RESEARCH

Reason-Based Evaluations of Wrongdoing in Religious and Moral Narratives

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Protestant, Roman Catholic, and non-religiously affiliated college students (N = 136) read narrative accounts of a wrongdoing which could be seen as violating both a rule and a relationship, in which the offended party was either God (religious narrative) or another person (moral narrative). They then rated the seriousness of the action and responded to open-ended questions designed to elicit their reasoning about the wrongdoing. Although participants evaluated the action in the religious narratives as somewhat more serious than in the moral narrative, they reasoned about religious and moral wrongdoings in similar ways. When asked to consider why the action was wrong, participants mentioned violating the rule most frequently; however, when asked what mattered most to the offended party, proportionately more participants mentioned the implications of violating a relationship. Reasoning was unrelated to gender or to religious affiliation.
For many, religious beliefs and practices represent a distinctive and important component of everyday living. National polls report that 86% of Americans indicate they believe in the existence of God, even when given the choice of indicating belief in a “higher power” (Newport, 1999), 68% are a member of a church or synagogue (Gallup, 2000), and 84% believe in the survival of the soul after death (Harris, 1998). Thus, for at least a substantial percentage of the population, a sense of spirituality is likely to be central to their goals, values, and motives.

Despite the apparent centrality of religious concerns in people’s lives, very little is known about the way people construe their relationship with God, particularly in situations in which their actions could be perceived as offending God. In this article we address the question of how individuals evaluate an infraction when the action in question could be considered to have wronged either God (religious narrative) or another person (moral narrative); we also examine individuals’ reasoning about the offense in each of these instances. In both narratives, it was possible to view the offense in terms of violating a rule or violating aspects of a relationship, or both; information supporting either perspective was equally present in each of the narratives.

EVALUATIONS OF RELIGIOUS AND MORAL WRONGDOING

Evaluations of actions that could be perceived as offending God might be expected to differ for a number of reasons from those arising from situations where the wronged party involves another person. A conceptualization of God that includes such attributes as “all-wise,” “omnipotent,” and “holy” (Gorsuch, 1968) may preclude any consideration of conflict in which the claims of another party warrant consideration, and cause the actions in question to be evaluated as categorically wrong. On the other hand, religious and moral domains are recognized to have important elements in common, such as considerations of justice, fairness, and the responsibilities of individuals to maintain faith with each other (Narvaez, Getz, Rest, & Thoma, 1999; Nucci & Turiel, 1993). As a consequence, evaluations of actions might be expected to share similarities across these two domains.

Evaluations of actions could be expected to vary with respect to participants’ sex as well as with the identity of the party that has been wronged. Women have been found to be more religious than men on a variety of measures, such as attending religious services and praying; religion also appears to be more salient in their everyday activities (Francis, 1997; Ozorak, 1996). These differences have largely be explained by gender schema theory (Martin & Halverson, 1981) that argues that religion is not a salient component of the male gender role, and by theories emphasizing the psychological characteristics distinguishing individuals of either gender (Francis & Wilcox, 1998; Thompson, 1991). Conversely, following the tradition
of Kohlberg’s (1984) cognitive-structural theory of moral development, researchers have found few consistent sex differences in comparisons of moral judgments (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; Snarey, 1985).

Individuals’ moral beliefs are likely to be influenced by the network of people that surround them. People interact with each other and hence affect each other. Individuals’ religious affiliation, then, might be critical in shaping their evaluations of wrongdoing (Gay, Ellison, & Powers, 1996; Stark, 1996). Similarly, individuals who are not actively affiliated with a religious organization would be expected to differ from those who are affiliated in the way they evaluate a religious transgression. Scheepers and Van der Slik (1998) indeed found that individual characteristics (religious involvement and religious beliefs) outweighed the effects of other characteristics (educational level and personal income) on the respondent’s moral evaluations of various infractions.

**REASONING ABOUT RELIGIOUS AND MORAL WRONGDOING**

By studying the reasons people give in judging the seriousness of a wrongdoing, it is proposed that we can better understand the ways individuals evaluate the behavior of others. A reason-based analysis of evaluations of wrongdoing identifies the reasons and issues that are purported to enter into and influence evaluations. The reliance on reasons to explain findings is not new, but is in fact a hallmark of social psychological analyses. Accounts of dissonance (Wicklund & Brehm, 1976), for example, focus on the reasons that people muster in an attempt to explain their counter-attitudinal behaviors. Similarly, attribution theory (Heider, 1958) centers around the reasons people attribute to others’ behavior. Likewise, examinations of intergroup relations (Phinney & Cobb, 1996) and explanations of moral judgment (Helwig, Hildebrandt, & Turiel, 1995) consider the reasons individuals give in support of the positions they take.

