

The Role of Religion in Marriage and Family Counseling

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Series Editor's Foreword

If you talk to God, you are praying; if God talks to you, you have schizophrenia.

—Thomas Szasz

At a time when scientists are stating that people are brainwashed by religion, over 90% of Americans still believe in a god or higher power. Science versus religion is not a new debate and will likely never be completely settled. Whatever the truth, religion and spirituality seem to be well accepted by society and an important part of each person's subjective reality.

No single volume can do justice to the range and depth of human faith and devotion to religious and spiritual phenomena, nor can the possibilities for healing be described in full (Richards & Bergin, 1997). Psychology and counseling, in their attempts to be a science, have historically avoided the topic altogether. However, this is changing as the number of books and journal citations has grown markedly this past decade. As Richards and Bergin (2000) state, "The alienation that has existed between the mental health professions and religion for most of the 20th century is ending."

It is now being mandated that all therapists must become "spiritually sensitive." There is a need to become competent in religious and spiritual diversity. This will allow therapists to gain a further understanding of each client's core beliefs and values.

Jill Duba Onedera and Bill Greenwalt have assembled an impressive group of contributors to enrich your knowledge in this area. You will be able to understand and appreciate many of the world's most popular religions and see how this knowledge is important for therapists.

In closing, remember what Plato stated, "He was a wise man who invented God."

Jon Carlson, Psy.D., Ed.D.
— Series Editor

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The Role of Forgiveness in Religious Life and Within Marriage and Family Relationships

VIRGINIA TODD HOLEMAN

Earlier chapters explored the impact of religion on family relationships. Particular religious beliefs and practices that are associated with forgiveness merit specific attention. Richards and Bergin (1997) observe that “from a religious perspective, forgiveness is viewed as an act that has important spiritual consequences” (p. 212). It is also an act with the potential to heal fractured family relationships. This chapter outlines the shape of forgiveness in the five major world religions (presented in alphabetical order) and then it explores how these conceptualizations of forgiveness may affect family relationships.

A BUDDHIST UNDERSTANDING OF FORGIVENESS

Buddhism does not espouse a concept that directly corresponds with common conceptualizations of forgiveness (Rye, et al., 2000). Nevertheless, one can find aspects of the Buddha’s teaching that are congruent with it. First,

karma is the moral law of cause and effect. This assures Buddhists that the universe is fair and just because thoughts and behaviors are actions that have consequences across and beyond space and time. For example, the offenses one experiences today may be the result of wrongdoing from a previous birth or from negative actions on the part of one's ancestors. When injured parties blame or condemn an offender they add to the suffering of the offender. *Karma* asserts that these negative thoughts toward the transgressor may bring additional suffering upon the injured party who harbors these thoughts. Conversely, positive acts such as forgiveness contribute to the reduction of suffering for self and others. Second, Buddhists are encouraged to develop loving-kindness (*maitri* or *metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upeksha* or *upekkha*), better known as the Four Immeasurable Minds (Nhat Hanh, 1998). As Buddhists nurture the Four Immeasurable Minds, they relinquish their attachments to the things and people they love by accepting the impermanent nature of all forms. This produces forbearance toward offenders and a sense of peacefulness for the self. Third, Buddhists hold a particular understanding of suffering (i.e., Four Noble Truths). Buddhists believe that (a) All life is suffering; (b) Cravings and desires are the origins of suffering; (c) The elimination of cravings, desires, and attachments is the solution to suffering; and (d) the Eightfold Path is the process by which one may end suffering (Anderson, 2004). The Eightfold Path is a middle way between self-indulgence and self-mortification. It includes right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

In addition to these beliefs, a number of Buddhist practices help one to release anger and bitterness without contributing to the suffering of the offender. Compassion seeks to empathize with the suffering of others, including one's offender, and then to ease their pain and suffering. Maguire (2001) offers five precepts for compassionate living. First, avoid causing harm to other sentient beings. Second, avoid taking anything that is not freely given. Third, avoid sexual misconduct. Fourth, avoid untruthfulness. Fifth, avoid clouding the mind with drugs. Forbearance involves refraining from reacting to an offense in a harmful way. "The Buddhist traditions are in general agreement that one must be rather strict in controlling one's own emotions and actions, but at the same time quite tolerant and understanding of the actions of others, especially those who hurt us" (Rye et al., 2000, p. 37). Forbearance seeks to decrease or eliminate a desire for revenge, and to reduce anger and resentment.

