

## Does religious commitment facilitate forgiveness? a study on Indian young adults

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### ABSTRACT

Religious practices are evoked from a strong sense of faith in God, which extends beyond praying. Commitment to one's religion exerts significant influence on one's everyday behaviour. Keeping this in mind, it is beneficial to study its influence on certain other aspects of life such as forgiveness. Religious commitment and forgiveness are the variables studied in the present study. A sample of 200 young adults (100 males and 100 females) was chosen for the study. The Religious Commitment Inventory (Worthington et al., 2003) and The Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (McCullough et al., 1998) were used to assess religious commitment and forgiveness. The analysis of results revealed that individuals with high religious commitment are more forgiving than those with low religious commitment. In addition, a significant positive correlation was found between religious commitment and forgiveness and women were found to be more forgiving than men.

**Keywords:** *Religious Commitment, Forgiveness, Gender*

Religious practices are evoked from a strong sense of faith in God, which extends beyond praying. This faith is what many rely on in both good and bad times, and is embedded deep in us, guiding and often motivating our behavior. Religion also plays a powerful role in the experiences of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a concept born from the teachings of religious doctrines and leaders, giving rise to the act of benevolence. Forgiveness in itself has numerous benefits for mental and physical health. Therefore, studying the relationship between forgiveness and religious commitment is beneficial.

### *Religious Commitment*

Religion is set of beliefs, rituals or feelings that result in an association between the living and the Almighty. It includes cognitive aspects (such as being at peace or calming anxiety of the unknown), motivational aspects (encouraging positive behaviour and promoting doing good for others), emotional aspects (leads to a feeling of contentment and happiness) as well as behavioural aspects (such as following rituals and practices) (Hackney et al., 2003). These

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aspects together give rise to the concept of religious commitment. Worthington et al. (2003) defined religious commitment as “the degree to which a person adheres to his or her religious values, beliefs, and practices and uses them in daily living”. Individuals with high religious commitment, more often than not, exhibit the influence of their religion on their way of life, their thoughts, their beliefs, their perceptions of the world as well as their behaviour. Religious commitment has various benefits such as having a greater social support, reducing stress and anxiety, encouraging and enhancing positive behaviour and growth and fostering forgiveness, to say the least.

### ***Forgiveness***

Forgiveness is a process that rewires both, emotional and behavioural change towards the offender or transgressor and can be understood as an act of benevolence, wherein one willingly lets go of their unpleasant feelings towards the offender. Enright (1991) characterizes forgiving "as a readiness to leave one's right to anger, condemnation and subtle vengeance towards an offender who acts unjustly while fostering the undesired characteristics of compassion, kindness and even love for him or her". So forgiveness is not just the reduction of negative feelings towards the offender rather it is letting go of feelings of revenge, resentment and bitterness to be able to embrace positive feelings towards the offender (Enright et al., 2000). The focus of the present study is on assessing the level of trait forgiveness, which is defined as a tendency to forgive across relationships and situations, as compared to state forgiveness where one forgives a precise offense. It can be directed towards self, other or even God (Davis et al., 2013). Forgiveness leads to enhanced physical and mental health (Allemand et al., 2012), promotes positive relationships (Ermer et al., 2015), reduces depression, enhances wellbeing, leads to an experience of harmony (Lawler-Row et al., 2006; Lawler-Row et al., 2011) as well as increases life satisfaction (Karremans et al., 2003).

Gender differences in forgiveness have always been of interest. Kohlberg (1984) described gender differences in terms of why we forgive. In the case of women, he described that they forgive to maintain relationships and to meet expectations of others, whereas men forgive as a desire for social order. Some studies suggest women are more forgiving than men (Miller et al., 2008; Khan et al., 2013; Kirmani, 2015), whereas a study by Toussaint et al (2005) found no gender differences in forgiveness.

### ***Forgiveness and religious commitment***

The concept of forgiveness is prevalent in most religions, despite the differences in the conceptualization of forgiveness. Forgiveness has been found to be positively related to religious commitment, that is religious individuals tend to be more benevolent (Amini et al., 2014; Gull et al., 2013; Konstam et al. 2003; Orathinkal et al., 2017; Stoycheva, 2018; Toussaint et al., 2016). In Hindu mythology, individuals who pursue the dharma route must practice benevolence and forgiveness, adding to one's *karma*. In Buddhism it is seen as a practice to avoid damaging ideas causing havoc on one's mental wellbeing. The notion of forgiveness hence, consists of two factors: (1) eliminating the hope of revenge, and (2) abandoning anger to someone who hurts you. Forgiveness is a central concept for Christian morality. They talk about how redemption consists of forgiving the perpetrator. The translation of forgiveness implies “letting go”. Islam teaches how God is forgiving, and how it is a virtue to ask for forgiveness with repentance from Allah. Lastly, in Jainism, they believe in a life of benevolence and empathy, being attentive to any harm they might have caused to other beings and asking for forgiveness for the act. Adhering to these values facilitate forgiveness. In addition, Religious scriptures and doctrines also set a positive