Despite the limitation that individuals are sometimes unaware of the precise factors that determine their evaluations, and generate spurious explanations when asked to account for their evaluations (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), a reason-based conception of evaluations has two attractive features. First, a focus on reasons seems closer to the way we normally think and talk about evaluations of wrongdoing. When faced with a difficult evaluation of a potential act of wrongdoing (e.g., whether to lie to protect the welfare of others), we try to come up with reasons for and against each option (i.e., the pros of being thought of as a good friend vs. the cons associated with being thought of as a liar). Second, a reason-based analysis of evaluations of wrongdoing in a religious setting makes possible a comparison of such evaluations with the extensive literature in moral reasoning.
Prior research in moral reasoning has identified two moral perspectives (Cortese, 1989; Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1984). The first, termed a *justice or rights orientation*, emphasizes adherence to abstract principles such as justice and the rights of individuals. The second, a care-based or relationship orientation, emphasizes the mutual responsibilities of one person to another and focuses on the relationship implications of an infraction. Juster (1989), analyzing narrative accounts of 19th century conversion experiences, found a comparable distinction in the ways individuals described personal wrongdoing; some characterized their offenses primarily in terms of having broken God’s rules and others referred to a flawed relationship with God. Oser and Gmunder (1991) found support for a sequencing of these perspectives, in which awareness moves from concerns about disobedience and punishment, at the developmentally earliest pattern of religious reasoning, to a concern with the implications of one’s actions for relationship with God at the highest level of reasoning. Correspondingly, concepts such as salvation or damnation are reinterpreted as loyalty or disloyalty at the highest level of reasoning (Oser & Gmunder, 1991).

Many biblical accounts of wrongdoing lend themselves to either of these interpretations. Biblical accounts depicting the “falling out” between humans and God (e.g., Adam and Eve eating from the tree of knowledge in violation of God’s warning; the Israelites turning to idol worship despite the covenant they had made with God) can be understood both in terms of breaking a rule and damaging a relationship. With respect to the narrative of Adam and Eve, for example, one could characterize the wrongdoing as primarily one of disobedience in that the characters broke a rule by eating fruit they were told not to eat. Conversely, one could focus on the implications of their actions for the relationship in that, by eating fruit that had been left within their reach, they betrayed a trust that had been placed in them.

Although religious issues can be shown to parallel moral ones with respect to either of these stances, individuals have been found to readily differentiate religious from moral domains. Nucci (1982) and Nucci and Turiel (1993) found that individuals regard moral rules as binding for all individuals irrespective of their faith, whereas religious rules are held to apply only to believers. Thus, when those belonging to a religious group were asked whether religious issues (working on the Sabbath or women wearing head coverings) would be wrong for those of another faith for whom they were not proscribed, they indicated such actions would not be wrong. Conversely, when asked whether moral issues (stealing, hitting) would be all right if there were no rule against them, the actions were still judged as wrong.

An examination of the reasons used in justifying such judgments revealed that both the rights and the relationship perspectives were reflected in reasoning about moral issues. However, the relationship perspective was virtually absent when reasoning about religious issues. Differences in the reasons brought to bear in either
domain may have been due to the degree of abstractness with which issues were presented. Individuals have been found to reason about moral issues differently when these involve real-life situations as opposed to abstract moral dilemmas; the latter are more likely to occasion considerations of justice, rules, and rights (Wark & Krebs, 1996). In contrast, when asked to consider real life moral issues, such as informing a sexual partner of a sexually transmitted disease, college students spontaneously combined reasons reflecting each orientation (Jadeck, Hyde, Moore, & Keller, 1995).

