“WHY DID YOU MAKE ME DO THAT?” ANGER AT GOD IN THE CONTEXT OF MORAL TRANSGRESSION

by

JOSHUA B. GRUBBS

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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Julie Exline

Department of Psychological Sciences
CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY

May, 2012
We hereby approve the thesis/dissertation of

Joshua B. Grubbs

Candidate for the degree: Master of Arts

(signed) Julie J. Exline
(chair of committee)

Todd J. McCallum

Heath Demaree

(date) February 29th, 2012

*We also hereby certify that written approval has been obtained for any proprietary materials contained therein.
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Abstract

by

JOSHUA BRIGGS GRUBBS

Transgression has been a focus within the psychological community for many years, with special focus on moral transgressions as a type of spiritual struggle. Recent research has placed an emphasis on another spiritual struggle, anger toward God, which appears is often associated with blaming God for a negative life event. The present study explored the relationship between these two struggles. In the context of a web-based survey, undergraduates (N=138) reflected upon an instance of personal moral transgression and then completed a series of questionnaires assessing attitudes and beliefs in the context of transgression. Consistent with hypotheses, the extent to which individuals viewed their transgressions as arising from dispositional or trait-like qualities robustly predicted negative evaluations of God. This association demonstrates a previously unexplored link between two forms of spiritual struggle and provides insight into the manner in which spiritual struggles interact.
“Why Did You Make Me Do That?” Anger At God In The Context Of Moral Transgression

Introduction

Religious beliefs are often a source of significant comfort during times of stress and difficulty (e.g., Gall, 2004; Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000; Jonas & Fischer, 2006; Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000). However, people can also experience significant stress and discomfort associated with their religious beliefs (for reviews, see Exline & Rose, 2005; Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005). More recent research has begun to focus on the possibility of religious beliefs being sources of anger and disappointment in some situations. Specifically, in the context of negative life events, individuals may experience feelings of disappointment or anger focused on God (e.g., Exline, 2011; Exline & Martin, 2005; Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey, 2011). Exline, Park and colleagues (2011) demonstrated that such feelings are quite common and are often associated with other symptoms of negative adjustment and distress, a finding that has been substantiated elsewhere (Exline & Martin, 2005; Exline et al., 1999; Gall, Kristjansson, Charbonneau, & Florack, 2009; Strelan, Acton, & Patrick, 2009; Wood et al., 2010). However, despite this initial research, relatively little is known about the causes of anger at God and the potential relationships between anger at God and other psychological phenomena.

Whereas anger toward God has been documented among individuals facing suffering and tragedy (Exline et al., 2011), the current study was designed to examine a previously unexplored issue: the possibility that people could experience anger toward God in the context of their own personal moral
transgressions. Moral transgression is a common type of spiritual struggle that is a significant source of anxiety in religious populations. Struggles related to moral transgression have been associated with symptoms of psychological distress (Abramowitz, Huppert, Cohen, Tolin, & Cahill, 2002; Exline et al., 2000). Furthermore, in some cases transgressors direct their anger toward those they have harmed, which can increase antisocial behaviors from transgressors and make them less likely to seek forgiveness or try to restore their relationships (Chiaramello, Sastre, & Mullet, 2008; Riek, 2010). Examples of this victim-blaming behavior would include a transgressor insisting that the victim provoked the transgression or arguing that the victim deserved the treatment they received. Building on these earlier findings, then, this project focused on an area of particular psychological importance: the possibility that God might serve as a target of anger by transgressors.

Background and Literature Review

Transgression

Within interpersonal relationships, transgressions are often found to be significant sources of strain and conflict (Exline, Root, Yadavalli, Martin, & Fisher, 2011; Fisher & Exline, 2006; Ross, Hertenstein, & Robel, 2007; Tangney et al., 1992; Tangney, 1993; Tangney, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marschall, & Gramzow, 1996; Thompson et al., 2005; Worthington, 2005, 2006). This strain is often experienced by the victim of the transgression (e.g., Harris et al., 2006; Lawler-Row, Karremans, Scott, Edlis-Mativityahou, & Edwards, 2008; Walton, 2005), but it can also be experienced in various ways by the transgressor (Fisher & Exline,
emotional responses to the transgression, often in the form of self-blaming emotions such as guilt and shame (Exline, Root, et al., 2011; Tangney et al., 1992).

In many cases, self-blame can be an important behavior that ultimately leads to restorative actions on the part of the transgressor (Fisher & Exline, 2006; Riek, 2010). Self-blame has been positively linked with guilt and an understanding of one’s responsibility in a transgression, both of which have been linked with prosocial behaviors (Smith, Webster, Parrott, & Eyre, 2002). However, self-blame can also have very detrimental effects on the individual’s well-being, particularly when it results in global negative evaluations of the self (e.g., Claessen, Birgegard, & Sohlberg, 2007; de Hooge, Zeelenberg, & Breugalmans, 2010; Tangney et al., 1996; Tilighman-Osborne, Cole, Felton, & Ciesla, 2008; Van Vliet, 2008). As extensively described in the literature on moral emotions, global negative evaluations of the self typically result in feelings of shame, a potentially dangerous emotional response (Tangney, 1993). Although shame can lead to prosocial behaviors (e.g., de Hooge et al., 2010; Ferguson, 2005), it is most often associated with poor mental health symptoms and destructive behaviors (e.g., Claessen et al., 2007; Tangney et al., 1992; Tangney et al., 1996).