As a Buddhist practice, repentance is an act that recognizes "the emptiness of all things—doer, deeds, and karma" (Chappell, 2004, p. 723). One may repent for immoral behavior or from wrongful attitudes, perceptions, and understandings. Indian Buddhism teaches at least two forms of repentance, insight and metaphysical. Insight repentance seeks to eliminate wrongs that are known and past wrongs that are presently unknowable. Practitioners of

insight repentance meditate on each of the sense organs and then recite a ritual repentance meditation three times. Through this form of repentance personal transformation may occur as one realizes the emptiness and impermanence of all things. Metaphysical repentance refers “to unexpiated guilt resulting from unknown or unremembered past wrongs, and [is] a plea for forgiveness to alleviate suffering and harm in the present life” (Chappell, 2004, p. 722). Metaphysical repentance seeks to avoid the larger karmic consequences of wrongful actions.

Meditation involves stilling oneself physically and emotionally. Through meditation one regularly seeks more open awareness of one’s thoughts and feelings, freeing oneself from judgments and rationalizations that daily impinge on one’s thoughts. Regarding forgiveness, Buddhists can use meditation to reframe the wound they have suffered, and to experience compassion and forbearance for the offender. Finally, mindfulness is a state in which the body and mind learn how to be fully present at any given moment (Maguire, 2001). Through mindfulness, one may be aware of anger and resentment that one has toward an offender, and then release those negative emotions, replacing them with compassion and forbearance.

A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF FORGIVENESS

For many Christians, “forgiveness” captures the essence of the biblical narrative, which unfolds the story of God, the Divine injured party, in loving pursuit of unfaithful humanity, and ever seeking to reconcile these sinful people to Godself through forgiveness (Holeman, 2004). Christians believe that God gives the ultimate gift of forgiveness to humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Volf, 2005). Forgiven persons become imitators of Jesus’ life and teachings. Forgiving one another as God has forgiven them is central to the imitation of Christ within the Christian community (Jones, 1995).

Behind this basic formulation lay the theological concepts of sin, salvation, and repentance. More than a violation of a moral code, sin is a form of relationship betrayal (McClendon, 1992). Christians believe that humanity’s betrayal of God is so great that no individual or corporate human action could ever repair the breach. So God had to do it. According to the New Testament, Jesus Christ proclaims the message of God’s forgiveness to all people who repent and believe the good news that he preached (Mk. 1:15). Jesus’ life of self-giving, other-centered love ultimately results in his execution by crucifixion (Gorman, 2001; Green & Baker, 2000). New Testament writers claim that Christ’s death and resurrection demonstrate the greatness of God’s love and offer of forgiveness to sinful humanity (Green & Baker, 2000; Volf, 2005). Christianity does not make repentance a *condition* for forgiveness. Instead, repentance is seen as a *consequence* of forgiveness (Volf, 2005). Grasping the

full implications of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, Christians can do little else but repent and receive God's gift of forgiveness. The New Testament subsequently links the believer's forgiveness by God with their forgiveness of one another (e.g., Matt. 5:9-15; Matt. 18; Col. 3:12-14; Holeman, 2004). Based on gratitude for their own forgiveness by God, Christians are to extend forgiveness to their offenders.

Christian practices associated with forgiveness range from particular liturgical sacraments, such as communion and baptism, to more general practices such as confession and prayer. These practices serve to restore the relationship of repentant people with God and one another through forgiveness. The Eucharist is a church sacrament that reminds Christians of their own forgiveness and challenges them to practice forgiving, repenting, and reconciling with one another (Jones, 1995; Volf, 1996). Jesus Christ inaugurates the Eucharist as he hosts his final meal with his disciples. At this meal he connects the bread that they break with his body, which would be crucified for them. He also associates the wine that they drink with his blood, which would be shed during his crucifixion, "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28, Today's New International Version). As a part of the Eucharist liturgy, a minister or priest declares that those who partake of the Eucharist are forgiven. Each time Christians celebrate the Eucharist they have an opportunity to seek God's forgiveness and to both give and request forgiveness from one another.