The type of reasons that are given when evaluating either a moral or a religious infraction might be expected to differ with sex. Women are typically socialized to be more attuned to the emotional needs of others and consequently might be expected to be more responsive to the relationship implications of the wrongdoing than men (Gilligan, 1982). Research has yielded inconsistent findings with respect to sex-based differences in moral reasoning, with some studies reporting no or only slight sex differences (Daniels, D’Andrea, & Heck, 1995; Jaffee & Hyde, 2000; Nucci & Turiel, 1993; Phinney & Cobb, 1996) and others reporting significant differences. The latter studies typically report that, although both orientations are reflected in the reasons given by individuals of either sex, women are more likely than men to mention interpersonal issues such as those of care and responsibility (Cortese, 1989; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988). With respect to religious infractions, scant research is available (Francis, 1997). Juster (1989), however, found that women were more likely to describe personal offenses against God in terms of a relationship perspective whereas men were more likely to describe these from a rights perspective. Similarly, Ozorak (1996) found women to describe their religious beliefs in terms that described God as “friend” and “confidant” rather than “ruler” or “judge.”

The reasons why an action might be evaluated as wrong are not necessarily those that matter most to the injured party. Actions that flagrantly violate rules can nonetheless have relationship issues as their most serious consequences. Thus, stealing money from an employer may occasion feelings of disappointment and betrayal, even though the act represents a violation of the employer’s property and rights. But would individuals perceive relationship issues to be as salient to God as they would when another person was wronged? To directly compare the salience of such issues in each type of scenario, individuals’ reasoning was examined from the perspective of the party that had been wronged as well as from the third person perspective of the participants themselves. Thus, individuals were asked not only for their reasons why it was important not to commit the action in question (e.g., eat the apple or steal the money) but were also asked what was most important to the offended party, God or the employer. Research in which individuals are asked to describe their images of God offers possible insights into what they might see as mattering to God. Such studies consistently find that God is perceived as both powerful and loving; these qualities are consistent with the image of God as one
who rules over others and as one who enters into relationships with them, and sug-
gests that reasons reflective of both a rights and a relationship perspective would be evident (Dickie et al., 1997; Gorsuch, 1968; Hertel & Donahue, 1995).

GOALS OF THE STUDY

Our investigation had two aims. The first aim was to assess the seriousness with which an infraction was evaluated when the wronged party was God as opposed to another person. Due to scant empirical data related to this comparison, no predictions were made as to the perceived relative seriousness of the wrongdoing in the religious versus the moral scenario. However, based on findings that women are more religious than men (Francis, 1997), women were expected to evaluate the infraction in the religious scenario as more serious than were men. For a similar reason, individuals who were affiliated with a religious institution were expected to evaluate the religious infraction as more serious than those who were not affiliated.

The second aim of this research was to compare the reasons individuals give when evaluating religious and moral infractions. We expected that reasons reflecting both the rights and the relationship orientation would be evident for each type of scenario. For the religious scenario, this expectation was based on Juster’s (1989) findings that individuals describe personal offenses against God both in terms of having broken God’s rules and as having tainted their relationship with God, and on research showing that individuals describe God in terms that are consistent with the image of a rule giver and a relationship seeker (e.g., Dickie et al., 1997; Gorsuch, 1968). For the moral scenario, this expectation was based on findings such as those of Jadeck et al. (1995), namely that individuals have been found to use both types of reasons when considering moral dilemmas. Based on findings such as those of Juster (1989) and Ozorak (1996) in which women describe God in relationship terms, it was also expected that the reasons mentioned by women would more frequently reflect a relationship orientation than would those of men. No predictions were made for religious affiliation due to the absence of relevant data concerning these comparisons.

In summary, this research presented individuals with a narrative account of a wrongdoing that could be perceived as a violation of a rule or a relationship, or of both, in which the offended party was either God (religious vignettes) or another person (moral vignette). The purpose of the research was (a) to assess the seriousness with which the infraction was evaluated when the wronged party was God as opposed to another person, (b) to compare the way individuals reason about religious and moral conflict, and (c) to determine whether gender and religious affiliation are related to evaluations of and reasoning about religious and moral infractions.
METHOD

Participants

A total of 136 college students (58 men, 78 women) from an ethnically diverse urban campus in southern California participated in the study. Eighty-five percent of those who participated were Asian American (18%), European American (17%), or Hispanic (50%). Of the remaining participants, 7% identified themselves as bicultural, 2% as African American, 2% as Native American, and 5% as Other. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 57, with a mean age of 25; 75% were 18 to 27 years old. Participants were selected from an initial sample of 192 respondents if they indicated their religious affiliation to be Protestant (20%), Roman Catholic (60%), or None (20%). All participants were treated in accordance with the “Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct” (American Psychological Association, 1992).