Shame resulting from interpersonal transgression is often associated with maladaptive psychological coping patterns (Andrews, Qian, & Valentine, 2002; Gilbert, Cheung, Irons, & McCewin, 2005; Lutwak, Panish, Ferrari, & Razzino, 2001; Steuwig, Tangney, Heigel, Harty, McCloskey, 2010; Tangney et al., 1996). Depressive symptoms associated with shame and self-blame are among the most
common responses to transgression, representing a debilitating response (Gilbert et al., 2005; Stuewig & McCloskey, 2005). Along with depression, self-directed anger associated with shame and self-blame is frequently observed (Lutwak et al., 2001; Wright & Gudjonsson, 2008). However, outward aggression has also been associated with shame resulting from interpersonal transgression, representing the potential for antisocial behaviors to result from shame (Stuewig et al., 2010; Tangney et al., 1992). This final observation is important, as it shows that certain responses to personal transgression can produce feelings of anger and aggression that can be expressed in interpersonal ways.

*A Brief Note on Moral Transgression*

Within religious groups, there is often a distinction made between interpersonal offenses and offenses that are moral in nature, which are variously referred to as transgressions, sins, or evil inclinations (McMinn, Ruiz, Marx, Wright, & Gilbert, 2006). This distinction is important, as moral transgressions both encompass and transcend interpersonal transgressions. In essence, transgressions of this nature are thought of as violations of either divine or religious standards for thoughts and behaviors. These transgressions may include interpersonal offenses, but they could also include a wide range of other behaviors that are inconsistent with the prescribed morals found in a belief system. It is well established that religious individuals tend to view their transgressions as being directly against God, which gives moral transgressions or sins a distinct interpersonal feel (McMinn et al., 2006; Weaver, 2001). Indeed, within Judeo-Christian scripture, there are passages that read “Against you [God] and you only
have I sinned.” (Psalm 51, Jewish Publication Society English/Hebrew Tanak), which further illustrates the direct relational aspect of religiously based moral transgressions for certain religious populations.

Transgressions in the context of religion have garnered special attention from the psychological community (Abramowitz, Huppert, Cohen, Tolin, & Cahill, 2002; Exline et al., 2000; Grubbs, Wheeler, Sessoms, & Volk, 2010; Mak & Tsang, 2008; Nauta & Derckx, 2007; Hall, Reise, & Haviland, 2007; Rose, 2010; Watson, Hood, Morris, & Hall, 1985). Historically, the psychological community has been both skeptical of the religious concept of sin and transgression (e.g., Bergin & Ellis, 1992; Ellis, 1960, 1980) and open to studying it as an important psychological construct (e.g., Curran, 1960; Mowrer, 1960a, 1960b; Shoben, 1960). However, at present, the notion of religiously based moral transgressions is still controversial and poorly understood (McMinn et al., 2006; Watson et al., 1985). It is known that the religious concept of sin, as well as the guilt associated with sin, has been linked to anxiety and compulsive behaviors (e.g., Abramowitz et al., 2002; Ellison, Burdette, & Hill, 2009; Grubbs et al., 2010), depressive symptomatology (e.g., Exline et al., 2000), and suicidality (e.g., Exline et al., 2000). Each of these response patterns appear to be associated with self-blame and fear of divine retribution, further illustrating the psychological problems that can arise due to reactions to personal moral transgression. However, these studies only represent a partial understanding of a complex psychological issue.

Transgression and Blame

Attributing blame to others for negative events is seen a common human
reaction to various difficulties (Alicke, 2000; Alicke, Buckingham, Zell, & Davis, 2008; Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Kulik & Brown, 1979; Lagnado & Channon, 2007). Placing blame or responsibility for a negative event on another being can aid in adaptive survival by helping individuals identify and react to potential sources of harm (e.g., Fincham, 2002). However, individuals are also capable of blaming or attributing blame to others in the context of their own transgressions (Alicke, 2000; Riek, 2008; Wood & Kristin, 2003).

Blaming others can take on several forms. People may feel that they have no fault whatsoever in a transgression scenario (e.g., Englebrecht, Peterson, Scherer, & Naccarato, 2007; Gray & Wegner, 2011; Green, South, & Smith, 2006), that others are more at fault for a transgression than they are (e.g., Schutz, 1999), or that others caused them to act in a certain way (e.g., Cromwell & Thurman, 2003; Jackson, Lucas, & Blackburn, 2009). In each of these scenarios, the transgressor normally attributes blame to an external source to alleviate a personal sense of culpability. Oftentimes, this sort of transfer of blame is highly effective in reducing the degree to which one is perceived as responsible (Riordan, Marlin, & Kellogg, 1983). However, blaming behavior represents a distinct counterpart to the restorative behaviors of apology, confessions, and rectification (Gold & Weiner, 2000).