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example, and work as a model of motivation for individuals to practice forgiveness. Empathy and compassion are two factors common to both forgiveness and religious commitment (Tsang, 2005), which when fostered by the latter, promote forgiveness. Furthermore, religious commitment also leads to increased positive affect, greater social support, enhanced pro- social behaviour, as well as morality (Batara et al., 2016; Koenig, 2001), which impact one's experiences and relationships, and therefore may exhibit significant influence on their perception and attitude towards forgiving. However some studies indicate a weak influence of religion on forgiveness (Fehr et al., 2010; Gordon et al., 2008; Greer et al., 2005; Kidwell, 2009; Tsang et al. 2005).

### *Present Study*

Religious commitment is not just one's faith or belief in a particular God, but a way of living that impacts the minutest action of an individual. Forgiveness on the other hand, is an individual's reaction to the negative strokes that they receive in life, and how they deal with pain and anguish caused more often than not, by a loved one. Forgiveness is both, a decision and a process for it impacts deeper layers of the psyche than what can be inferred through behavior or a simple apology. It is therefore, worthwhile to examine whether commitment to one's religion helps to mitigate the impact of hurtful experiences. Studying religious commitment in youth is beneficial because of the lack of empirical data as well as to gain understanding about how one's upbringing influences their commitment. There is a dearth of empirical evidence for religious commitment especially in India, along with the absence of literature denoting the impact of religious commitment on forgiveness.

### *Hypothesis*

- H1: There will be a significant difference in forgiveness with respect to level of religious commitment
- H2: There will be a significant relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness
- H3: There will be significant gender differences in forgiveness among men and women

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Sample*

The sample consists of 200 young adults (100 men and 100 women). For measuring religious commitment and forgiveness, the sample was divided into two groups based on religious commitment scores (top 33% and bottom 33% (Kelly, 1939)) – high religious commitment group and low religious commitment group (n=66 in each group). For assessing the gender differences in forgiveness, the total sample (100 men and 100 women) was taken. All participants were residents of New Delhi, India, belonging to a middle economic group, age ranging from 19-24 years, unmarried and graduates from Delhi University.

### *Measures*

**Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI-10):** Religious Commitment Inventory by Worthington et al (2003) is a ten-item inventory on a 5 likert scale which aims to assess an individual's commitment towards their religion in terms of involvement in religious and religion related activities. The inventory yields a total score of religious commitment as well as scores of two subscales which are Intrapersonal religious commitment and Interpersonal religious commitment. In terms of reliability, the coefficient alpha was found to be .93, internal consistency reliability was found to be moderately high at .88 and the test retest reliability at 5 months was also found to be high at .84.

**Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) Inventory:** The Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) Inventory by McCullough et al (1998) is an 18-item inventory on a 1–5 Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The inventory includes 3 subscales, avoidance motivation subscale (7 items) revenge motivation subscale (5 items) and benevolence subscale (6 items). The subscales had adequate internal consistency (.85) and test-retest stability (e.g., 8-week test–retest  $r$ s .50) across all measurement occasions (i.e., alphas ranged from .85 to .95, and  $r$ s ranged from .54 to .93). The scale has also shown good convergent and discriminate validity (McCullough et al., 2001; McCullough et al., 2003)

### Procedure

Data was collected from 200 participants. Informed consent and demographic details were taken from each participant. The exact purpose of the study wasn't revealed to the participants, though they were told that the questionnaires were about their way of living. The religious commitment scale was administered followed by TRIM for forgiveness. On obtaining the participants responses, their scores were divided into high and low religious commitment in order to fulfill the purpose of the study. The scores on the benevolence motivation sub scale (TRIM-18) were reversed score to obtain a total score of unforgiveness. The data was analyzed using t tests and Pearson's correlations.

## RESULTS

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness. The scores were subjected to t tests and correlations were found between religious commitment and forgiveness.

**Table 1: Test of means of forgiveness with respect to high religious commitment and low religious commitment group**

Variable	t value	p value	High RC Group		Low RC Group	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Forgiveness	2.36**	.019887	52.38	7.5788	49.42	6.7983

RC – Religious Commitment

Significant difference at \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

The results of t test revealed that there is a significant difference in forgiveness among individuals with high and low religious commitment [ $t(64) = 2.36$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ]. Those with high religious commitment were found to be more benevolent (52.38) as compared to those with low religious commitment (49.42).