Materials and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three vignette conditions in which the character(s), through a single act, could be seen as violating both a rule and a relationship. Each of the three vignettes contained five parallel elements: (a) an explicit rule given by God or an employer to which the character(s) had implicitly agreed, (b) a relationship characterized by companionship and trust between God or the employer and the character(s), (c) temptation to violate the rule or agreement, (d) an action which violated the rule or agreement, and (e) punishment following the action (see Appendix).

After reading the vignette, participants evaluated the seriousness of the action on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all wrong) to 6 (very wrong) and wrote answers to three open-ended questions. The first question asked whether the action would have been wrong or all right had nothing been said about eating the fruit (Adam and Eve vignette), worshiping other gods (Israelites vignette), or taking the money without working for it (moral vignette). The remaining two questions were designed to elicit participants’ reasoning about the action. The first of these asked why it was important for Adam and Eve (the Israelites; Sam or Sally) not to eat the fruit from that tree (worship the golden calf; take the money), and the second asked what was most important to God (Jones).

Participants also responded to three separate 4-point scales assessing their religious practices and beliefs. With respect to religious practices, they indicated the frequency with which they attended religious services: 1 (weekly), 2 (1-2 times/month), 3 (rarely), or 4 (never). For beliefs, they indicated both the importance of their beliefs: 1 (very important), 2 (pretty important), 3 (a little impor-
tant), or 4 (not important). They also chose one of four categories describing the nature of these beliefs: 1 (in a God who is involved in the events of our lives), 2 (in a God who is not involved in the events of our lives), 3 (one can not know if there is a God), or 4 (there is no God).

RESULTS

Religious Beliefs and Practices

Separate chi-square comparisons revealed that Protestants and Roman Catholics did not differ either in the nature of their beliefs or in the frequency with which they attended religious services; however, significantly more Protestants than Roman Catholics indicated their beliefs to be very important, $\chi^2(3, N = 136) = 8.731, p < .05$. Participants who indicated no religious affiliation were significantly less likely than Protestants and Catholics to believe in the existence of God, $\chi^2(6, N = 136) = 51.853, p < .01$, or to attend religious services, $\chi^2(6, N = 136) = 67.15, p < .01$. Participants who reported no religious affiliation (None) were also less likely to consider their beliefs important when compared to either Protestants, $\chi^2(3, N = 136) = 22.54, p < .01$, or Catholics, $\chi^2(3, N = 136) = 47.05, p < .01$.

The relationship between sex and frequency of attendance, importance of religious beliefs, and nature of beliefs was examined in separate chi-square analyses. The chi-square for frequency of attendance was significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 136) = 10.64, p < .05$, indicating that women attended religious services more frequently than men. Neither the importance of religious beliefs nor the nature of religious beliefs differed as a function of sex.

Evaluation of the Wrongdoing

Multinomial logistic regression analyses were applied, in lieu of ordinary least squares regression, because the dependent variables consisted of nominal categories or scaled categories for which the assumptions of least squares regression could not be met. The effects of independent variables are tested with a chi-square statistic, which is the difference between two likelihood ratios. We report the chi-square values for all statistically significant results; any result is regarded as significant if the probability ($p$) value is $< .05$.

Several dependent variables were regressed on the same independent variables of vignette, religious affiliation, and sex. We tested these main effects and all two-way interactions among them. Non-significant effects were dropped from subsequent analyses to mitigate the effects of empty cells. No significant effects of sex were found in any of our reported analyses. If a factor or its interaction was sig-
significant, we examined the parameters involving cell comparisons. In comparing cells, there is a reference level for the dependent variable and each independent variable; within each level of the dependent variable (except the reference level) a category of the independent variable is compared to the reference level for that factor. For religious affiliation, we utilized three categories: Protestant, Catholic, and None, with the latter as the reference level. For the vignette factor, there are three categories, Adam and Eve, Israelites, and Moral, with the latter serving as the reference level. We report significant \( p \) values for these comparisons and the odds ratio (OR). The greater the difference between OR and 1, the more likely are participants to fall into the reference category (OR < 1) or the comparison category (OR > 1).