The transfer of responsibility for a transgression to an outside source represents an important component of the relational aspect of transgression. The extent to which a transgressor feels responsible for the offense committed is often a direct predictor of the degree to which an individual will attempt to restore the
relationship (Chiaramello, Munoz Sastre, & Mullett, 2008; Exline, Root, et al., 2011; Fisher, 2010; Fisher & Exline, 2006; Riek, 2008). Conversely then, feeling that one is not responsible for a transgression often represents a distinct impediment to a restored relationship (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992, 1993; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; Fisher & Exline, 2006; Riek, 2008). It has also been observed in multiple domains that the victim of a transgression can be blamed for the offense committed (e.g., Dutton, 1986; Janoff-Bullman, Timko, & Carli, 1985; van de Bos & Maas, 2009). The victim is not often blamed for the actual transgression, but may be blamed for initiating the actions that led to the transgression or failing to properly prevent the transgression (for reviews, see Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). A rape victim might be blamed for inviting an attack, a teacher might be blamed for failing to properly prevent a student from cheating, or a spouse might be blamed for starting an argument that escalated severely. In any case, however, when blame is attributed to the victim, the probability of restorative behaviors on the part of the transgressor will be limited, and the relationship will likely be damaged as a result (Chiaramello et al., 2008; Fisher & Exline, 2006; Riek, 2008). Due to these factors, the integrity of a relationship is often dependent on the manner in which both parties involved view the transgression (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987a, 1987b, 1992).

Beyond the simple transfer of blame, the potential for anger from a transgressor toward a victim has also been demonstrated to be a response to transgression (Camodeca & Goosseens, 2005; Chiaramello et al., 2008; Riek, 2010). The shame associated with self-blame can prompt individuals to shift
blame to others, which in turn can lead to externalized aggression (Shine, 1997; Steuwig, Tangney, Heigel, Harty, & McCloskey, 2009). The motivations for transgressor anger are varied but often involve a desire to excuse the self or place blame elsewhere, and these angry responses can further damage an already fragile relationship (Chiaramello et al., 2008; Riek, 2010; Stuewig et al., 2009).

**Blaming God in the Context of Negative Events**

People are quite capable of blaming others when either negative events occur in their lives or when they are attempting to transfer responsibility for a transgression committed. However, individuals are also capable of blaming God for negative events that have occurred in their lives (e.g., Beck & Taylor, 2008; Exline, Park et al., 2011; Gray & Wegner, 2010; Turrel & Thomas, 2001). God is often viewed as a significant source of external control in day-to-day life (Berrenberg, 1987). Due to this position of control, God can serve as a target of blame when events occur that are construed as negative or harmful (Exline, Park et al., 2011; Turrel & Thomas, 2001). This model of control and blame can be extended to perceptions of the self, as God is often viewed as “Creator” and directly or indirectly responsible for numerous life processes (Exline, Park, et al., 2011; Flannelly, Galek, Ellison, & Koenig, 2010; Kunkel, Cook, Meshel, Daughtry, & Hauenstein, 1999). This places God in the position of being blameworthy for numerous events. Seeing God as the ultimate cause also gives rise to a new area of research interest that is associated with blaming God for negative events—anger at God.

**Anger at God**
Within the domain of spiritual struggle, anger at God has recently emerged as an area of research interest (Exline, 2011; Exline & Grubbs, 2011; Exline & Martin, 2005; Exline, Park, et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2010). Anger at God has been shown to be a common phenomenon experienced by many individuals across cultural groups and religious affiliations (Exline, Park, et al., 2011). Anger toward God has been linked with signs of psychological distress and is associated with other spiritual struggles (Exline, Park, et al., 2011; Exline et al., 1999; Gall et al., 2009; Strelan et al., 2009; & Wood et al., 2010). These signs of psychological distress are often varied, but depressive and anxious symptom patterns are commonly found (Exline & Martin, 2005; Exline, Park, et al., 2011; Exline et al., 1999; Gall, Kristjansson, Charbonneau, & Florack, 2009; Strelan, et al., 2009).

Building on the psychological ramifications of anger toward God, there is increasing confirmation that anger at God follows patterns very similar to interpersonal anger (Exline et al., 2011). Much evidence now indicates that many individuals in the Western world tend to view their relationship with God in interpersonal terms (e.g., Hall & Edwards 1996, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 1998; Simpson, Newman, & Fuqua, 2008). Given that many individuals view God in these personal terms, the potential for anger toward God that parallels interpersonal anger is striking. Building on this, Exline and colleagues (2011) found that anger toward God does in fact imitate interpersonal anger in many domains.

As previously mentioned, finding an individual responsible for a negative outcome predicts both greater blame (e.g., Alicke, 2000) and anger (e.g., Weiner, 1993); in parallel fashion, seeing God as clearly responsible for a negative life
event predicts greater anger toward God (Exline, Park, et al., 2011). Furthermore, just as attributions of negative intent predict interpersonal anger (e.g., Dodge, 1993), attributions of negative divine intent predict anger at God (Exline, Park, et al., 2011). Finally, just as the perception of oneself as the victim of an offense often strongly predicts negative perceptions of the perpetrator (Baumeister et al., 1990; Camodeca & Goosens, 2005), perceiving oneself as the victim of divine cruelty predicts anger at God (Exline, Park, et al., 2011). From these findings then, it can be concluded that anger at God is manifested in distinctly interpersonal ways, which allows for further parallels to be drawn between the two domains.

*Anger toward God in the Context of Moral Transgression*

The conceptual link between anger toward God and moral transgression flows directly out these previously discussed ideas. There is precedent in the interpersonal domain for anger from a transgressor toward the perceived victim of the transgression, and there is sufficient evidence in the religious domain to suggest that individuals view relationships with God in interpersonal ways. Furthermore, as mentioned, anger toward God is often associated with the extent to which God is viewed as responsible and the self is viewed as a victim (Exline, Park, et al, 2011). This would lead the conjecture that, should God be blamed for moral transgression, anger at God would be a natural result. Initially, blaming God for one’s transgressions seems to be inconsistent with the nature of moral transgression, particularly given that God is often the perceived victim of the transgression (McMinn et al., 2006; Weaver, 2001). However, if individuals were to somehow feel that they were not personally responsible for the transgression
committed, but rather, that God was somehow responsible and that they were, in fact, a victim, anger would be a logical result.