According to Bartlett (1992), "Christians believe that baptism represents the believer's repentance, as he or she dies to sin and rises again to new life" (para. 6). Therefore, baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward transformation. As Christians witness the baptism of others, they have an opportunity to renew their own love of God. Regarding forgiveness, Jones (1995) argues that "baptism signifies that, by the grace of Jesus Christ, people are set free from patterns of sin and evil, of betrayals and of being betrayed, of vicious cycles of being caught as victimizers and victims, so that they can bear to remember the past in hope for the future. They can do so because they are given a new perspective on that past, the perspective of forgiveness" (p. 166). Confession of sins often accompanies acts of repentance. In the Protestant tradition, individuals may confess their sins directly to God, or they may confess to one another. In the Catholic tradition, confession is made to a priest, who stipulates acts of penance.

Repentance and forgiveness are often the topic of prayer (formal and informal). Prayer for forgiveness of sins is featured in the model prayer that Jesus taught to his disciples, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). In this passage, forgiveness is the only aspect of the prayer upon which Jesus offers further commentary, emphasizing the importance of extending forgiveness to our offenders. Today many Christians continue to pray to God for forgiveness of their sins and for the strength to extend forgiveness to their transgressors.

A HINDU UNDERSTANDING OF FORGIVENESS

The basic foundation of Hinduism is “*ahimsa*, nonhurtfulness, physically, mentally and emotionally” (Subramuniya, 2001, para. 7). The goal of Hindu religious life is to surrender to Hindu Dharma. Dharma is the cosmic law that directs all processes in the universe, and provides the basis for Hindu morality and ethics (Ellinger, 1996). It is the essence of an ultimate purpose in life that provides balance and integrity. The path of dharma includes practices of forgiveness, righteousness, forbearance, compassion, and patience (Rye et al., 2000). According to Subramuniya (2001) contemporary Hindu Dharma entreats people to release grudges, resentment, and self-contempt, actions that result in forgiveness of self or others. Subramuniya suggests that when one has been wronged, one should let the offense “awaken compassion, kindness and forgiveness” (para. 1) instead of resentment or anger. Then one can see one’s own limitations, and ultimately bring one’s speech and behavior in line with Hindu Dharma.

In Hindu thought, sin (*p-pa*) is the willful or accidental transgression of Dharma. Sins arise from one’s previous lives, mental or physical deformities that one inherited from one’s ancestors, and sins in this life (Beck, 1997). Two categories of sin exist in Hindu thought. Major sins include the killing of a brahmana, drinking liquor, stealing, having sexual intercourse with the wife of one’s guru, and association with anyone who does any of these things. Minor sins are morally degrading behaviors for which a means of expiation exists. Examples of minor sins include killing a cow, selling oneself, abandoning one’s guru or parents, and breaking a vow. Normal rituals of forgiveness have no impact on the expiation of major sins so a more extreme use of pain and suffering is needed over the course of several lifetimes.

Dharma is also associated with the dutiful performance of ritual action. Failure to perform such action results in negative social and personal consequences, or sin (*p-pa*; Flood, 1996). Hindus recognize nine duties that are eternal and that are equally applied to members of the four castes. Named among the nine eternal duties are suppression of wrath, truthfulness of speech, justice, forgiveness, purity of conduct, and avoidance of quarrel (Understanding Hinduism, n.d.). Fulfilling one’s duties aligns one’s life with Dharma.