**Seriousness of the offense.** In this analysis we examine the effects of our independent variables on how wrong the actions described in the vignettes were perceived to be. There were significant effects for vignettes, \( \chi^2 (8, N = 136) = 32.966, p < .001 \), and religious affiliation, \( \chi^2 (8, N = 136) = 28.562, p < .001 \). Table 1 shows the percentages for response categories of seriousness of the offense by vignettes and religious affiliation. The reference category for the dependent variable is “very seriously wrong;” it is by far the most frequently used category overall, constituting nearly 45% of all responses. There are a number of significant comparisons among the vignettes; these results are presented in Table 2. Those reading the Adam and Eve vignette were more likely to give a “not or little” wrong response than readers of the Moral vignette (the reference category). However, among respondents who perceived the actions as being at least “moderately” wrong, many of the OR’s are significantly less than 1. This is evidence that respondents in the religious vignettes conditions were more likely to label the actions as being “very seriously” wrong rather than as being less than very seriously wrong.

**TABLE 1**  
Percentage of Responses to Categories of Seriousness of Wrongdoing by Vignette and Religious Affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of Seriousness</th>
<th>Adam and Eve</th>
<th>Israelites</th>
<th>Moral</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Protestant</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not or a little</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>17.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.67</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seriously</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19.00</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very seriously</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>44.67</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>43.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( ^a n = 45, ^b n = 46, ^c n = 45, ^d n = 27, ^e n = 82, ^f n = 27. \)
For religious affiliation the only statistically significant differences were for those who chose the “not or little wrong” category. In comparison to those reporting no religious affiliation, Protestants (OR = .033, df = 1, p < .01) and Catholics (OR = .076, df = 1, p < .001) were unlikely to evaluate the offense as being less than “very serious” (OR = .033, df = 1, p < .01).

If nothing were said. Next we examined the effects of the independent variables on responses as to whether the described actions would have been wrong had nothing been said (about eating the fruit, worshiping other gods, taking money without working for it). The only significant effect was for vignettes, \( \chi^2 (2, N = 136) = 67.840, p < .001 \). Cell comparisons revealed that participants responding to the two Religious vignettes, in comparison to the Moral vignette, were significantly less likely to prefer a “wrong” response over the “all right” response (the dependent variable reference level). For Adam and Eve, OR = .001, df = 1, p < .001; for Israelites, OR = .054, df = 1, p < .01. Table 3 shows the observed frequencies and percentages of responses for each of the responses for each of the vignettes. Responses to the Adam and Eve and Moral vignettes were clearly reversed: 97.1% of the responses were “wrong” to the Moral vignette while only 3.7% of the responses to the Adam and Eve vignette were “wrong.” The Israelite vignette responses fell between the other two. An analysis using only the two religious vignettes showed that they differed significantly; those responding to the Adam and Eve vignette were less likely to label it “wrong” than those responding to the Israelites vignette (OR = .021, df = 1, p < .001).

### Analysis of Reasoning

Participants’ reasoning to each of two additional questions was examined. The first of these questions asked why it was important for the character(s) in the vignettes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation of Seriousness</th>
<th>Vignette</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not or a little wrong</td>
<td>Adam and Eve</td>
<td>11.253</td>
<td>.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Israelites</td>
<td>4.602</td>
<td>.200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat wrong</td>
<td>Adam and Eve</td>
<td>1.052</td>
<td>.951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Israelites</td>
<td>.988</td>
<td>.988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately wrong</td>
<td>Adam and Eve</td>
<td>.249</td>
<td>.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Israelites</td>
<td>.236</td>
<td>.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seriously wrong</td>
<td>Adam and Eve</td>
<td>.072</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Israelites</td>
<td>.241</td>
<td>.012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 2**

Effect of Vignettes on Evaluations of Seriousness of the Wrongdoing
not to have done what they did and the second question asked what mattered most to
the offended party. Responses were coded for the types of reasons participants
gave. Coding categories were developed by first having each member of a
four-member research team independently read one quarter of the protocols and
write down all of the responses given by each of the participants. Then, based on
group discussion among all members of the team, responses were grouped into cat-
egories of reasons on the basis of similarity in meaning; responses that were given
infrequently, and could not be grouped, were coded as “other.” Finally, each mem-
ber of the research team read all of the protocols, including those from which the
coding categories had been developed, and coded the responses in terms of the
agreed on categories. Intercoder reliability among all coders for all protocols
reached 90% agreement across all categories of reasons.

