

Article

Is Sanctification Real? Empirical Evidence for and against Christian Moral Transformation

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Abstract: According to a widely held view of the New Testament teaching on sanctification; the Holy Spirit brings about a significant moral transformation in the character of every true believer. This claim about Christian moral transformation (CMT) has empirical implications. Thus, its truth can be evaluated from a scientific perspective. Sociological and psychological data on the relationship of religion and morality suggests that (Christian) religion is negatively correlated with undesirable moral behavior such as alcohol and substance abuse, criminal behavior, domestic abuse, and nonmarital sex, and positively correlated with desirable behavior such as helping. While these correlations are consistent with CMT, they do not necessarily serve as good evidence for it, for they can be more naturally explained by situational factors than by character differences between religious and nonreligious people. Some scientific findings serve as evidence against CMT. Religious believers engage in dishonest behavior and porn viewing at least as much as others. There is also a positive correlation between prejudice and conservative Christian beliefs. These correlations cannot be explained by situational factors as easily as the link between religion and desirable moral behavior. Sociological and psychological research; therefore, provides at least a mild challenge for the truth of CMT.

Keywords: sanctification; character; religion and morality; religious orientation; cheating; prejudice; porn viewing; helping behavior



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1. Introduction

The late philosopher of religion John Hick (1922–2012) is remembered as the foremost proponent of religious pluralism. In many writings, he recounts how he first came to question the uniqueness of Christianity.

Coming to know both ordinary families, and some extraordinary individuals, whose spirituality has been formed by these different traditions and whose lives are lived within them, I have not found that the people of the other world religions are, in general, on a different moral and spiritual level from Christians. But is this what we would expect if Christians have a more complete and direct access to God than anyone else and live in a closer relationship to him, being indwelt by the Holy Spirit? Should not the fruit of the Spirit, which according to Paul is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22–3), be more evident in Christian than in non-Christian lives? (Hick 1996, pp. 40–41)

Historical and contemporary Christianity knows numerous moral saints. However, Christian believers in general (at least in the West) do not seem any more virtuous in comparison with other religious or nonreligious people. But as Hick pointed out, this is not what the New Testament would lead us to expect. The chasm between the biblical teaching on sanctification and the moral lives of believers has been lamented by several spiritual leaders (e.g., Lovelace 1973; Sider 2005). It is commonly seen as a spiritual problem that hinders the witness of the church. Less frequently, it is considered a theological problem

that threatens the truth of biblical teaching. Hick certainly saw it that way, and he is not alone.¹

To my knowledge, few attempts have been made to consider whether empirical data supports or challenges biblical claims about moral transformation. This paper presents such an attempt. I shall focus on widely held interpretations regarding the New Testament teaching on sanctification as well as on empirical studies on the relationship between religion and morality. The first section argues that, according to Paul and other New Testament authors, all true believers are empowered by the Holy Spirit and are expected to undergo a significant moral transformation during this lifetime. After this I shall turn to the empirical evidence. Although science obviously cannot directly detect the supernatural workings of the Holy Spirit or separate true believers from mere “nominal” Christians, sociological and psychological studies on the relationship between religion and moral behavior can serve as indirect evidence for or against moral transformation. While some findings appear consistent and others inconsistent with sanctification, the evidence against transformation seems a bit weightier. This is because the positive link between religion and morally desirable behavior can often be easily explained by situational factors such as religious environments that constrain immoral behavior and reinforce good deeds. However, findings that cheating, porn viewing, and prejudice are just as common or more common among Christian believers than among nonreligious people serve as decent evidence against moral transformation. Finally, I will consider a few attempts to solve the problem.

2. Moral Transformation in the New Testament

2.1. A Biblical and Optimistic Starting Point

Christian theologians hold a variety of views of what sanctification means and how it happens. There is also disagreement about what kinds of character traits and behaviors are supposed to be upgraded by the Holy Spirit and which ones weeded out, and how slow or speedy the transformation is supposed to be. Many Lutherans, for instance, take a low view of moral progress, while Catholic theology is more optimistic. The views of various strands of Evangelicals, Free Churches, and Pentecostals are likewise generally optimistic. For instance, while all five authors of the popular-level book *Five Views on Sanctification* “agree that the process of sanctification requires believers to strive to express God’s love”, they also agree that “the Bible promises success in this process” (Gundry 1987, p. 7).²

Since a survey of various theological views of sanctification would be impossible here, this paper takes such an optimistic outlook as a starting point—but not without an argument. Below I shall consider three widely accepted claims regarding the New Testament teaching on the topic, focusing especially on Paul’s theology of moral transformation. While the interpretations I offer are not universally accepted, they are in line with the work of several conservative biblical scholars (e.g., Peterson 1995; Thompson 2011), theologians (e.g., Gundry 1987), and Christian philosophers (e.g., Alston 1988).

