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DOES ANGER TOWARD GOD MODERATE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGIOUSNESS AND WELL-BEING?

Most of the current research has found that highly religious people have better well-being compared to people with low religiousness. However, the former group is not immune from occasionally feeling anger toward God, which has an adverse effect on well-being. The purpose of this research is to study whether anger toward God moderates the effect of religiousness on the well-being of Christian college students. The data were derived from 228 respondents (55 male) from a religious university using the Four Basic Dimensions of Religiousness (4-BDRS), the Attitude toward God Scale (ATGS-9), and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). The results of the moderation analysis using Process version 3 demonstrated that Anger toward God significantly moderated the effect of religiousness toward well-being ($b = .01$, 95% CI [.001, .023], $t = 2.14$, $p < .05$). The higher the level of anger toward God, the lesser the effect of religiousness on well-being. Therefore, it is essential for students to resolve their divine struggles. The implications and applications of this study are discussed.

Keywords: well-being; religiousness; anger toward God; Christian college students.

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Living in a religious country such as Indonesia, almost all college students regard religion seriously. They received religious training both at home from their parents and at school through religious education. As a result, most of the previous studies found that college students in Indonesia have a high level of religiousness (Saputra et al., 2017). However, as their cognitive ability becomes more mature, they begin to think critically. They start questioning and testing their beliefs to answer their questions about life. For example, Christian college students are taught that God not only created the world, but he also cares about the world he created (Beck & Haugen, 2013; Koenig, 2017). Confronted by a large amount of suffering in this world, they may become confused and motivated to find an answer about the roots of suffering. Wong and Weiner (1981) argued that people underwent this attributional process to explain the cause of events, especially negative events such as suffering. As religious people, college students are likely to include God in their attributional process, and if they think God is responsible either wholly or partly for that suffering, they may become angry toward God (Exline et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2010). Anger toward God is linked to a low level of well-being, and people with a high level of anger toward God tend to be more anxious and depressed, which leads to the deterioration of well-being (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015; Wilt et al., 2016).

Zarzycka (2016) found that in Poland—a highly religious country—most people declared that they felt anger toward God sometimes in their life, and younger generations tend to have more anger toward God compared to older generations. Studies in the U.S. also found that the prevalence of anger toward God is higher among college students, especially for those attending religious institutions (Exline et al., 2011; Carter, 2019). Therefore, it is predicted that Christian college students in Indonesia are not immune to feeling anger toward God. Hence, it is vital to understand how anger toward God affects the influence of religiousness on well-being.

Most of the current research has found that people with a high level of religiousness tend to have better well-being compared to people with a low level of religiousness (Regnerus, 2019). However, anger toward God was associated with a low level of well-being. Moreover, not many studies, especially those focused on Indonesia, have explored the interaction among religiousness, anger toward God, and well-being. Therefore, the purpose of this current research is to address this gap and examine the interplay among religiousness, anger toward God, and well-being.

Religiousness is a construct to measure interest in religion (Saroglou, 2013), which is complex and multidimensional. Therefore, a good religiousness scale

should be multidimensional so that it can capture the complexity of religion (Hood et al., 2018; Koenig, 2018). This study uses the Four Basic Dimensions of Religiousness (4-BDRS; Saroglou, 2011), which consists of four dimensions of religiousness: believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging. Believing is a cognitive part of religiousness, and it includes a set of beliefs about God/Gods or supernatural being/s. In the case of organized religion, believing contains a set of religious teachings and doctrines. Bonding is an emotional part of religiousness that focuses on a relationship with God or a transcendent deity through private or collective rituals. Behaving deals with moral behaviors and consists of norms, practices, and values; while, belonging focuses on relationships with other believers.

Anger toward God is feeling angry toward God, and many people feel angry toward God at a specific time in their life. People usually feel this negative emotion when they suffer or see suffering in other people. However, this suffering that triggers anger does not need to be significant, such as a terrible natural disaster that causes many casualties. A common problem in life, such as a poor grade, can induce anger toward God if individuals think God is responsible for that suffering either directly, by actively causing the suffering, or indirectly by not intervening to prevent the suffering (Exline & Rose, 2013).

Religious people usually think they should not feel anger toward God. However, when they feel disappointed with God, they think they have acceptable reasons to be angry. This causes a cognitive dissonance, which can trigger depression and anxiety, which lowers their well-being (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Krause, et al., 2015; Exline et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2010). In addition, anger toward God is usually accompanied by negative religious coping mechanisms that worsen well-being (Exline et al., 2014).

Considering religiousness and anger toward God have a contradicting effect on well-being, it is hypothesized that anger toward God moderates the effect of religiousness toward well-being; the higher the anger toward God, the lower the effect of religiousness toward well-being.