“Why was it important…?” In answer to the question “Why was it impor-
tant … not to …?” six categories of reasons were identified. Participants gave rea-
sons mentioning: (a) a rule or stating that the characters had been disobedient (rule),
(b) an aspect of the relationship, such as cooperation, respect or trust (relationship),
(c) some consequence that was specific to the vignette, such as loss of innocence for
the Adam and Eve vignette or idolatry for the Israelites vignette (vignette-specific),
(d) punishment, such as not being able to get to the promised land or losing the job
(punishment), (e) maintaining control, as in Adam and Eve no longer seeing God as
all powerful (control), and (f) being tested, as in Adam and Eve being tested to de-
terminate whether they could be honest (testing). With one exception, the latter two
categories were mentioned only in response to the Adam and Eve vignette. Due to
low frequencies of mention for reasons coded as punishment, testing, and control,
these categories were excluded from the analysis. Each reason was scored dichoto-
mously, depending on whether the reason had been mentioned. Although partici-
pants could mention more than one reason, the average number of reasons given per
participant was 1.16.

Table 4 shows the frequencies with which different types of reasons were given
why actions described in the three vignettes were wrong. When we regressed the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette</th>
<th>Wrong Count</th>
<th>All Right Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam and Eve</td>
<td>1 3.7</td>
<td>26 96.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israelites</td>
<td>20 64.5</td>
<td>11 35.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>34 97.1</td>
<td>1 2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
three independent variables on the types of reasons, we found no statistically significant effects.

“What mattered most…?” In answer to the question “What mattered most…?” five categories of reasons were identified. Participants again gave reasons referring to the rule, to the relationship, and to consequences specific to each vignette. Among the latter, those given in response to the Adam and Eve vignette mentioned punishment and control, those given to the Israelites vignette mentioned concern that they be free and that they reach the promised land, and those specific to the Moral vignette mentioned the ethical implications of the niece’s or nephew’s action. As with the first question, participants tended to limit their answers to a single reason, giving a mean of 1.27 reasons per participant. Table 4 also shows the frequencies with which different types of reasons were given concerning what mattered most to the offended party.

We regressed the independent variables on the factor for types of reasons; the main effects were not significant but there was a significant interaction of vignettes with religious affiliation, $\chi^2(12, N = 136) = 24.038, p < .05$. The reference category for the dependent variable is the rule only category. The comparison group for the interaction are those with no religious affiliation who were given the Moral vignette. The only significant partial is for the Israelites vignette (OR = .000, df = 1, $p < .001$), indicating that responders to this vignette were less likely to give both a rule and a relationship type response than the reference group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette</th>
<th>Rule</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Punishment</th>
<th>Testing</th>
<th>Vignette Specific</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam and Eve</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israelites</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette</th>
<th>Rule</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Control/Punishment</th>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>Moral/Ethical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam and Eve</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israelites</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>66</td>
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The purpose of this study was to compare individuals’ evaluations of the seriousness of religious and moral transgressions and to examine the ways individuals reason about these transgressions. The results of this study indicate that despite a tendency for participants to evaluate religious transgressions as somewhat more serious than moral ones, individuals reason about both types of wrongdoing in similar ways. These findings are consistent with observations previous researchers have made concerning the important elements shared by both domains (Narvaez et al., 1999; Nucci & Turiel, 1993).

Individuals evaluated the actions in either domain as serious transgressions; 45% of the responses in both the religious and moral vignettes fell into the category of “very seriously wrong.” Despite similarities in individuals’ evaluations of the religious and moral offenses, several differences emerged. Responses to the religious vignettes tended to be bimodal in nature, with more responses in the “not or a little” and “very seriously” wrong categories than for the moral vignette. This pattern was especially characteristic of responses to the Adam and Eve vignette. Compared with the moral narratives, the transgressions in the religious narratives were also more frequently evaluated as “very seriously” wrong. Thus, with the exception of those who discounted the actions in the religious vignettes, participants were likely to evaluate the religious infractions as more serious than the moral one. As previously noted, it is possible that the perception of God as being “all-wise” or “omnipotent” may cause any transgression against God to be evaluated as categorically wrong (Gorsuch, 1968).

Individuals’ commitment to a set of beliefs should affect their evaluations of the seriousness of acts seen as a violation of those beliefs. Thus, we had expected that participants who were affiliated with a religion would perceive the religious infraction as more serious than would those with no religious affiliation. Conversely, religious affiliation was not expected to influence evaluations of the action in the moral vignette. No such interaction was obtained. Instead, the significant effect for religious affiliation indicated that participants who were affiliated with a religion were less likely to view all wrongdoings as less seriously wrong (“not or a little wrong”) than were those with no religious affiliation. This finding is consistent with research showing religious individuals to be somewhat more conservative in their moral judgments (Getz, 1984); however it may be that the tendency to perceive the transgression in all vignettes either as seriously or very seriously wrong obscured these expected differences.