2.2. A Transformation of Character and Behavior

Firstly, *the Holy Spirit brings about a significant transformation in every believer’s moral character and behavior*. According to New Testament scholar James D. G. Dunn, the apostle Paul viewed having the Holy Spirit as the criterion that defines and determines whether someone is “in Christ” (e.g., Rom. 8:9; Gal. 4:6). “A spiritless Christian”, Dunn writes, “would have been a contradiction in terms” (Dunn 1996, p. 423). Importantly, the Holy Spirit generates a process of character formation whereby believers gradually become more Christ-like. In a classic paper on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, philosopher William Alston writes that this process

has to do with personality or character changes, with changes in what we might call “motivational structure.” That is, it has to do with changes in one’s tendencies, desires, values, attitudes, emotional proclivities, and the like. It has to do with such changes as the weakening of a desire for illicit sexual intercourse, the

strengthening of a desire for awareness of God, the weakening of a tendency to be preoccupied with one's status or reputation, and the strengthening of one's interest in the condition of others. (Alston 1988, p. 126)

Moral transformation, then, is about character development. Character may be defined as an enduring "disposition to form beliefs and/or desires of a certain sort and (in many cases) to act in a certain way, when in conditions relevant to that disposition" (Miller and Knobel 2015, p. 21). Changes in one's beliefs and desires are followed by changes in external behavior (e.g., Rom. 2:28–29; Eph. 4:22–24). The Holy Spirit begins to curb one's vices and gives rise to virtues such as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22–23).³ "Precisely because the Spirit empowers this new life", writes New Testament scholar Gordon Fee, "Paul has little patience for the point of view that allows for people to be 'justified sinners' without appropriate changes in attitudes and conduct" (Fee 1994, p. 880). After all, Paul calls believers "a new creation" for whom the "old has passed away" (2. Cor. 5:17). This is a strong metaphor with obvious ethical overtones. The lifestyle of especially pagan congregants is expected to undergo a significant, empirically verifiable change after conversion (2. Cor. 6:9–11).

2.3. A Transformation with a Goal

Secondly, *while believers may never become morally perfect in this life, and while progress may be slow, over time they will learn to live consistently with biblical morality.* According to a widely accepted interpretation of Pauline eschatology, Christians are caught in an eschatological tension, between the "already" and the "not yet", between Christlikeness and Adam-likeness (Dunn 1996, pp. 461–98). On the one hand, believers still struggle with sin even after regeneration. For example, Paul's letters to the church in Corinth show that it is clearly possible for saints (1. Cor. 1:1) to lead rather immoral lives. Some men continued to visit prostitutes after coming to faith (1. Cor. 6:15–17). Perhaps here Paul saw little difference between the moral lives of the congregants and the behavior of other Corinthians. On the other hand, Paul and other New Testament writers generally expect believers to overcome habitual sin (1. John 3:6; 1. Pet. 4:4). We should not imagine Paul allowing for the possibility that, after several years of living as Christians, men in the church of Corinth continue to fall into the sin of adultery. He clearly expects that believers indwelt by the Spirit will eventually get rid of habitual vices and grow in virtue so that their moral life is visibly different from that of nonbelievers.

As C. S. Lewis once noted, sanctification does not indicate that every Christian is going to be morally superior to every nonbeliever (Lewis 2002, p. 210). Believers begin their moral growth from different starting points. For example, many nonbelievers never steal. If a professional thief turns to Christ, in the beginning of his spiritual journey, he may be more likely to fall into the sin of stealing than the average non-Christian. Nevertheless, we can still expect Christians to be morally superior to their non-Christian neighbors on average. If we randomly select a hundred Christians and a hundred non-Christians from relatively similar life situations, we should expect to find the Christian cohort to be more virtuous as a whole.

2.4. A Transformation by God's Power

Thirdly, *although moral transformation does not take place without human cooperation, it is based on and secured by what God has already done in regenerating the individual.* Pastors and theologians writing about the spiritual laxity of Western Christians often lament that believers do not desire the things of God but run after worldly goods (e.g., Smith 2016). While this may be a correct diagnosis, it does not answer the theological problem. On the one hand, as all five authors of the book *Five Views on Sanctification* maintain, transformation does not happen simply by God's sovereign decision. Paul's exhortations to "sow to the Spirit" instead of "sowing to the flesh" (Gal. 6:8) suggest that believers are responsible for their own sanctification. Alston (1988) presents three models which divide the responsibility between man and God differently. According to what he calls a fiat model, God changes

our character at the snap of fingers. Here the Catholic idea of infused virtues comes to mind. Alston thinks such a view has some biblical support (e.g., 1. Thess. 3:12; 5:23), but finds it ultimately problematic. The fiat model, he argues, views people as “sticks and stones” rather than free persons God wants to have an interpersonal relationship with (Alston 1988, p. 131). Moreover, if this were the right model, he points out, we might blame God for the slowness of our spiritual growth. Moral transformation, therefore, is not automatic. It depends on the will of the believer.

