

People who believe they were "born that way" more inclined to blame God for bad behavior, researchers find

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People are more likely to blame God for their bad moral behavior when they believe they were born to act that way, according to an ongoing Case Western Reserve University project on spirituality and religion.

A growing body of research demonstrates that feelings of anger, disappointment, or mistrust toward God can negatively impact mental and physical health. Over time, feeling in conflict with God predicts depression, likelihood of suicide, poor recovery from illness and general discontent.

"For this study, we are identifying another pathway to anger at and conflict with God," said Joshua Grubbs, a Case Western Reserve University doctoral student. "Our research empirically shows that feeling as if God set you up to fail leads to conflict with deity, which we know from other studies can predict a lot of negative outcomes."

Grubbs conducted the study with Julie Exline, professor of psychology at Case Western Reserve. Their findings were published in the *Journal of Psychology and Theology* article, "Why did you make me this way? Anger at God in the contexts of personal [transgressions](#)."

The findings contribute to a three-year project, supported by a \$1.4 million John Templeton Foundation grant, to study spiritual and religious struggles. Exline is directing the project.

The study focused on evaluating how anger at God may be related to how people view the cause of their own moral transgressions.

Researchers found that people view God as partly responsible if they attributed these transgressions to how God created them.

"I think this bears implications for people working through their own identities and the religious identities they were raised to believe," Grubbs said.

For example, someone raised in a religiously conservative background would likely believe that God made them and that God prohibits a wide range of sexual behaviors.

"If they find themselves wanting to engage in some of those behaviors or feel like they were born with desires that God prohibits, they might have a crisis of faith because they feel like God made them to fail," he said.

Their study was based on two psychological studies:

In the first one, participants were asked to consider an example of an imaginary character in an imaginary world with an imaginary God. Participants were told to imagine the character was constantly breaking rules the God had set.

Half of the participants were told he broke the rules because of a genetic condition that made it impossible for him to follow the rules; the other half was given no explanation.

When asked how they imagined the character felt toward the described God, participants given the [genetic condition](#) scenario were more likely to describe feelings of anger and hostility toward the God.

In the second experiment, a sample of college students and a sample of

adults were asked to describe a time they had done something they thought was morally wrong.

Participants were asked to what extent they felt the transgression was due to chance, genetics, personality, biology, circumstances, how they were born, their environment and other factors.

Participants were then asked if they felt any emotions (guilt, [anger](#), regret, etc.) toward God about their moral misstep.

"What we found," Grubbs said, "was that [participants](#) who were more likely to describe their transgression as the result of their personality or biology—as a result of who they felt they were as people—were also more likely to feel angry and upset at God in response to the transgression."

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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