Smith, et al., 1998; Pargament, Zinnbauer, et al., 1998).

We are particularly interested in the issue of whether anger toward God might lead to decreased belief in God's existence. Our interest was piqued by an early study of anger toward God among undergraduates (Exline et al., 1999), which revealed a counterintuitive finding: Those who reported no belief in God reported more grudges toward God than believers. At first glance, this finding seemed to reflect an error. How could people be angry with God if they did not believe in God? Reanalyses of a second dataset (Exline, Fisher, Rose, & Kampani, 2004; Kampani & Exline, 2002) revealed similar patterns: Those who endorsed their religious beliefs as "atheist/agnostic" or "none/unsure" reported more anger toward God than those who reported a religious affiliation. Further analyses identified a group of *conflicted believers* (or *slipping believers*), all of whom had previously believed that God exists (or might exist) but no longer believed at the time of the study. When compared with believers, these individuals reported more anger toward God. These findings raised the question of whether anger might actually affect belief in God's existence, an idea in line with Novotni and Petersen's (2001) clinical descriptions of *emotional atheism*.

Studies of traumatic events suggest a possible link between suffering, anger toward God, and doubts about God's existence. According to Cook and Wimberly (1983), 33% of parents who suffered the death of a child reported doubts about God in the first year of bereavement. In another study, 90% of mothers who had given birth to a profoundly retarded child voiced doubts about the existence of God (Childs, 1985). Our survey research with undergraduates has focused directly on the association between anger at God and self-reported drops in belief (Exline et al., 2004). In the wake of a negative life event, anger toward God predicted decreased belief in God's existence. Furthermore, when we looked only at those who showed some drop in belief, belief was least likely to recover for those who reported that they were angry toward God and had chosen to turn away from God. In addition, an open-ended question revealed that 9% of those who had resolved negative feelings stated that they had done so by deciding not to believe in God (Exline, 2002a). Because these data were based on retrospective reports rather than longitudinal analysis, they should be interpreted with caution. Yet they raise the possibility that anger toward God—and subsequent decisions to withdraw—may lead to reduced belief in God's existence.

Summary. Clearly, longitudinal and experimental studies are needed to make firm conclusions about the consequences of anger toward God. However, studies to date suggest that anger toward God could impair health and might also decrease belief in God's existence. Data on mental health consequences are correlational, creating a chicken-and-egg problem: Anger toward God could lead to distress or vice versa, or a

third variable might account for the link. Future studies might also compare the consequences of interpersonal grudges with the consequences of grudges toward God—a topic that, to the best of our knowledge, remains completely unexplored.

Resolving Negative Feelings Toward God

Once people become angry toward God, how do they resolve the anger? Of course, this question assumes a desire to reduce the anger—a desire that not everyone has. Nonetheless, our study of undergraduates showed that 80% of those who reported negative feelings toward God indicated that the feelings decreased over time (Exline, 2002a). What prompts this decreased anger? Research has not been sufficiently sophisticated to offer systematic, process-oriented models. However, preliminary data do exist. We describe these findings briefly below.

Parallels with Interpersonal Forgiveness. Some of the findings about resolution of anger toward God suggest clear parallels with interpersonal forgiveness. For example, people are more likely to forgive others if they receive apologies (e.g., Darby & Schlenker, 1982; McCullough et al., 1998; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989) or other restitution (e.g., Witvliet, Worthington, Wade, & Berry, 2002; Worthington, 2003). Odds are that God will not appear to a person with a confession of wrongdoing or an apology. Nonetheless, people may believe that God has repaid them in some positive way for their suffering. In one recent study (Exline & Bushman, 2004), undergraduates reported more benevolent attributions about God's intentions when they believed that God had repaid them in some way for their distress. When participants rated the overall impact of the event, feeling repaid also predicted more positive evaluations of their relationship with God.

Repayment is not the only way to reduce the injustice gap. People might also see injustices as smaller if they see benefit from the suffering or if they see a perpetrator's motives as benevolent. They might decide that the party in question was not responsible for the offense, which would also reduce the sense of injustice. Among students in our sample (Exline, 2002a), 25% cited benign reappraisal of God's intentions as a reason for reduced anger, whereas 14% cited benefits from the situation. A substantial minority (27%) reported that their anger subsided because they had obtained a meaningful explanation or insight into why the event occurred. In addition, 12% became less angry because they saw the event as God's will, whereas 11% decided that God was not at fault.

The same study (Exline, 2002a) suggests another parallel with interpersonal forgiveness. Research on interpersonal offenses suggests that anger may fade with the passage of time (e.g., McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). Consistent with this finding, 27% of those in our undergraduate sample cited the simple passage of time as a reason for decreased anger toward God.

Some Likely Differences. Despite clear parallels between anger toward God and anger toward others, fundamental differences between humans and God imply important distinctions. For example, the major monotheistic traditions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) all center on a God infinite in knowledge and power. People are extremely limited in comparative terms. God has full access to people's thoughts, whereas people cannot fully know the thoughts of God (except as given through divine revelation). God is also viewed as holy and perfect, whereas people commit sins and errors. People can also see and talk to other humans, whereas contact with God is less tangible. Although many try to communicate with God through prayer, not everyone prays. Attempts to hear from God are likely to be even more rare, and these perceived messages (by healthy, nonpsychotic individuals) may arrive in ways that seem fuzzy and prone to distortion—through images, visions, thoughts, prophetic words, decontextualized scripture verses, or presumably God-ordained events.