Like Buddhism, Hindus believe in *karma*. Actions and thoughts from previous lives create karmic limitations in one’s present life, yet a person has freedom to loosen the bonds of karma by surrender to God, creation of good karma, and dissolution of bad karma (Friedrichs, 1986). Regarding forgiveness, Hindus believe that harmful deeds or negative thoughts from one’s own past are the origin of offenses. Therefore, one should not harbor resentment or grudges against one’s offender because such grudge-holding and anger only contributes to negative karmic effects in one’s present or future life. When one forgives, however, karma will come against the offender. In the strictest understanding of karma, everyone had to experience the consequences of

one's sinful behavior before the sins could be destroyed. *Prayascitta*, or the doctrine of expiation, developed as "a flexible means of confronting moral causation and social justice" (Beck, 1997, p. 81). *Prayascitta* is performed after a sin is committed and it takes away the consequences of sin. The Vedas contain prescriptions for expiations (Lochtefeld, 2002). The *Manu-Samhita* is the most important text that spells out penances for sin. Examples of expiations include confession and repentance as a preparation for expiation, fasting, acts of charity, physical asceticism, recitations, purification rituals, and travel to sacred sites.

Two Hindu practices are particularly noteworthy in the context of forgiveness. First, the festival of Mahasivaratri is closely associated with forgiveness. It focuses on austerity and occurs on the 14th day of each month according to the Hindu calendar. No revelry or joyous celebration happens on this day. Instead this festival focuses on the disciplines of *ahimsa* (non-injury), *satya* (speaking the truth), *Brahmacharya* (continence), *daya* (compassion), *Ksama* (forgiveness), and *anasuyata* (absence of jealousy) (Shastri, 2002). Second, yoga is one way many Hindus nurture compassion, renounce resentment, or cultivate forgiveness as it contributes to mastery over one's emotional self.

AN ISLAMIC UNDERSTANDING OF FORGIVENESS

Allah's character and the nature of Allah's relationship with humanity form the template for an Islamic understanding of forgiveness. Receiving forgiveness from Allah is a central theological concern for Islam. Six of Allah's 99 names relate to forgiveness. These names of Allah are: *ar-Rahm-n*, The Merciful; *ar-Rah-m*, The Compassionate; *as-Sab-r*, The Forbearing; *al-'Afuw*, The Pardoner; *al-Ghaffar*, The Forgiver; and *al-Ghaff-r*, The Forgiving (Glasse, 1991). Muslims who invoke these names of Allah are reminded that Allah forgives. Allah is sovereign. Allah created humanity with the ability to reason, so people can see for themselves that Allah and his commands are just. Muslims believe that humanity was created with *fita*, an original righteousness. Allah promises to provide guidance to humanity so that Muslims can follow the Straight Path (Altareb, 1996). Individuals bear the responsibility for deepening their devotion to Allah because Allah will not prevent them from leaving his protection.

Muslims believe that people sin because they are weak and move away from Allah's protection. Islam recognizes four categories of offenses. These include offenses (a) against Allah, (b) against a person, (c) against a group of persons or society, and (d) against aspects of the created order such as animals. The Qur'an regards sin as a breach of the laws or norms, and includes sins of omission and commission. Sins are divided into major and minor sins. Major sins are those that are in direct disobedience to the Qur'an. *Shirk*, or idolatry, is the only unforgivable major sin. *Shirk* can also involve hypocrisy or preventing others from believing in Allah. Allah will overlook minor sins,

which are less easily defined, if one avoids committing major sins. Good deeds, such as prayer, studying the Qur'an, treating others fairly, etc., can repay the debt of sin that one owes to Allah.

Before Allah, people are considered either repentant or wrongdoers. Sincere repentance (*tawbah*) is required for Allah's forgiveness. If one sins against Allah three things are required for *tawbah*: (a) recognize and admit the offense before Allah; (b) commit to not repeating the offense; and (c) ask Allah for forgiveness (Ali, n.d.). Sincerity is essential because with the help of Allah it protects the person from repeating the offense. Moreover, Allah will turn the punishment for the offense into a reward if one sincerely repents. If one sins against another person or society, then a fourth condition, that of atoning for the offense and seeking the injured party's forgiveness, is added.