On the other hand, the New Testament consistently teaches that “renewal and change flow from the regeneration and sanctification that God has already accomplished in our lives” (Peterson 1995, p. 136).⁴ Getting sanctified is not like grudgingly joining the gym, with the Holy Spirit as your personal trainer who shouts slogans (“no pain, no gain!”) to your ear as you pump iron. Paul’s exhortation to “work out your salvation” ends with the reminder that “it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13). Similarly, before telling believers to “make every effort” to add to their faith goodness, self-control, perseverance, and so on, the writer of 2. Peter reminds them that God’s “divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life” (2. Pet. 1:3–6). There is hard work to be done for sure, but the Holy Spirit gives believers both the *desire* and the *ability* to avoid sin and to do good. Theologians in the Augustinian tradition such as Jonathan Edwards have rightly emphasized that, in virtue of the regeneration of their will, Christians gain the desire to obey and please their heavenly Father (see Yeo 2014). In other words, sanctification is not up to the believer’s own desires and willpower alone. The Holy Spirit empowers and assists them every step of the way.

2.5. The Division of Labor

How should we understand the roles and responsibilities of the believing person and the Holy Spirit in sanctification? Biblical scholar N. T. Wright describes the division of labor between man and the Spirit as follows:

We don’t become Christian by struggling with great moral effort to make ourselves good enough for God, but by the work of the Holy Spirit, bringing us to a faith which looks away from ourselves and trusts, instead, in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. But that work of the Spirit is precisely the work of bringing someone to new birth. And, as that person is reborn, the life into which he or she is brought, like a newborn baby blinking and crying a moment after delivery, is the life in which new “strengths” of character need to be nurtured and developed. (Wright 2010, p. x)

The mother-infant analogy implies that the lack of moral virtue cannot be explained away simply by believers’ unwillingness to cooperate with the Spirit. We don’t blame newborns for their slowness of development. Regarding the fiat model of sanctification, Alston writes that “the conscientious parent does everything she can within limits set by other constraints, to mold the motivational structure of the child in what she deems a desirable direction, *without obtaining the infant’s consent for these proceedings*” (Alston 1988, p. 134; italics original).

But perhaps mother-infant analogies leave too little responsibility on human shoulders. Consider, then, my analogy of two adult lovers.

Jack is addicted to alcohol. He is depressed and angry with himself and the world. One day he meets a wonderful woman. Jill is attractive and a virtuous person, and way out of his league. But she sees something in Jack. They fall in love and decide to get married. Jack is immensely happy and grateful for the newfound relationship. He feels his life has completely changed. He knows he does not deserve someone like Jill. Jill happens to be all about healthy living. She wants Jack to get sober. She makes it clear that this is what she expects from her husband. She promises to walk him through the recovery process. Jack knows his habit hurts Jill and he wants to be a good husband. He joins the AA, begins exercising and eating healthy. However, his old drinking buddies keep calling

him. Often his body craves alcohol. At times he gives in to temptation. Jill is sad but patient. She forgives him time after time and continues to show love and support. Over time, Jack learns to lean more on Jill's loving assistance and to say no to the bottle. Gradually his body forgets old habits and gets used to jogging and eating healthy. In many ways, he becomes a new person—joyful, patient, and kind—just like his wife is.⁵

Such an analogy provides a more realistic account of the division of labor between the believer and the Holy Spirit. It is also, I would argue, faithful to biblical imagery. Objectively, there is a new identity based on a covenant relationship. Subjectively, a revolution takes place in one's heart, giving rise to new desires and habits. The analogy also leaves lots of room for personal responsibility. Jill cannot force Jack to change against his will. There is a real possibility that he will stick to his drinking habits. Does this show that we cannot know for sure in advance how the person undergoing such a process will perform? After all, Jack may want to change but he might also find it very hard. Despite his love for Jill, he might find his new life somewhat burdensome and even give up the relationship. Likewise, the New Testament seems to view apostasy as a real possibility (Heb. 6).