Similarly, past research showing women to be more religious (Francis, 1997) led us to expect an interaction of sex with type of vignette; this expectation was not confirmed. Women and men alike evaluated the wrongdoing in each type of vignette as equally serious. The similarity in their judgments may be due to the finding in this study that men and women did not differ in the importance they gave to their religious beliefs, nor did they differ in the nature of these beliefs.
A second purpose of this research was to compare the way individuals reason about wrongdoings when these place characters in conflict either with God or another person. The results indicate that participants tend to reason about religious and moral conflicts in similar ways. In each case, when asked to consider why the characters should not have acted as they did, individuals most frequently mentioned that the characters had done something they were told not to do. Thus, individuals tended to define the wrongdoing in terms of a justice, or rights, orientation. This definition of the wrongdoing was equally true across conditions defined by sex and religious affiliation as well as by vignettes.

When asked to consider the wrongdoing from the perspective of the party that had been wronged, however, proportionately more of the reasons given in answer to this question than to the first mentioned some aspect of the relationship; as such, these reasons evidenced a care- based or relationship orientation. With respect to this second question, with the exception of the Adam and Eve vignette, the percentage of reasons mentioning the relationship was greater than any other type of reason. Thus, although the wrongdoing appears to have been defined primarily in terms of breaking a rule, what was seen as mattering most to the party that had been wronged were the implications of this action for the relationship. This latter point was true whether the wronged party was God or another person. Participants’ reasoning suggests they perceived God to be no less likely than a person to consider the relationship as of primary importance. These findings contrast with those of Nucci and Turiel (1993) who found that individuals reasoned differently about moral and non-moral religious issues. The use in this study of narratives that portrayed the actions and feelings of the characters, as done by Jadack et al. (1995) and Phinney and Cobb (1996), rather than identifying the issues only by name (e.g., “hitting” or “women wearing head coverings”) may have made relational issues more salient in this study.

As expected, then, conflict was defined in comparable ways and was perceived as having similar repercussions in both religious and moral settings. There were two exceptions to this general finding. Each occurred to the Adam and Eve vignette when individuals were asked what mattered most to God. In contrast to the other vignettes, participants mentioned more rule-based reasons than relationship-based ones as mattering to God. Also, only to this vignette did participants mention reasons having to do with controlling or punishing the characters in response to this second question. A number of possible explanations exist for these differences. It is possible that the rule may have appeared more capricious in the Adam and Eve narrative than in the other two vignettes; being told not to eat fruit from a particular tree has an arbitrary, even authoritarian, ring to it. In the absence of any apparent reason for this rule, individuals may have judged that it was simply the rule itself that mattered. Support for this line of reasoning comes from participants’ responses when asked whether it would have been “wrong” or “all right” for the characters to have acted as they did if nothing had been said; participants were significantly less likely to judge the action as wrong in the Adam and Eve vignette.
It is also possible that reasoning concerning the wrongdoing in the Adam and Eve vignette may have reflected individuals’ religious teaching. Church canon over the centuries has characterized the action described in this narrative as one of disobedience. Although, in theory, it is just as possible to view the actions of Adam and Eve as a betrayal of trust as those of the Israelites or of Sam and Sally, in actuality, this perspective may not be one that is readily available to most individuals. The centrality of the Adam and Eve narrative to religious teachings concerning the nature of sin may have limited thinking about it in other than doctrinal ways.

One might question whether the religious vignettes were believable accounts of conflict for college students. Although evaluations of the seriousness of the wrongdoing for both religious vignettes were more likely to be bimodal than were evaluations of the moral vignette, nonetheless a majority of participants evaluated the conflict in the religious vignettes as very seriously wrong. Further support for the authenticity of participants’ responses to these vignettes comes from the analysis of ratings given by individuals in the three groups defined by religious affiliation. Ratings across all three vignettes were lower for participants grouped as None than for either Protestants or Catholics. Additionally, Protestants and Catholics did not differ in the seriousness with which they rated the action in the vignettes, but each of them viewed the action as more serious than did those who were not religiously affiliated. This latter finding, as well as the absence of an effect for religious affiliation in reasoning about the conflicts, is consistent with those of others (Nucci, 1982; Nucci & Turiel, 1993; Oser & Gmunder, 1991) who also found that individuals differing in religious affiliation nonetheless adopted similar positions when reasoning about religious or moral issues.