Forgiveness from Allah is linked to a willingness to forgive others. Forgiving others subsequently results in rewards in this life and the next. Forgiveness of another must be sincere, however. Islam values interpersonal forgiveness because Allah forgives and because interpersonal forgiveness facilitates peaceful relationships (Rye et al., 2000) and reward in the after-life. However, forgiveness is a choice that victims make rather than a religious obligation or duty. Repentance is not required for interpersonal forgiveness. Reconciliation is a desirable outcome, but it is also not required.

An Islamic concept of revenge, *qi---*, deems that the actual wrongdoer alone is guilty, and may be punished. However the punishment must be equivalent to the offense. According to Glasse- (2001), "*qi---* is the very essence of justice, the recognition that consequences are contained in acts, or that effect is contained in cause" (p. 372). According to Rye and colleagues (2000), "Islam taught a middle path between turning the other cheek and never ending blood feud, that is, revenge to the extent harm done is allowed but forgiveness is preferred" (p. 31).

In addition several Islamic practices are related to forgiveness. Muslims pray *salat* five times each day (Matthews, 2002). *Salat* nurtures one's relationship with Allah and with Allah's guidance one will follow the Straight Path and thereby forsake sin. Other Islamic practices that are related to forgiveness include reading or listening to the Qur'an and meditation (Ali, Liu, & Hume-dian, 2004). Each of these practices seeks to draw devout Muslims closer to Allah, to aid them in renouncing all manner of sinful behavior, and to commit to following Allah's commandments fully.

The Night of Forgiveness occurs two weeks before Ramadam. This marks a time when Muslims seek forgiveness for their sins and guidance from Allah. Many Muslims believe that one's destiny for the coming year is set on this night (Lailat-ul-Barah'h, n.d.). The 27th night of Ramadam, the holy month under Islam's lunar calendar, is called the Night of Power. This night marks the date when Allah gave to the Prophet Muhammad the first verses of the Qur'an, and is a time of Allah's maximum forgiveness. This is an ideal time

for individuals to repent and seek Allah's forgiveness for major and minor sins (Holy Days, n.d.).

A JUDAIC UNDERSTANDING OF FORGIVENESS

God's moral character is central to Judaic theology. This shapes Judaic ideas of repentance and forgiveness and establishes one's moral obligations in community and family life. Based on the prime commandment of the Holiness Code—"Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy" (Lev. 19:2), the Judaic community is to embody the attributes of God in its life together. "To the extent that Israel is to pattern its own moral life on God's example, the obligation to forgive must become one of its central moral duties. By forgiving those who hurt them, Jews draw themselves closer to God and make God's own compassion the operative force in their relations with others" (Newman, 1987, pp. 166–177).

Judaism believes that God also endowed humanity with free will to choose between good and evil. Sadly, people have a strong propensity to violate God's laws. God forgives those who repent and punishes those who do not repent. Therefore repentance (*teshuvah*) is a precondition to forgiveness for offenses committed against God and one another. Because people can change for the better, offenders ought to and can accept responsibility for their actions and should be given a chance to do so (Dorff, 1998), even if this means that the injured party confronts the wrongdoer first. Only a victim has the moral right to forgive the offender (Dorff, 1998; Schimmel, 2002). However, sins against another person are also sins against God (Schimmel, 2002). Offenders cannot receive God's forgiveness until they have sought the forgiveness of the injured party. Judaism teaches that its people are members of a covenant community (Newman, 1987). A concern for peace in the house, *shalom bayit* (Korzenik, 1994) energizes a longing for reconciliation when relationships are fractured. Nevertheless, a concern for justice and the law takes precedence over the forgiveness of the unrepentant. Dorff (1998) proposes that a focus on a change of feelings for the injured party is not central to a Judaic understanding of forgiveness. Rather it is "acting on the moral duty to forgive so that community is maintained" (p. 46).

A number of Judaic practices support forgiveness. Daily prayers remind the community of their duty to repent. These prayers emphasize repentance as a prerequisite to God's forgiveness and God's character as one who longs to pardon and forgive those who return to God through repentance. In addition to daily prayers, special holy days mark the Judaic liturgical calendar. Salient to our discussion are the High Holy Days, which begin with *Rosh Hashanah*, the New Year, and end with *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement.