This claim, however, misses an important statistical point. Meeting and marrying Jill significantly raises the likelihood that a transformation will take place in Jack's life. Imagine, then, a hundred drunkards all of whom find a similar life-changing relationship and another hundred drunkards who remain single and sad. The probability that over time there will be more changes in the character and behavior of men in the first group compared to men in the second group seems very high. For the same reason, we should predict that over time, people indwelt by the Holy Spirit would behave more morally, on average, compared with people without the Spirit. Our three claims about moral transformation can be summarized as follows:

Christian Moral Transformation (CMT): The Holy Spirit brings about a positive change in all believers' moral character and behavior during this lifetime. The change is significant enough to be verified empirically.

We now turn to consider the empirical evidence against and for this claim.

3. Lying and Cheating

"In virtually every study we conduct, representing thousands of interviews every year, born-again Christians fail to display much attitudinal or behavioral evidence of transformed lives" (Kinnaman and Lyons 2007, p. 47). Thus writes David Kinnaman, the president of the evangelical research firm Barna Group. Such an observation speaks against the biblical claim that all believers are undergoing CMT.

In what follows, I shall consider sociological and psychological studies on the relationship between religion and moral behavior. The types of behavior under discussion are chosen on the basis of two criteria. First, the given behavior must be generally viewed either as sinful or virtuous by Christians. Second, there must be at least tens of studies conducted over tens of years by several research teams. While the relationships are almost always correlational, and we cannot say for sure whether religion or some other factor causes or hinders certain behaviors, the results can still indirectly support or discredit CMT by being consistent or inconsistent with it. While these studies use the general word "religion", the religion in question is clearly almost always Christianity. The vast majority of studies cited here have been conducted in the United States.

Let us begin with studies indicating that, on average, Christians are no better than others. Consider lying and cheating. In most cases, the Bible condemns lying (Lev. 19:11; John 8:44; Acts 5:3; Col. 3:9). God's people are expected to be characterized by truthfulness, integrity, and honesty (Prov. 10:9, 12:17; Eph. 4:25; 1. Pet. 3:10). In the U.S., however, cheating is very common in high schools and universities, even among religious college students. Several decades of research indicates that religion makes no real difference to honesty and cheating (Hood et al. 2009, p. 385). There are some studies indicating that religious people cheat less, but these rely mostly on self-reports. Self-reports are

problematic because religious respondents seem to be more biased than others toward presenting themselves as honest.⁶ Perrin's (2000) study used a behavioral measure instead of relying on self-reports and found that religious college students did cheat less. However, the cheating in this study was quite mild. Interestingly, one study found that, while 92 percent of religious college students affirmed that it was morally wrong to cheat, 87 percent agreed with the statement "if everyone else cheats, why shouldn't I?" (Goldsen et al. 1960).

It seems, then, that religious students are no more honest than their peers. This is in line with the finding by Barna Group that those identifying as born-again Christians had lied statistically as often as others during the last thirty days (Kinnaman and Lyons 2007, p. 47). If we consider cheating and lying as sins, as most Christians do, we should expect the Holy Spirit to gradually weed out such habits. Of course, college students are young and only in the beginning of their spiritual growth. While cheating may not serve as strong evidence against CMT, it contributes to the cumulative case at hand.

4. Porn Consumption

While Christians usually view sexual lust as a sin (Matt. 5:28), it is no news that even they have trouble keeping away from internet porn (Perry 2018). On the one hand, there is some evidence that religion helps to prevent and reduce porn usage. For instance, one study found that religious and theologically conservative people are less likely than others to report viewing pornography (Hardy et al. 2013). Religious commitment seemed to reduce intentional pornography use partly by increasing self-regulation and social control. On the other hand, lots of research suggests that religiosity does not predict viewing less online porn:

Several studies of undergraduates at both secular and Christian universities, for example, reported no statistically significant correlations between religiosity and viewing pornography (Abell, Steenbergh, & Boivin, 2006; Goodson, McCormick, & Evans, 2001; Short et al. 2015). Foubert and Rizzo (2013) reported that extrinsic religiosity (i.e., religious engagement done for self-interested reasons) was actually positively associated with students viewing Internet pornography and listing more reasons to view pornography. Perry's (2016, 2017b) studies of married Americans found that worship attendance was not a significant predictor of viewing pornography at all or more frequently. Baltazar, Helm, McBride, Hopkins, and Stevens (2010) found that religiosity was not significantly related to porn viewing in general, though it was negatively associated with hours spent viewing porn among men who were weekly users. Edelman (2009) analyzed state level correlates of credit card subscriptions to a leading pornographic website, finding that subscriptions were more prevalent in states with larger proportions of religious conservatives. In studies analyzing Google trends data, MacInnis and Hodson (2015) reported that terms like "sex" were more often searched for in states with higher aggregated religiosity. Whitehead and Perry (2017) found that higher percentages of evangelical Protestants, theists, and biblical literalists predicted more Google searches for the terms "porn", "sex tape", "lesbian porn", "amateur porn", and "free porn", as did high rates of religious service attendance. (Perry 2018, p. 370)