**Table 2: Values of correlation between religious commitment and forgiveness among men, women and total sample**

	Religious Commitment	
Forgiveness	.253*	Men
	.288**	Women
	.145*	Total

A significant positive correlation was found between religious commitment and forgiveness for men ( $r = .253$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), for women ( $r = .288$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and for the total sample ( $r = .145$ ,

$p < 0.01$ ) indicating that there is a relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness.

**Table 3: Test of means of forgiveness with respect to gender**

Variable	t value	p value	Men		Women	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Forgiveness	-2.80**	.005609.	51.69	9.0439	48.33	7.8843

Significant difference at \*\* $p < 0.1$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

The results of t test revealed that there is a significant difference in forgiveness among men and women [ $t(98) = -2.80, p < 0.01$ ]. Men scored higher on unforgiveness (51.69) as compared to women (48.33), indicating that women are more forgiving.

## DISCUSSION

The present study aimed at examining the relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness as well as investigating gender differences in forgiveness. Religion is an essential building block of the Indian culture and therefore the magnitude of its influence cannot be undermined. Forgiveness too has played a significant part in social life. It is a concept deeply embedded in each one of us and its roots can be traced back to religious teachings and doctrines.

Individuals who have higher religious commitment were found to be more forgiving than those who have low religious commitment. Whether it's the Bhagavad Gita, the Quran, or the Christian gospels, the concept of forgiveness is well ascribed in them. Individuals with high religious commitment are more likely to forgive as they tend to abide by their religious values and traditions. It affects the probability of forgiveness in a facilitative manner. Studies as old as that of Rokeach (1973) have indicated the influence of religious commitment on forgiveness. The present findings are in sync with previous studies (Amini et al., 2014; Gull et al., 2013; Orathinkal et al., 2017; Stoycheva, 2018; Toussaint et al., 2016). Consistently, a significant positive correlation was found between religious commitment and forgiveness, as also noted in past studies (Davis et al., 2013; Edwards et al., 2002; Exline et al., 2004; Sheldon et al., 2011). The relation between the two may be influenced by the premise that one is more likely to forgive if they believe that it will grant them forgiveness from god. Worthington et al. (2000) reported that religious engagement plays an important role in forgiving as despite the distinction in religions, most foster traits of benevolence and compassion, which encourage voluntary forgiveness. Moreover, reading religious scriptures and tales of the almighty, set a positive example, encouraging religiously committed individuals to be more benevolent. Furthermore, it is well known that the forgiveness process entails both, a positive emotional and behavioural change. Enhanced positive emotions and pro-social behaviour as a result of one's religiosity and commitment (Batara et al., 2016; Koenig, 2001) perhaps make it easier for one to let go of their negative feelings towards the transgressor. Similarly, adhering to religious standards, one is expected to behave in a moralistic manner (Shariff, 2011) which may influence positive behavioural change. The results are a beneficial indicator of the positive influence of religious commitment on young adults.

In studying gender differences in forgiveness, women were found to be more forgiving than men (Miller et al., 2008; Khan et al., 2013; Kirmani, 2015). Being more empathetic (Toussaint et al., 2005), having a caring nature (Gilligan, 1994), having higher willingness to

maintain social relationships (Kohlberg, 1984) and perhaps even being more religious than men (Rye, 2005), may the possible contributing factors for women being more forgiving than men. Women tend to be more compassionate as well as indulge in more socialization, which leads to building positive relationships. Also, men and women may differ in the way in which they express their hurt or anger towards the transgressor. Where men tend to do it more outwardly, in terms of physical aggression (Kret, 2012), women tend to experience more negative feelings such as jealousy (Gohier, 2013). Therefore, indicating that the experience of being offended or hurt by differs for both genders, which further influences their reaction to it. In addition, the differences can also be attributed to one's previous experiences of forgiveness, cultural values as well as gender norms.

## **CONCLUSION**

The results of the study highlight the significance of religious commitment in the Indian youth and brings to light the influence it has on one's values and traits, such as that of forgiveness. A significant difference was found in forgiveness based on the level of religious commitment, wherein those with high religious commitment were found to be more forgiving. Consistently, a positive relationship was also seen between religious commitment and forgiveness. Religious commitment and forgiveness go hand in hand, the consequence of the positive connotations of religious teachings and one's dedication towards them is long known to foster benevolence. In terms of gender differences in forgiveness, women were found to be more forgiving than men. As research suggests, women tend to be more empathic, compassionate and indulge in more socialization, which perhaps has implications on their tendency to forgive.

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### Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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