The ten days between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* are known as the Ten Days of Repentance (Strassfeld, 1985). The themes of repentance, judgment, and atonement take center stage throughout these holy days. The period before *Rosh Hashanah* is devoted to contemplating how one may repair broken relationships. Worshippers devote themselves to careful self-examination to become cognizant of how they have failed God, others, and even themselves.

Yom Kippur, the most important holy day, is the climax of the Ten Days of Repentance. It enters on seeking God's forgiveness through repentance. On the eve of the Day of Atonement, it is customary to seek reconciliation with others because God cannot forgive sins committed against another person unless that person has first forgiven the transgressor. Family members gather together to celebrate this holy day and to share the evening meal. Five services are held in the synagogue throughout the day with sin, repentance, and forgiveness as central liturgical themes. The *viddui*, confessional, is recited at each service (Strassfeld, 1985).

While the Day of Atonement focuses on seeking divine forgiveness, Dorff (1998) describes a process of return for seeking human forgiveness. The steps in the process of return are (a) acknowledgment that one has done something wrong; (b) public confession of one's wrongdoing to both God and the community; (c) public expression of remorse; (d) public announcement of the offender's resolve not to sin in this way again; (e) compensation of the victim and acts of charity to others; (f) sincere request of the injured party for forgiveness repeated up to three times, if necessary; (g) avoidance of the conditions that caused the offense; and (h) behaving differently when confronted with a similar situation. Once the offender has repented, the injured party now is under a moral duty to forgive. If the offender repents up to three times without receiving forgiveness, then the injured party carries the burden of having sinned.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUPLE AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Religious beliefs are deeply embedded in the language that a given community uses to name and describe itself, its values, and its mores. According to Walsh (1999) these beliefs "provide faith explanations of past history and present experiences; for many, they predict the future and offer pathways toward understanding the ultimate meanings of life and existence" (p. 6). Walsh's sentiments are underscored when one reflects upon the role that forgiveness and its companion concepts play in religious and family life. Beliefs about forgiving, repenting, retaliating, and reconciling provide the scaffolding for the stories that families construct to explain why they do or do not get along (e.g., sin against God or another; bad karma). They provide motivation to heal fractured relationships (e.g., seeking a right relationship with God, blessings in this life or the next, or promoting good karma). They undergird and

support the challenging tasks of releasing anger and hostility, seeking justice, or pursuing relationship restoration. With respect to forgiveness, families are not left on their own. Beliefs about forgiveness are also reinforced by the stories that the practicing religious community tells through its holy texts. Families who participate in sacred rituals and ceremonies have ready-made avenues for offering forgiveness or repentance to one another. When taken deep into a family's soul, these beliefs become embodied in the give and take of daily life.

As indicated above, *beliefs about forgiveness influence how families understand the causes and solutions to interpersonal wounds*. Hindu and Buddhist families interpret suffering through the lens of *karma*. This cyclic and cosmic view of cause and effect gives these families a wider perspective for making attributions of innocence or blame. Interpersonal wounds in this life may have resulted from one's own wrongdoing or they may have had their origins in the misdeeds of one's own past lives or of one's ancestors. Devote Hindus and Buddhists may look to the distant past for the source of their suffering and may not attribute *total* blame to the wrongdoer.

Buddhists affirm that suffering is a natural part of life. The Four Immeasurable Minds and the Four Noble Truths encourage Buddhist families to extend compassion and forbearance to their offender. Buddhists believe that if they harbor bitterness, anger, and resentment against their transgressor, they will bring injury to that person, which then binds wounded parties and their progeny more tightly to future harmful karmic effects. If this is applied to a marital affair, for example, one can imagine how compassion and forbearance would be more likely to evoke repentance and relationship restoration than hatred or grudge-bearing. In a similar way Hindus also seek to avoid contributing to the negative effects of karma by following *ahimsa* or the principle of nonhurtfulness. Hindus believe that bad karma can be averted if the wrongdoer performs expiations for the sins he or she committed. If a family member sins, the Hindu family would look to their guru for direction on the rituals that the individual or family should perform as expiation for sin.