As previously mentioned, God is often viewed as “Creator” and seen as directly or indirectly responsible for practically all aspects of human existence; building on this, God is often seen as at least indirectly responsible for many negative events (Exline, Park, et al., 2011; Flannelly, et al., 2010; Kunkel et al., 1999; for a review see Kay, Gaucher, McGregor & Nash, 2010). Given these factors, the conceptual leap from blaming God for general negative life events to blaming God for one’s personal transgression is not a large one. Referring back to the notion of God as creator, many people do attribute who they are as individuals to a perceived deity (Flannelly et al., 2010; Kubicek et al., 2009; Kunkel et al., 1999). This attribution of self-identity could be problematic if individuals were to perceive themselves as being in conflict with the same deity to which they attribute their existence, particularly if expressions of the self were viewed as transgressions of a divine moral code. Moral transgressions that arise out of dispositional or trait-like qualities could be viewed as expressions of the manner in which an individual was created or made. Such a predicament would leave the individual asking God, “Why did you make me this way?”. Blaming God for how one is made could ultimately lead to a self-view as both the perpetrator of a transgression as well as a victim of divine cruelty, a perception known to be associated with anger toward God (Exline, Park, et al., 2011; Grubbs & Exline, 2011). In this context, then, the individual would be both the product of divine creation and the victim of a divine set of moral standards that is specifically biased
against the manner in which he or she was made. The individual would not have to blame God directly for the transgression committed so much as he or she would blame God for creating them with the propensity toward the transgression. This transference of responsibility would allow the individual to lessen his or her own sense of culpability and create a plausible excuse for why he or she transgressed. These ideas are the bases for the present study.

Pilot Study

Building on the previously cited research, a pilot study for this project was conducted in the spring of 2011. Undergraduate students in introductory psychology classes were offered the opportunity to participate in a web-based survey for partial class credit. This pilot study made use of a simple experimental design, assigning participants to one of two conditions. In both conditions, participants read a story about a hypothetical character living in a world created by a specific hypothetical deity. All individuals in this world were subject to this deity and participated in the worship of this deity. However, the main character of this story was portrayed as being in constant conflict with the ideals that the deity put forth, as he was described as constantly transgressing key aspects of the deity’s moral code. In the first condition, no explanation was given for why the protagonist constantly transgressed. In the second condition, the transgressions of the protagonist were attributed to a genetic predisposition that had left him vulnerable to transgressions since his birth.

As hypothesized, participants in the condition involving the genetic defect attributed more anger toward God to the protagonist than those who read the
story with no explanation given. Furthermore, in comparison to those who did not read about the genetic defect, those who did endorsed significantly greater perceptions of God as cruel and distant, and they also imagined the protagonist’s responses to the deity as significantly more negative—that is, seeing the deity as less loving and having more negative intentions. These results underscore the direction for this study by illustrating the tendency of individuals to associate greater anger toward God with transgressions that arise out of dispositional or trait characteristics for which a deity could be seen as responsible. It is on these findings that the hypotheses for this study are based.

Hypotheses

The first hypothesis for this study was that reflection on transgression would be associated with heightened negative perceptions of God and lowered positive perceptions of God. Multiple studies have shown that spiritual struggles tend to cluster together and that the experience of one spiritual struggle is often associated with other such struggles (e.g., Exline et al., 1999; Exline et al., 2000; Pargament et al., 2005). Building on this notion, it was specifically hypothesized that perceptions of God as loving would decrease following reflection on a transgression, whereas perceptions of God as distant or cruel would increase following reflection on a transgression.

A second hypothesis for this study was that individuals would be relatively unwilling to blame God directly for transgressions committed but would be more willing to attribute to God the qualities leading to the transgressions. Although blaming God for negative life events has precedent (e.g., Exline, Park, et al., 2011),
blaming God directly for a transgression could be difficult for many individuals. However, given that personal identity is often ascribed to a deity, personal qualities or dispositions might seem innocuous or even appropriate to ascribe to a deity. As such, placing responsibility for traits or qualities that led to a transgression on a deity should be a more likely response than blaming the deity directly for the transgression.

Finally, the primary hypothesis for this study was based on the previously described model detailing the manner in which transgression experiences could lead to anger toward and negative evaluations of God. Specifically, it was hypothesized that the belief that a transgression was influenced by or the result of character traits would be associated with negative evaluations of God in the context of transgression. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that these negative evaluations would be manifested as anger at God, perceptions of God as cruel, and negative attributions about divine intent.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at CWRU. Participants were awarded one research participation credit for completing this study. All participants age 18 or over were allowed to participate, resulting in a total sample size of 216. However, due to the nature of the constructs being studied, only participants indicating some level of belief in God (64%) were included in the final analyses. The final sample consisted of 52 males and 86 females, with a mean age of 19.1 years.
The sample identified primarily as White or Caucasian (63%), followed by: Asian/Pacific Islander (25%), African American (7%), Hispanic or Latino (3%), Middle Eastern (1%), and Native American (1%). The primary religious affiliations reported were Protestant/Evangelical Christian (46%), Catholic (25%), Spiritual but Not Religious (14%), Agnostic (6%), Jewish (4%), Hindu (3%), and Muslim (2%). Analyses of variance revealed no systematic differences on any key variables based on demographics.