Although we are not aware of empirical data on these issues, it seems likely that the aforementioned ways in which monotheists view God should affect their means of resolving anger toward God. For example, seeing God's power as unlimited may make people angry toward God for not preventing disasters; however, it may also make them wary about expressing negative feelings toward God out of fear of retribution—particularly if they are convinced of God's power but are not convinced of God's benevolence toward them. Seeing God as holy implies that believers must convince themselves that God did not actually commit a wrongdoing. This condition differs markedly from those of interpersonal forgiveness, in which people typically hold offenders accountable for wrongdoing. Not being able to talk with God face to face is likely to raise barriers to understanding, barriers that offended parties may need to surmount through their own efforts (e.g., prayer, study of scripture, reflection, or seeking clues in the external world).

When people strive to be close to God, they may need to engage in considerable mental effort to find explanations and attributions that help to resolve their anger. If they are not willing to turn away from God, they must find other solutions that satisfy them. The popular literature suggests some ways of reframing. For example, some people frame suffering as a tool for refining character (e.g., Arthur, 1997; Wilkinson, 2001). Others blame Satan, evil forces, or the fallen nature of humankind for suffering, rather than blaming God. Some propose that God actually suffers along with people or on their behalf (e.g., Moon, 1999), with perhaps the most dramatic case being the atoning death of Christ on the cross in Christianity. Others argue that the need for free will opens the door to suffering and evil, and God may not choose or be able to prevent suffering for this reason (e.g., Kushner, 1981; McCloskey, 1987). Some might find comfort in believing that justice will be restored in the afterlife (McCloskey, 1987). Others contend that because human perspectives are so limited in comparison with God's, there are many mysterious aspects of God's character and plans that humans cannot comprehend; therefore, we must accept a certain degree of mystery while trusting in God's infinite wisdom, love, and power (Jeffress, 2000; Moon, 1999;

Yancey, 1988). In our current research, we are trying to assess some of these forms of appraisal using empirical tools.

Cognitive gymnastics may not be the most effective way to resolve anger toward God. Experiential tools might also prove helpful. For example, some authors have argued for the importance of first acknowledging—and perhaps communicating—one’s negative feelings toward God (e.g., Novotni & Petersen, 2001, Smith, 1997; Zornow, 2001). This might be accomplished through techniques such as prayer, journaling, writing letters to God (Murray-Swank, 2003), or empty-chair techniques in which people imagine themselves talking with God (e.g., Smith, 1997). Individuals from Judeo-Christian traditions might also meditate on holy texts written by fellow sufferers, such as the Hebrew Psalmists, as a way of facilitating the process of “crying out” to God (see Zornow, 2001, for an intervention based on this technique).

Tools to rebuild a sense of trust and closeness to God might include use of contemplative prayer, worship, imagery, or meditation on sacred texts that emphasize God’s love and power. Some preliminary data support the notion that eliciting imagery of unconditional love, caring, and acceptance from God can help to reduce anger toward God (Exline, 2004; see also Murray-Swank, 2003). In Charismatic Christian circles, some believers might also turn to supernaturally based techniques involving inner healing or deliverance from evil forces (see Exline & Rose, in press, for a discussion). Other techniques might be more interpersonal, as in the form of healing therapeutic relationships. Finally, to the extent that God images indeed reflect parental images (Rizzuto, 1979), working to forgive one’s parents might be a helpful starting point for resolving anger toward God (Bliss, 2003). Each of these techniques merits empirical attention, and there are doubtless many other useful techniques available that are not mentioned here.

NEW RESEARCH DIRECTIONS NEEDED IN THIS AREA

We see the empirical study of anger toward God as a rich and largely unexplored frontier. The field is currently wide open, with a great need for studies on virtually every aspect of the topic. Future studies should tap more diverse forms of stressors (e.g., natural disasters, accidents, wartime atrocities, crime, problems in fertility and pregnancy, serious illness, and injury). It is also crucial to study samples that are diverse in terms of age, culture, and religion. There should be an advancement in methodology that includes longitudinal and experimental designs. For example, one might follow participants over a period of years to determine (a) how their perceived relationships with God (including anger) shift over time, (b) predictors of such shifts, and (c) consequences of such shifts for mental, physical, and spiritual well-being. From an applied perspective, it is very important to begin to evaluate empirically the effectiveness of various techniques for managing anger toward God. For example, laboratory-based research could examine the physiological effects of expressing versus suppressing

anger toward God, whereas a controlled clinical trial could be used to evaluate an intervention.