The results of this study are congruent with those of research assessing individuals’ concept of God (Dickie et al., 1997; Hertel & Donahue, 1995; Kunkel, Cook, Meshel, Daughtry, & Hauenstein, 1999). Among the dimensions that emerge in individuals’ descriptions, two that are central to their concept of God are those defined by love and by authority. In the present research, the first of these dimensions is reflected in reasoning concerning the aspects of the wrongdoing that matter to God; these reasons reflect a relationship orientation in which issues related to the relationship predominate. Conversely, the use of reasons that reflect a rights orientation, when characterizing the nature of the wrongdoing, captures the second of these dimensions, that of authority.

The expected sex differences in religious practices and beliefs were partially supported. Women were more religiously observant than men, indicating in response to survey questions that they attended religious services more frequently, but they did not differ from men in the importance they assigned to their beliefs. Nor did women and men differ in the ways they reasoned about conflict in a religious or a moral setting. The absence of a sex difference in reasoning about either type of scenario is consistent with the scant research that has been done comparing religious and moral reasoning. Nucci and Turiel (1993) also found no sex differ-
ences in reasoning about religious and moral issues. The absence of a sex effect is consistent as well with recent research in the domain of moral reasoning which has found either little or no difference in the reasoning of women and men (Jadeck et al., 1995; Phinney & Cobb, 1996). Thus, irrespective of who had been wronged, whether this was God or another person, individuals of either sex reasoned about the infraction in similar ways, defining the conflict in terms of the rule but, with the exception of responses to the Adam and Eve vignette, describing what mattered most to the injured party in terms of the relationship.

In summary, the results of this research reveal many similarities and few differences in the ways individuals reason about religious and moral conflicts. Irrespective of whether the injured party was God or another person, the wrongdoing was characterized in terms of having broken a rule. However, when asked what mattered to the injured party, individuals also considered the implications of this action for the relationship. The focus of this research has been relatively narrow, namely exploring similarities in reasoning about religious and moral conflicts; however, the implications for future research are broader. The psychology of religion has been integrated only marginally into the mainstream of psychological research (Gorsuch, 1988; Jones, 1994). Given the striking parallels between religious and moral reasoning, research exploring the relationship between religion and other psychological variables should prove valuable.

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REFERENCES


**APPENDIX**

The religious and moral vignettes were as follows:

*Adam and Eve:* “In the beginning of time, there was a garden in a place called Eden, with flowing rivers and all kinds of trees and plants. God put Adam and Eve in the garden, and told them that they could eat the fruit from all of the trees, except from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which God left in the very middle of the garden. God loved Adam and Eve, and each evening came calling for them and they would all walk together in the garden. Then one day the serpent approached Eve and convinced her to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. She took the fruit from the tree and gave some to Adam, and they both ate. Because of this, they could no longer live in the garden.”

*Israelites:* “A long time ago, God prepared a homeland for the Israelites, a land flowing with milk and honey. God told them that they were not to worship any other gods. God loved the Israelites, and each day led them toward their new homeland. But the trip was long and hard, and the Israelites grew restless. One of their leaders convinced the Israelites to turn over all of their gold and jewelry in order to make a golden calf. When the golden calf was finished, the Israelites called it a god and they worshipped it. Because of this, the Israelites could not live in the new, promised land.”

*Moral:* “Mr. (Mrs.) Jones, a businessman (businesswoman) with a large office, needed someone to work Friday afternoons, filing the paperwork that had come in during the week. Sam (Sally) his (her) 17-year-old nephew (niece), applied for the job. Mr. (Mrs.) Jones hired Sam (Sally) and told him (her) that he (she) was to file papers for two hours each Friday, whether Mr. (Mrs.) Jones was there or not, and he (she) would leave Sam’s (Sally’s) wages on the desk when he (she) would not be there. Mr. (Mrs.) Jones loved his (her) nephew (niece) and enjoyed working with him (her). Many weeks went by and Sam (Sally) did a good job filing papers. One Friday, however, Sam’s (Sally’s) friends convinced him (her) to go to a party after school. That afternoon Sam (Sally) stopped by the office and, when he (She) saw that Mr. (Mrs.) Jones would not be there, he (she) took the money Mr. (Mrs.) Jones had left, and went to the party instead of doing his (her) job. Because of this, Sam (Sally) could not work in the office anymore.”