METHOD

Participants

Data were collected from a Christian university in Banten, Indonesia, as part of a larger project. In total, 374 participants completed the survey; 37 data were

discarded because the respondents did not answer demographic questions completely, and 109 data from non-Christian participants were not used. Therefore, only 228 (55 men and 173 women) participants were used in further analysis. All respondents were Christians from a Christian university in Banten, Indonesia. Most of the participants (94%) were between the ages of 18–21; 3% were 22.2% were 17, and 1% were 24. Regarding ethnicity, 50% of the respondents were Chinese Indonesians, 24% were of mixed ethnicity, 7% were Batak, 5% were Javanese, and the rest were from various Indonesian ethnic groups.

Measures

Religiousness. It was measured using the Four Basic Dimensions of Religiousness Scale (4-BDRS). This scale was developed by Saroglou (2011), and as described above, measured four dimensions of religiousness: Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging. Each dimension has three items on a 7-point scale. The sample of the items for each dimension is as follows: Believing (“I feel attached to religion because it helps me to have a purpose in my life”), Bonding (“I like religious ceremonies”), Behaving (“I am attached to the religion for the values and ethics it endorses”), and Belonging (“In religion, I enjoy belonging to a group/community”). The total score of religiousness can be obtained by totaling the 12 items (Cronbach $\alpha = .9$), and a higher score on this scale indicates higher religiousness.

Anger toward God. It was measured using the four-item Anger toward God subscale of Attitude toward God Scale (ATGS-9; Wood et al., 2010). The participants rated their extent of agreement with four statements (e.g., “Feel angry at God”) on a 10-point scale, and higher scores on this scale indicate higher anger toward God (Cronbach $\alpha = .9$).

Well-being. It was assessed through the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985). The participants rated their agreement with five statements (e.g., “In most ways my life is close to my ideal”) on a 7-point scale, and higher scores on this scale indicate higher life satisfaction (Cronbach $\alpha = .76$).

RESULTS

Descriptive and Correlational Statistics

The means, standard deviations, and correlations for all of the variables are presented in Table 1. As illustrated in Table 1, the mean of total religiousness

($M = 5.53$, $SD = 0.86$) was high (possible range of 1–7), the mean of anger toward God ($M = 1.71$, $SD = 0.87$) was low (possible range of 1–7), and the mean of well-being ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.95$) was high (possible range of 1–7). The high levels of religiousness and well-being were consistent with the findings of other studies on religiousness and the well-being of college students in Indonesia (Saputra et al., 2017). However, anger toward God in Poland—which, similar to Indonesia, is also a highly religious country—and in college students in other studies in the U.S. and India were low as well, so the results of this study are consistent with previous studies (Exline et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2010; Yali et al., 2019; Zarzycka, 2016). The correlational analysis demonstrated that all bivariate relationships were in the expected direction. Religiousness was positively correlated with satisfaction with life, while anger toward God was negatively correlated with life satisfaction.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

	Mean	SD	Range	TR	ATG
Total religiousness (TR)	5.53	.86	1–7		
Anger toward God (ATG)	1.71	.87	1–10	–.32*	
Well-being	4.45	.95	1–7	.36*	–.3*

Note. Simple slopes for the association between religiousness and anger toward God was tested for low (-1 SD below the mean), moderate (mean), and high ($+1$ SD) level of anger toward God (Figure 1).

* $p < .05$.

Table 2. Moderation Analysis: Religiousness, Anger Toward God, and Well-Being

Predictor	Life Satisfaction (Y)					
	Coefficient	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Intercept	20.0655	.274	7.3101	.0000	14.666	25.465
Religiousness (X)	.0596	.041	1.455	.146	–.021	.1401
Anger (W)	–.7945	.2709	–2.9331	.0036	–1.3272	–.2617
Religiousness X Anger (XW)	.0086	.0043	1.99	.0474	.0001	.017
Model R^2	.182***					

Note. Model summary: $F(3, 224) = 16.57$, R^2 change due to XW = .01, $F(1, 224) = 4.26$.

$p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

Regression Analysis

To test whether the association between religiousness and life satisfaction would be moderated by anger toward God, a moderation analysis (Hayes, 2018) was conducted. As illustrated in Table 2, the interaction of religiousness and anger toward God was significant ($B = .01, p < .05$) and contributed to a small but significant change in R^2 . Simple slopes for the association between religiousness and anger toward God were tested for low ($-1 SD$ below the mean), moderate (mean), and high ($+1 SD$) level of anger toward God (Figure 1).