Procedure

The study was made available to participants through the university’s research participation system. It was publicized via emails from the instructors of introductory psychology courses. Participants completed an informed consent and were then directed through the survey. Those under the age of 18 were screened out and offered the opportunity to do a personal walkthrough of the survey for participation credit.

After completing basic demographic information, participants were directed through a series of questions assessing baseline levels of all relevant variables. Following this, participants read this prompt:

Please take a moment to think about a moral transgression (something that you have done that was wrong) that you have committed. This transgression should be something that you consider severe or important. This can be any conflict that you have experienced between your actions and your personal ideals, provided that it meets the previous criteria. Please take some time
to think about the transgression, how it has impacted your life, how it has impacted those around you, how it has impacted your spirituality or religiosity, and how it has made you feel. Also take some time to think about the things that contributed to the transgression, such as the circumstances around it, the reason you committed the transgression, and the things that influenced you to do it.

After this prompt, participants were directed through a series of questions assessing attitudes toward God, image of God, and notions of divine responsibility within the context of the transgression. Specific questions regarding divine responsibility for the offense and the traits that may have influenced the offense were included. The survey concluded with a series of items and measures controlling for various individual differences. All relevant measures are subsequently explained.

**Measures**

Due to the unique nature of this research and the novelty of many constructs being measured, this study used a combination of established measures, adaptations of existing measures, and original measures. Table 1 reports descriptive statistics. Unless otherwise indicated, measures were scored by averaging across items.

**Religiosity.** A combination and adaptation of the Religious Participation Scale (Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000) and Blaine & Crocker’s (1995) measure of religious belief salience was used to assess participant religiosity. This
adaptation/combination has been used in numerous prior studies (e.g., Exline, Park, et al., 2011; Exline & Grubbs, 2011) and has demonstrated reliability and utility as a measure of religiosity.

*God Image.* To assess baseline levels of perceptions of God, the God-10, a 10-item inventory that is currently under development, was used (Exline, Grubbs, & Homolka, 2012). This inventory has been used in numerous studies and demonstrated to be associated with anger toward God (e.g., Grubbs & Exline, 2011, 2012). Participants read the following prompt: "In general, I imagine God as being," and then rated their agreement with 10 items. Subscales assess views of God on three dimensions: seeing God as cruel (cruel; unkind; rejecting), distant (distant, remote, unavailable, uninvolved) and loving (loving, forgiving, caring). All items were scored from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely).

Immediately after describing their transgressions, participants completed a series of items assessing situation-specific anger toward God, God image, and divine attributions. These are described in sequence below.

*Situation-Specific Anger toward God.* To assess situation-specific anger toward God, the study adapted items from Exline, Park, and colleagues (2011). Participants read the following prompt: “At this moment, when I think about the transgression that I just described, it makes me feel _______ toward God.” They then rated 12 items describing their emotions from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely). Five of these items (anger, rage, mistrust, blaming, frustration) were used to assess anger toward God in the context of the transgression.

*Situation-Specific God Image.* To assess post-manipulation images of God,
the God-10 (described above) was repeated with the following prompt: "At this moment, when I think of the transgression I just described, I imagine God as being ___." Participants then rated their agreement with the previously listed adjectives from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely).

*Attributions about God’s Intent.* To assess attributions of God’s intent, participants rated a list of 13 actions in response to the following statement:

“When I think about the transgression I described, I believe that in this particular incident, God ________ me.” Participants rated their agreement with each of the actions from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely). Roughly half (7) of these actions were negatively valenced (cheated, abandoned, betrayed, neglected, abused, turned away from, did not care about). The average of these negatively valenced items was calculated to determine negative attributions of God’s intent. Such attributions have previously been shown to predict overall levels of anger toward God (Exline, Park, et al., 2011).

*Divine Responsibility.* To assess notions of divine culpability for the transgression and the traits or qualities that led to the transgression, participants were directly asked to attribute responsibility for both the offense and the factors leading up to the offense. Participants completed both variations of the following prompt: “I view God as being ______ responsible for the *transgression I described* [traits or qualities that led to the transgression I described].” Participants rated their answers from 0 (not at all) to 10 (solely/completely) on each item.

*Character Trait Attribution.* To assess the character trait attributions, participants rated their agreement with a list of 12 statements related to the
nature of the transgression from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely). In total, 8 of the 12 items emerged through factor analysis as strongly associated with the notion of character trait attributions. These items were as follows: “This transgression came from a part of myself that I cannot change,” “This transgression resulted from a character trait,” “This transgression stemmed from a basic part of who I am,” “This transgression can be seen as an expression of my true self,” “This transgression represents who I am as a person,” “This transgression was very typical for me,” “This transgression was the result of a biological predisposition,” and “This transgression was the result of my genetic makeup.” These items were averaged to form a cohesive measure that was found to have acceptable internal consistency (see Table 1) and strong associations with various other relevant variables (see Table 2).

**Personality.** The survey also included a series of inventories meant to control for other relevant personality constructions that could influence the results. These measures included: the Big Five Inventory-44 (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1995), the State Trait Anger Expression Inventory (Spielberger & Sydeman, 1994), and the Psychological Entitlement Scale (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004). Finally, the survey concluded with a short form of the Marlowe-Crowne measure of Social Desirability (Reynolds, 1982), consisting of a series of 13 true/false responses. Socially desirable responses were summed to obtain an index of impression management. For a summary of the reliability, means, and standard deviations of all relevant measures, please see Table 1.