On the other hand, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism do not interpret hurtful interactions through the lens of karma. Instead, hurtful family interactions arise from individual wrongdoing against another. Therefore an individual bears the label of guilty or innocent without undue consideration for bad behavior on the part of one's ancestors. This confines the time frame for wounding events to the family's present, not to its ancestral past. While each of these theistic religions recognize the generational impact of family betrayals, sin is more of an individual matter than a cosmic one.

Beliefs about forgiveness determine how couples and families view the relationship between forgiving, repenting, revenge, and the extent to which reconciliation is possible. In Christianity, the New Testament presents forgiveness as a command rather than a suggestion. Because repentance is not required prior to forgiveness (Jones, 1995; Volf, 1996), family members are free to keep a soft heart

toward a wayward and recalcitrant relative or mate. The priority of forgiveness within Christianity may forestall ongoing cycles of retaliation because Christians believe that revenge belongs to God alone. Yet these theological dynamics also raise questions about safety when offenders return to the matrix of family relationships but are unrepentant. Will forgiveness become “cheap” when it is offered without any expectation or demonstration of changed behavior from the transgressor (Jones, 1995)? For example, Christian battered wives place themselves in grave danger when they forgive the batterer without requiring observable and sustainable changed behavior over time. Many perpetrators “repent” as part of the cycle of abuse and then demand that injured spouses forgive and reconcile. In such cases forgiveness is too often coupled with reconciliation, minus authentic repentance (Holeman, 2004).

In Islam, Muslim families strive to honor and serve Allah in all aspects of their daily life by full obedience to Islamic teachings. This includes avoiding prohibited behaviors such as telling lies, cheating, gambling, adultery, and taking advantage of others. Obviously, these actions are harmful to family well-being! However, if family members engage in such sinful actions, then returning to Allah through repentance is required of the individual. Islam does permit retaliation, but only to the degree of the harm done. The injured party is not required to forgive, but forgiveness is preferred because Allah is forgiving. When family members engage in retribution, the question arises as to the perceived appropriate degree of retaliation. It is likely that families could be locked into ongoing cycles of retribution if wrongdoers believe that injured parties exceeded the appropriate level of punishment (Baumeister, 1997).

In Hinduism self-forgiveness is the platform from which forgiveness of others flows (Subramuniya, 2001). Forgiveness of self includes accepting oneself fully and living without guilt. Subramuniya writes, “We must start with ourselves, for as long as we hold self-contempt, we are unable to forgive others, because everyone else is a reflection of ourself” (para. 4). In Hindu thought, forgiveness does not automatically lead to reconciliation. An apology is required. When offenders remain unapologetic, Hindu practice endorses affectionate detachment with the offender.

In Judaism wrongdoers know that forgiveness does not come free. Repentance (*teshuvah*) is required. This compels wrongdoers of all ages to initiate repair processes with their families. In addition, transgressors are not eligible for God’s forgiveness until one has repented and been forgiven by the people one has injured. However, relationship repair is not all left up to offenders. Injured parties are also obliged to give transgressors an opportunity to repent by informing them of the offense. Although Judaic teaching underscores one’s duty to forgive following repentance, the Judaic emphasis of justice may compete with an obligation to forgive. In these cases, injured family members must decide which tradition takes precedence. One can easily imagine the conundrum that exists when a transgressor has completed the process of return, but the injured family member is not yet emotionally ready to forgive.

That moral duty takes precedence over emotional readiness does not diminish the family's anguish in their struggle to forgive.

As noted in this chapter, many religious people forgive because they have been forgiven by God or because this contributes to good karma. Such deeply held convictions may compel some family members to forgive prematurely. They may feel guilty, unrighteous, or unworthy if they remain unforgiving. They may fear invoking divine wrath or bad karma if they stay angry or resentful. It is at this point that families may seek counsel from their priest, pastor, rabbi, imam, or guru. If the offender is still dangerous, reconciliation may not be possible. Then religious families may lean upon concepts of ultimate justice as framed by their religious tradition.