RELEVANCE FOR CLINICAL AND APPLIED INTERVENTIONS

The topic of anger toward God would seem to be an extraordinarily ripe area for the development of interventions. This seems especially true given the recent attention to spiritually oriented treatments and the recent burst of interpersonal forgiveness interventions. We are aware of some recent interventions that address anger toward God (see, e.g., Murray-Swank, 2003; Novotni & Petersen, 2001; Zornow, 2001), and there are doubtless others of which we are unaware. There seems to be considerable room for development and empirical evaluation in this area. Interpersonal forgiveness interventions might incorporate themes related to anger toward God, and stand-alone interventions might also be created to focus specifically on this issue. Interventions that focus on anger toward God should probably also include some emphasis on receiving forgiveness from God, because the two issues are likely to be intertwined for many people.

Development of interventions should provide a natural opportunity to collaborate with religious professionals, such as pastoral counselors, theologians, chaplains, and members of the clergy. Relative to the typical psychologist, religious professionals are likely to have greater experience in dealing with issues involving anger toward God. Although our need to focus on empirical work in this chapter prevented us from delving into theological and religious works on suffering and anger toward God, such writings do exist and should not be overlooked. An interdisciplinary perspective seems highly appropriate for research and intervention on the theme of anger toward God, especially given the inherently theological and pastoral nature of the topic.

As a cautionary note, it seems that intervening when a person is angry with God requires sensitivity and a keen sense of ethics. If a person's faith is slipping, as we found in some cases, who should provide counsel? Should a religious leader or counselor try to bolster a flagging faith? Should an atheist hasten the slippage and help a person feel comfortable with losing faith? Should one attempt neutrality, which might be impossible to attain? These ethical and moral issues are contextualized by the personal experience of the struggler, and the counselor must accurately read what is in the client's best interests. These are difficult issues—not for the glib or the faint-hearted. Yet there are desperate needs in this area to help struggling people, and interventionists need to identify and address the issues thoughtfully.

PERSONAL THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE FIELD

We see anger toward God as an exciting and largely untapped area in which to conduct research. In the past decade, much of the research on forgiveness has emphasized its

secular and interpersonal sides. Research to date has revealed many of the basic processes behind transgression and forgiveness. However, given the importance of anger toward God in many people's lives, it seems like an appropriate time to devote attention to this important (but often taboo) topic.

One of the authors (J. E.) became involved in this work through two different avenues: one line of research in interpersonal forgiveness and another emphasizing religious and spiritual struggles. After she and her colleagues published a small correlational study on anger toward God (Exline et al., 1999), their work received an unusually high amount of media attention for what they viewed as a modest scientific contribution. There seems to be a good deal of public interest in the topic. In conversations with others, we find that the religiously devout are often intrigued (and sometimes shocked) by this line of research. Because of the taboo nature of anger toward God, many people with strong faith commitments rarely have opportunities to discuss it. Some welcome the opportunity. Atheists and agnostics have also expressed considerable interest in the topic, with many using it as a launching pad to discuss their own religious and spiritual struggles.

The other author (A. M.) became involved in this work by first looking at the opposite side of the coin: receiving forgiveness from God and its relationship to one's ability to forgive the self. Recent correlational data have demonstrated a link between self-forgiveness and feeling forgiven by God for an incident where participants felt they might have offended God (Cafaro & Exline, 2002). Believing that one has been forgiven by God and accepting God's forgiveness were both positively correlated with self-forgiveness. Current research (Martin, 2004) is investigating the effects of religiously oriented mini-interventions—such as letter writing to God and imagery—on one's ability to accept God's forgiveness. We imagine that accepting God's forgiveness may help people to realize their innate worth as humans and may encourage them to view themselves in a more loving, compassionate, and forgiving way. Because anger toward God often co-occurs with a belief that God is angry toward one, we propose that future research and interventions on anger toward God should include elements that focus on receiving forgiveness from God.

Given the amount of public interest in anger toward God and the potential for unique contributions to both basic science and intervention, we are enthusiastic about continuing to pursue research in this area. We encourage others to do so as well, and we are particularly eager to encourage collaborations between empiricists, clinicians, and religious professionals.

Also, for those who are interested in directly participating in studies on this topic (or know others who might be interested), please note that we are currently developing online studies on anger toward God and spiritual struggles to run from our Web site. At the time of this writing, the Web site address is as follows: <http://www.cwru.edu/artsci/pscl/faculty/exline/exline3.htm>.

CONCLUSIONS

Individuals can experience anger not only toward one another but also toward God. Although empirical research on this topic is in its infancy, existing data suggest parallels between anger toward God and interpersonal anger. For example, people become angry (toward other people or God) when they experience or witness serious injustices, especially when they do not feel repaid, when they feel entitled to repayment, and when there is no preexisting close relationship to serve as a buffer. The consequences of anger toward God are not yet well understood, but there is some evidence suggesting the potential for spiritual, psychological, and physical health effects. Once people become angry toward God, it appears that a majority of them resolve the anger. However, the processes behind this resolution are not yet understood.

The prospect of anger toward God raises thorny theological and psychological issues, and the topic is one that many people consider taboo. Given the prevalence of anger toward God, the level of public interest in the findings, and the prospect for creative interdisciplinary and clinical work, we see the topic of anger toward God as a fruitful and exciting area for future research.

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