Results
Types of Transgressions Reported

Participants recalled and reported a wide range of transgressions. Although varied, the transgressions fell broadly into one of seven categories. The distribution of transgressions in each category was as follows: deception/dishonesty (21%), interpersonal conflict (19%); sexual indiscretion (19%); substance use/abuse (17%); irresponsibility/failure to meet obligations (12%); other/non-classifiable (9%); and no specific transgression described (4%). Analyses of variance revealed no systematic differences in any key variables based on type of transgression reported.

Correction of Skew

As has been found in other studies related to spiritual struggle (e.g., Exline, Park, et al., 2011; Exline et al., in press), many of the variables measured in this study showed significant skew, primarily in a positively accelerated curve (e.g., skew>1.0). For a list of these variables, please refer to Table 1. In variables for which this skew was found to be moderate (e.g., Character Trait Attributions, God as Distant), data were normalized using cube root transformations, and the transformed variables were used in further analyses. Scale variables with substantial skew that could not be normalized using standard transformations were converted to dichotomous variables (e.g., Baseline Perceptions of God as Cruel and God as Loving; Post Manipulation Measures of Negative Attributions About God’s Intent, Anger at God, Perceptions of God as Cruel). These dichotomous variables were used in all correlational and regression analyses. For
descriptive statistics detailing the original and corrected skews of relevant variables, please see Table 1.

Tests of Main Hypotheses

*God Image*

To test the effects of transgression reflection on perceptions of God, repeated measures T-tests were performed on the untransformed variables representing each of the three components of God image assessed before and after the manipulation. There was no significant difference between baseline and post-manipulation perceptions of God as distant; \( t(138)=1.53; p=.128 \). Results also indicated that there was a marginally significant decrease from baseline to post-manipulation perceptions of God as Cruel; \( t(138)=1.89, p=.062 \). Finally, it was found that there was a significant decrease in baseline and post manipulation measures of God as loving; \( t(138)=10.82; p<.001 \). These findings were partially consistent with the hypothesis that negative perceptions of God would increase and positive perceptions of God would decrease in the context of transgression reflection. These comparisons are represented graphically in Figure 1.

*Divine Attributions*

Another hypothesis was that individuals would be more willing to blame God for a trait leading to a transgression than they would for the transgression itself. To test this, participants completed items assessing perceptions of divine culpability after reflecting on their transgressions. Participants rated the extent they considered God to be responsible for the transgression and their traits or qualities that contributed to the transgression. Repeated Measures T-Tests
indicated that participants were significantly more likely to attribute responsibility to God for the traits leading up to the transgression (Mean=3.71) than they were for the transgression itself (Mean=2.03) (Mean Difference=-1.68; SD=2.79; t=7.11, p<.001). This finding was consistent with the aforementioned hypothesis.

*Global Negative Evaluations*

To test the hypothesis that character trait attributions would be associated with negative evaluations of the divine, Pearson correlations between such attributions and post-manipulation measures of anger at God, perceptions of God as cruel, and negative attributions about God's intent were conducted. As hypothesized, results indicated significant positive relationships between character trait attributions and each of these measures. These correlations are illustrated in Table 2.

Given similarities in the correlation patterns of these three measures of negative evaluations of the divine (see Table 2), an index score summarizing scores across these variables was computed. This Global Negative Evaluation (GNE) index was calculated by taking the sum of the three previously described dichotomous measures of negative evaluations of the divine. This index was found to have good internal consistency and displayed little skew (see Table 1). In further analyses, controlling for baseline measures of God image and religiosity, the GNE index score maintained a significant positive relationship with character trait attributions, in a comparable fashion as the associations formed by each of its components. Character trait attributions were still strongly associated with
negative evaluations of God, even when prior notions of God and overall participant religiosity were held constant. The results of this analysis can be seen in Table 3.

To further test the hypothesis that negative evaluations of God would be positively related to character trait attributions, a hierarchical linear regression was performed in which the GNE index was the criterion variable. Through successive steps, in which relevant personality variables, baseline measures of God image, overall religiosity, and the perceived impact of the transgression were controlled, character trait attributions still accounted for a significant amount of the variance observed in the GNE index. Furthermore, in the final step of the regression, only character trait attributions and baseline perceptions of God as cruel demonstrated a significant relationship with the GNE index. For details of this regression, please see Table 4. This regression was repeated for each of the individual components of the GNE index (Post Manipulation: Anger at God, Perceptions of God as Cruel, Negative Evaluations of About God’s Intent) with highly similar results, further confirming the validity of the GNE index score. (The details of these results are not reported here for the sake of brevity.)

Discussion

Prior work both in the study of moral transgression and the study of anger at God has focused on the psychological implications of each or the mechanisms that contribute to the development and maintenance of these struggles. However, little work has been done to explore the relationship between these struggles or the manner in which one could contribute to another. The present study was
designed to explore the possibility of such a relationship. Specifically, the present study tested the idea that individuals could experience negative emotions and thoughts regarding a deity, even in the context of their own transgressions. Below, a discussion of the basic findings and implications of this work is offered.