Forgiveness is nurtured as family units participate in holy day celebrations, special prayers, and rituals. "From a spiritual perspective, acts of worship and ritual can serve a number of purposes for believers: (a) expressing one's devotion, love, and respect toward God or the gods; (b) committing or recommitting oneself to a spiritual and moral life; (c) demonstrating devotion and piety to other members of one's religious community; (d) offering penitence and sacrifice for sins or wrongdoings; (e) demonstrating one's solidarity with other members of the religious community; and (f) seeking spiritual enlightenment, guidance, and healing" (Richards & Bergen, 1997, p. 215). These holy observances remind families of their duties and responsibilities as related to forgiveness.

For many Christian families, the local church is a center of family activity. Denominations vary on the frequency with which they celebrate the Eucharist, ranging from quarterly to weekly to daily. Whatever the frequency, the family is encouraged to settle interpersonal conflicts through repentance and forgiveness at each communion service. In addition, baptism is celebrated as a family event. If the church practices infant baptism, parents make the commitment to raise their child to be a disciple of Jesus. This would naturally include the parents modeling forgiving, repenting, and reconciling. If the church practices the baptism of only adolescents or adults, then that individual is affirming his or her status as a forgiven follower of Jesus Christ. All who witness a baptism have an opportunity to reflect upon their own forgiveness and what it means to them to be a member of the body of Christ. Moreover, many parents take the discipleship of their children seriously so that training in how to be a follower of Christ begins in the home. Clearly forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation should be included along with Bible study, prayer, and church attendance.

The community of which a particular Judaic family belongs may become involved in the family's conflict in an effort to encourage repentance. Schimmel (2002) explains: "The communitarian ethos is strong in Judaism, making every member of society responsible for one another's moral and spiritual state" (pp. 183–184). Once repentance has been made, an expectation exists that wrongdoers will be reincorporated into the community, although not

necessarily into the same position they once held, and by extension into the family, taking appropriate precautions against re-violation (Dorff, 1998).

World religions set aside special holy days that revolve around the restoration of right relationship with God, others, and the cosmos. For example, Christians celebrate Easter; Hindus celebrate the festival of Mahasivaratri; Muslims celebrate Ramadam, which includes the Night of Forgiveness; Jews celebrate Yom Kippur. Couples and families who practice these holy day celebrations have regular opportunities to make peace with one another through forgiving and repenting. During these hallowed times of worship, families reaffirm their commitment to one another because observance serves as a reminder of the way to restore harmony to fractured relationships. The bond between family members is strengthened as they practice forgiving and repenting during these holy days. This would seem to affirm the saying that "The family that prays together stays together."

CONCLUSION

Obviously beliefs about forgiveness rarely are cold propositional or theological statements when couples and families face the kind of betrayals that threaten to rip them apart. At these benchmark family moments, beliefs about forgiveness serve constraining and facilitative functions. Practices of forgiving, repenting, and reconciling prevent couples and families from immediate collapse, and exert subtle and not so subtle pressure for family reunification. As religious practices, these religious beliefs help couples and families to define their problems as "solvable," their recalcitrant family member as "redeemable," and renders their relationships as "restorable." While resentment, grudge-holding, and hatred do exist even in the most committed families, teachings on forgiveness or repentance press family members toward resolution.

Religious beliefs help bring a sense of cohesion to couples and families. As individuals commit themselves to values and virtues that are greater than themselves, they gain a new perspective on painful family interactions. All of the major world religions offer the image of an individual who epitomizes their practices of forgiveness. In Buddhism, there is Sakyamuni Buddha. In Christianity, this is Jesus Christ. In Judaism, it is the Messiah. In Islam, one finds Muhammad. In Hinduism, one reads in the Vedas examples of forgiving and merciful acts of the gods and goddesses. These exemplars can inspire family members to act as "transitional figures" in their family. Bergin (1988) defines this as a person who makes a difference in their family history, by embracing the pain from past victimization, preventing its transmission into future generations, forgiving offenders, and adopting a redemptive role between previous ancestors and future family members. In this way, forgiveness is no longer a theological construct, but a lived reality that will impact the well-being of family for generations to come.

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