

Dare you protest against God? Perspectives from a CWRU psychology study

March 26 2012

or inactions? This was the key question behind recent studies led by Case Western Reserve University psychologist Julie Exline.

Many [people](#) report having a relationship with God, similar to those relationships in marriage, parenting or friendship. Exline and colleagues found that being assertive with God could actually strengthen that perceived bond and one's faith.

They report their findings in the journal *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality's* article, "[Anger](#), Exit and Assertion: Do People See Protest toward God as Morally Acceptable?"

Using Internet surveys, the research focused on two groups: 358 undergraduates at a research university and 471 participants from a broad-based group of adults. Although a variety of faiths were represented, the analyses focused only on people with some [belief in God](#).

The researchers discovered if a person views God as cruel, then protest toward God is seen as more acceptable.

"If God seems like a [bully](#) or a tyrant, standing up to God could be seen as an act of courage or even [heroism](#)," says Exline.

But when people see God as a kind and loving authority figure, then protest seems less acceptable. "In this case, protest could appear

disrespectful to a good and fair leader," says Exline.

Exline suggests that it's important to analyze different types of protest.

The researchers found that many believers think that it's morally OK to be assertive by asking God questions or complaining. But they're less sure about whether anger toward God is acceptable.

"The larger step of leaving the relationship is clearly seen as wrong by most people of faith," Exline says. "Exiting the relationship can entail outright rejection of God, holding onto anger, questioning God's authority, rebelling, or withdrawing from the relationship."

"We can think about the parallel to a human relationship," says Exline. "Good relationships usually leave room for honest communications, including some complaint and [disagreement](#). People tend to feel most close and happy with their partners when they have some sense of 'voice' in a relationship. This doesn't mean yelling or screaming, but showing respect and honesty with each other about their feelings—including those of anger and frustration."

A related question was addressed in the recent *Journal of Psychology and Theology's* article, "If I Tell Others about My Anger Toward God, How Will They Respond?" Drawing from the same Internet survey of adult believers, she focused only on those who felt some anger toward God.

If people felt that it was morally OK to feel angry with God, they were more likely to reveal their feelings to others.

Most people reported supportive responses, Exline says, but it was also common for people to receive unsupportive responses that made them feel judged, ashamed or guilty about their feelings.

"When people saw others as supportive, they were more likely to report that they had approached God with their feelings—and they were more likely to report strengthened faith in response to the incident," said Exline. "On the other hand, people who reported unsupportive responses from others were more likely to suppress their feelings toward God rather than dealing with them openly. They tended to stay angry with God and were more likely to exit the relationship. They also reported greater use of alcohol and drugs to cope with the problem."

Exline advises that if someone comes to you and tells you that they are mad at God, the type of response that you provide could be important in terms of shaping what happens.

"Regardless of whether you think that anger toward [God](#) is right or wrong, it's important to respond in a way that helps the other person feel supported rather than shamed," Exline says.

More information: Any English-speaking person aged 18 or over can participate in an ongoing web study on these topics: (psychology.case.edu/research/god/index.html).

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

Citation: Dare you protest against God? Perspectives from a CWRU psychology study (2012, March 26) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-03-protest-god-perspectives-cwru-psychology.html>

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