*Transgression and Divine Perceptions*

At the outset of this study, it was hypothesized that reflection on transgression would lead to greater negative perceptions of God and lower positive perceptions of God. Results only partially supported such a hypothesis. Ratings of God as distant did not change significantly from baseline after reflection on a transgression. Ratings of God as cruel decreased from baseline, and this decrease approached significance. Finally, ratings of God as loving did substantially and significantly decrease following transgression reflection.

The previously mentioned results are not fully consistent with initial hypotheses, yet they may provide a unique insight into personal reactions to moral transgression. It is likely that perceptions of God as cruel would be threatening and distressing to an individual who has just reflected upon his own transgression. Under such circumstances, it would be psychologically beneficial to think of God as being less cruel. By reducing this perception of God as cruel, an individual may be able to conceptualize a less intimidating and more available divine figure. Such a thought could be reassuring in the context of one’s transgression. In contrast, perceptions of God as loving in the context of the transgression would likely be viewed as reassuring and comforting. However, viewing God in highly loving and caring terms following a transgression reflection
might also be inconsistent with personal perceptions of divine justice, or it might be seen as an attempt to excuse one’s behavior. In such a situation, lowered perceptions of God as loving would be intuitive.

*Transgression and Divine Attributions*

Initial hypotheses stated that individuals would be unlikely to blame a deity directly for transgression, but they would be more likely to blame a deity for the traits thought of as leading to a transgression. This hypothesis received support. Given that many religious individuals attribute their personal existence to God (Flannelly et al., 2010; Kunkel et al., 1999), it is not surprising that they would attribute character traits or qualities to the same deity. Although it is more specific to attribute to God the traits that led to a transgression, this study found that individuals are still more willing to do so than they are to attribute a specific transgression to God. Blaming God for a transgression specifically would likely be inconsistent with traditional views of the divine, but attributing character traits or dispositional qualities to God would be consistent with perceptions of God as creator. Furthermore, these perceptions of divine responsibility demonstrate a possible mechanism by which personal transgressions could lead to negative evaluations of God.

*Transgression and Character Trait Attributions*

Previously, a model was proposed in which individuals may develop hostile feelings toward or negative evaluations of God in the context of transgression. The notion of character trait attributions, or the perception that a transgression was the result of a character trait or dispositional quality, was a central tenet of this
model. In keeping with this notion, an eight-item scale of character-trait attributions was derived factor analytically from the data obtained in this study. These items were designed to be face-valid and displayed high levels of internal consistency. The emergence of this measure confirms that certain individuals do conceptualize moral transgressions as the result of a character trait. More importantly, these attributions demonstrated significant, robust, and positive relationships with various measures of negative divine evaluation in the context of a transgression.

*Negative Evaluations of the Divine*

Negative evaluations of the divine in the context of a moral transgression are likely contrary to what one would expect as a normal response to transgression. Given that moral transgressions are often construed as violations of divine standards or even as being against God, negative evaluations would be intuitively unexpected. However, in certain contexts, they could be viewed as natural, if not theologically consistent, responses.

The primary hypothesis for this work was that religious individuals, should they attribute a moral transgression to a character trait, would be more likely to endorse negative feelings toward God in the context of this transgression. Specifically, initial hypotheses stated that this relationship would be seen in perceptions of God as cruel, anger at God, and negative evaluations of God’s intentions. It has already been shown that individuals are able and willing to attribute transgressions to character traits. And it has further been demonstrated that individuals are more likely to attribute traits to God than to attribute a
specific transgression to God. It stands to reason then that, should an individual think of God as responsible for both the standards that prohibit certain actions and the traits that led to the violation of those standards, anger and negative evaluations of God would be a logical result. Results from this study support such an interpretation.

It was consistently found through various analyses that character trait attributions were positively related to negative evaluations of God. Simple correlations showed that these evaluations were evident in perceptions of God as cruel, negative evaluations about divine intentions, and anger at God. Such a finding demonstrates a range of negative evaluations of God that vary, in some ways, as a function of the extent to which an individual believes a transgression to be the result of a character trait. It was also noted that this relationship was robust, keeping high levels of significance, even when various measures of divine perception and religiosity were held constant. This finding is key, as it demonstrates that the association between character trait attributions and negative evaluations of God is not simply a function of a priori notions of God.

Building on this, during regression analyses, not only were baseline levels of God image held constant, but various measures of personality and impression management were also controlled. Even under such conditions, the association between character trait attributions and negative evaluations of God maintained significance. This analysis demonstrated that, even when a wide array of individual difference and belief-related variables were held constant, character trait attributions still accounted for approximately seven percent of unique
variance associated with negative evaluations of God in the context of a transgression. This finding suggests that negative perceptions of God are significantly, robustly, and somewhat strongly related to the impression that a transgression was the result of characterological factors. This finding also very strongly supports the primary hypothesis that character trait attributions are associated with heightened negative perceptions of God in the context of a transgression.

Implications

The previously discussed findings demonstrate preliminary, but persuasive, evidence for the notion that negative feelings toward God can be a response to transgression. Such findings should be understood as a component of a greater body of emerging research regarding spiritual struggle. Spiritual struggle has been previously demonstrated to be a multifaceted (e.g., Exline et al., 2000; Pargament et al., 2000), widespread (e.g., Exline, Park et al., 2011; McConnell et al., 2006), and psychologically relevant (for a recent review see: Exline, In Press) experience for many individuals. Both negative evaluations of God and the experience of moral transgression are strongly linked with a wide variety of mental health symptoms (Exline, Park et al., 2011; Exline et al, 2000). As such, the experience of moral transgression and the emotions and cognitions associated with it are potentially crucial sources of psychological distress.