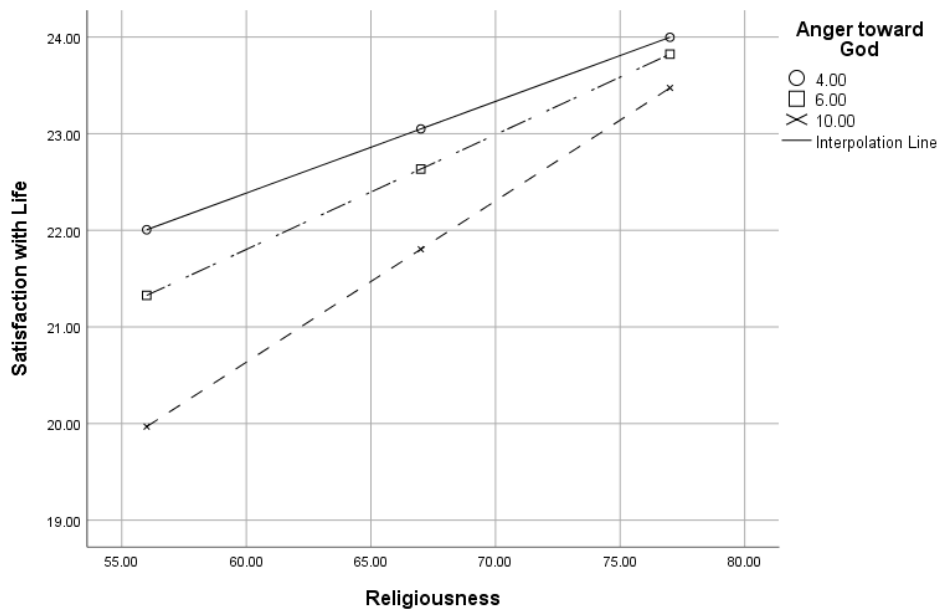


Figure 1. Simple Slope of Life Satisfaction on Religiousness at Values of Anger Toward God

As indicated in Figure 1, the effect of religiousness on satisfaction with life decreased when the level of anger toward God increased. In other words, life satisfaction was highest for those with more religiousness and less anger.

DISCUSSION

Religiousness was found to have a positive effect on life satisfaction. People with higher religiousness tend to have higher life satisfaction compared to people with lower religiousness. In this study, the 4-BDRS was used to assess religiousness. Higher religiousness indicates a higher belief in God, higher bonding with God, a better relationship with other believers, and better moral lives (Saroglou, 2011). Christian college students with a firm belief in God understand that God cares for them. This understanding will reduce anxiety and provide them with comfort during uncertain times in life. Bonding well with God also frees the students to feel an emotional connection with God. This emotional closeness means that the students can turn to God when they have problems, and they will view God as a haven who provides them with the strength to deal with their problems. A better relationship with other believers ensures that there are people who can provide help and comfort during stressful events. Lastly, better moral lives help to prevent the students from developing harmful behaviors (such as drinking or using drugs) to cope with their problems. As a result, they can use more adaptive coping behaviors. All of these aspects will help the students to improve and maintain their well-being (Koenig, 2018; Sandage et al., 2015).

In contrast, anger toward God harmed life satisfaction, and people who have a strained relationship with God tend to have low life satisfaction. This conclusion is confirmed by the results of studies in many other countries that focused on different religions (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, & Exline, 2015).

The primary purpose of this study was to examine whether anger toward God moderated the effect of religiousness toward satisfaction with life. As expected, the results demonstrated a significant moderation effect. Anger toward God diminished the positive effect of religiousness toward life satisfaction. The higher the level of anger toward God, the lesser the effect of religiousness toward well-being. Previous studies found that people with a high level of religiousness can feel disappointed and anger toward God. Similar to relationships with other human beings, a relationship with God can include both positive (e.g., love and awe) and negative (e.g., anger and hurt) feelings (Exline et al., 2017; Exline et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2010). However, it is still difficult for religious people to accept their anger toward God.

Christians usually turn to God to find consolation during times of stress, and their religious beliefs can give them meaning to help them cope with stressors (Schuster et al., 2001). However, it is difficult for them to turn to God when they think God is the source of the problem, leading them to feel anger toward God.

While they know they must turn to God to find consolation, they cannot do this because they feel anger toward God. Yali et al. (2019) argued that anger toward God caused a severe cognitive dissonance, which has a negative effect on life satisfaction. As demonstrated in this research, the effect of anger toward God on well-being may be more severe for college students who live in a highly religious country such as Indonesia. They know that most of the people in their religious communities will not support their anger toward God. Previous studies found that perceived social support mediates the effect of religiosity on psychological well-being (Fatima et al., 2018). Zarzycka et al. (2020) also found that religious support and meaning making mediate the effect of religious struggles on psychological well-being. Therefore, college students in Indonesia who feel anger toward God feel alone in their struggle, and this affects their well-being.

Previous studies found that many college students sometimes feel anger toward God during college. This current research indicated that anger toward God created a negative impact on well-being no matter how high their religiousness. Therefore, it is essential for university counselors or clinicians to pay close attention to students reporting anger toward God and help them to understand this anger and solve their problems.

The purpose of the current study was to test whether anger toward God would moderate the relationship between religiousness and well-being. The results demonstrated that anger reduced the effect of religiousness to well-being. The higher the level of anger, the lesser the effect of religiousness on well-being. Therefore, it revealed a complicated dynamic of having a relationship with God. Positive and negative feelings can coexist, and college students can learn to manage these feelings.

This present study examined total religiousness, and it is crucial for future studies to use more specific scales to understand which specific dimension of religiousness is moderated by anger toward God (for example, using the four dimensions of the 4-BDRS, instead of using the total score). Interested researchers can also examine this phenomenon in other religions as the same phenomenon may have different manifestations in different religions.

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