At a more applied level, these findings reach beyond the realm of theory and bear practical implications for the individuals experiencing these phenomena and the mental health professionals that may be working with them. Although
anger at God may appear similar across cases, the contributing factors that fuel such an emotion may be vastly different. Similarly, although moral transgressions produce many consistent emotions, the expression and direction of those emotions may vary based on the individual’s judgment regarding the nature of the transgression. Identifying whether or not individuals attribute transgressions to a character trait that is, in turn, attributable to God may provide insights into other spiritual struggles also being experienced by the individual. For example, a religious individual struggling with alcoholism or compulsive gambling may also be angry at God because of the genetic contribution evident in both behaviors. Similarly, a conservative religious individual may also identify as a homosexual and then experience anger at God over the conflict between his sexual identity and perceived divine standards. By illuminating these relationships in a clinical setting, a practitioner should be better able to accurately and empathically understand the client’s experience, which, in turn, could lead to a stronger therapeutic relationship.

Limitations

Albeit the findings of this study are intriguing, they are not yet conclusive. It is important to note that the findings of this study are only correlational in nature. As such, no causal inferences can be made. The findings are consistent with the proposed model of character trait attributions leading to negative evaluations of God. However, it is perhaps just as likely that negative evaluations of God result in the commission of more transgressions that can be attributed to character traits. Furthermore, although baseline perceptions of God image were
controlled in the present study, it is unclear whether these baseline measures are
impacted by the individual’s current experience of transgression. It seems
possible that the individual’s experience of transgression could impact the total
self, whether or not it has been primed to be a part of conscious reflection. As
such, inferences regarding the nature of baseline perceptions are limited.

This sample was composed of predominantly Caucasian, monotheistic
college students. Although there was some diversity in the sample, it is unlikely
that the results of this study are fully generalizable to polytheistic or pantheistic
belief systems, and the applicability of these findings to ethnic minorities is also
unclear. It was also noted during the analyses that the transgressions reflected
upon by the participants in this study were highly varied—ranging from
reflections over unintentional car accidents to plagiarism to various forms of self-
identified sexual indiscretions. Although such transgressions were typically
deemed severe by participants, the range of transgressions reported could
represent a complication in analyzing the results. It seems plausible that more
objectively severe transgressions would result in more pronounced effects, and
less severe transgressions would result in smaller effects.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The results of this study rather clearly point to the notion that the
experience of negative attitudes toward a deity is a distinct possibility in certain
transgression experiences. When individuals feel as if their transgressions are
associated with character traits or dispositional qualities, they tend to report
greater negative evaluations of God in the context of their transgressions. At the
present, these findings are simply correlational and nature and demonstrate an interesting trend in the individual experience of spiritual struggle.

Future research is needed examining the manner in which these two phenomena are associated. Clearly, the results of this study point to a relationship that is impacted by the extent to which one feels their transgression is the result of a character trait. However, more research specifically exploring the mechanisms by which character trait attributions contribute to negative evaluations of the divine is needed. A future focus on the types of transgression most likely to be associated with character traits, the individual differences that may contribute character trait attributions, and any potential mediators in the relationships described in this study is necessary. There is also a need for research examining the clinical implications of such a relationship. Although anger at God and negative evaluations of the divine are clinically significant concepts (Exline, Park, et al., 2011), the exact manner by which these issues should be addressed clinically is yet unclear, particularly when such issues are related to various other spiritual struggles. Although this study serves as an introductory look at the relationship between the transgression experience and negative divine evaluations, there is more work to be done examining the intricacies of the trend described here.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Skew</th>
<th>Corrected Skew</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Internal Consistency</th>
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<td>139</td>
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<td>0-10</td>
<td>0.91</td>
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Figure 1: Pre and post measures of God as Cruel, Distant, and Loving

Figure 2: Mean attribution of divine responsibility for the transgression committed and the traits leading to the transgression
### Table 2
Inter-item correlations for negative evaluations of the divine, personal beliefs, character trait attributions, and relevant personality variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Trait Attribution</th>
<th>Situational Anger at God (Adj. List)</th>
<th>Negative Attributions</th>
<th>Situational Perceptions of God as Cruel</th>
<th>Character Trait Attribution</th>
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<tr>
<td>God as Cruel</td>
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<td>.294**</td>
<td>.348**</td>
<td>.198*</td>
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<td>God as Distant</td>
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<td>.180*</td>
<td>.222**</td>
<td>.223**</td>
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<td>God as Loving</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>.084</td>
<td>-.151</td>
<td>-.197*</td>
</tr>
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<td>Religiosity</td>
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<td>-.140</td>
<td>-.105</td>
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<td>-.224**</td>
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<td>-.059</td>
<td>-.235**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
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<td>-.047</td>
<td>-.032</td>
<td>-.258**</td>
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</table>

*p < .05; **p < .01.

### Table 3
Partial Correlations between character trait attributions and negative evaluations of the divine controlling for relevant religiosity variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control Variables</th>
<th>Key Variables</th>
<th>Character TraitAttributions</th>
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<td>Baseline Perceptions of God as Cruel</td>
<td>Global Negative Evaluations</td>
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*p < .05; **p < .01.
Table 4
Summary of hierarchical regression analysis of variables predicting Global Negative Evaluations of God in the context of moral transgression.

<table>
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<th>β</th>
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*p<.01, **p<.001
References


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