The finding that religious people consume porn more than others is very surprising considering Christian teaching on sexual issues. Some have suggested that perhaps Christians view more porn because they engage in fewer extramarital sexual relationships. Or perhaps they are worse in covering their digital tracks so that their internet behavior gets easily caught by researchers. Be as it may, there is good evidence that that Christians on average are not viewing less porn than nonreligious people in the United States. But if the Holy Spirit really supplied believers with self-control (Gal 5:23), this is not what we would expect to find.

5. Prejudice

5.1. Whose Prejudice? Which Religious Orientation?

Another important area of research concerns the way believers view and treat members of outgroups. While Christians are called to love their neighbors as themselves, their attitudes toward others often seem as less morally laudable than those of nonreligious people. Religion is often correlated with higher levels of prejudice and intolerance (Hood et al. 2009, pp. 412–27; Batson et al. 1993, pp. 290–330). In social psychology, prejudice is commonly defined along the following lines: “[T]he holding of derogatory social attitudes or cognitive beliefs, the expression of negative affect, or the display of hostile or discriminatory behavior towards members of a group on account of their membership of that group” (Brown 1995, p. 8; italics original). However, according to one overview of studies, “it is not religion per se that is linked to prejudice, but the ways in which one holds one’s faith, the importance of one’s religious group affiliation, and so on” (Hood et al. 2009, p. 434). Consider, therefore, the following religious orientations:

- *Intrinsic Religion*: You consider your religion as an end in itself. You agree with claims such as “I try hard to carry my religion over into all my other dealings in life”, “it is important for me to spend periods of time in private religious thought and meditation”, and “quite often I have been keenly aware of the presence of God or the Divine Being”. (Allport and Ross 1967)
- *Extrinsic Religion*: You use religion as a means to other ends, such as achieving social status or security. You agree with claims such as “although I am a religious person, I refuse to let religious considerations influence my everyday affairs”, and “a primary reason for my interest in religion is that my church is a congenial social activity”. (Allport and Ross 1967)
- *Quest Religion*: You are open to change in your religious thinking, you accept doubt as positive, you face existential questions in all their complexity, and resist clear-cut answers (Batson 1976).
- *Religious Fundamentalism*: You believe that “there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, essential, inerrant truth about humanity and deity; that this, essential truth is fundamentally opposed by forces of evil which must be vigorously fought; that this truth must be followed today according to the fundamental, unchangeable practices of the past, and that those who believe and follow these fundamental teachings have a special relationship with the deity” (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1992, p. 118).⁷

Recall that we are asking about prejudice among those whom Christians themselves would consider as true, Spirit-filled believers. While extrinsic religiosity is often linked with prejudice, extrinsics are likely to be considered as “nominal” Christians, so we might want to exclude them. Those who score low on the extrinsic scale and high on the intrinsic scale might be considered as real believers. There are both positive and negative links between intrinsic religion and prejudice. For instance, two independent literature reviews found that 70 percent of the studies of the relationship between intrinsic religiosity and prejudice found positive correlations, whereas only 22 percent found negative correlations (Batson et al. 1993, pp. 297–302; Hunsberger and Jackson 2005).

Prejudice, however, is a value-laden term. Christians do not always agree with secularists about what counts as prejudice, especially in relation to sexual minorities. In a meta-analysis of 61 studies on the relationship of religion and prejudice toward lesbians and gay men, Bernard Whitley (2009) found that five out of seven different measures of religiosity (including the intrinsic orientation) were related to negative attitudes toward homosexuals.⁸ It has sometimes been questioned whether such studies appropriately differentiate between Christians’ attitudes toward “the sin” and “the sinner”, that is, homosexual behavior and homosexual persons. This distinction was acknowledged in a study led by C. Daniel Batson (Batson et al. 1999). Participating students were given a few pieces of information about a fellow student named either Jerry or Jenny. Some students

were also told this person was a homosexual. Jenny/Jerry needed money, and the students were offered a chance to help her/him by playing a simple game. Those scoring high on the intrinsic scale were less willing to help Jerry/Jenny if they thought she/he was gay. Importantly, it did not make much difference whether Jerry/Jenny needed money to attend a gay parade or to visit his/her grandparents. As Batson later commented, “there seemed to be rejection of the gay person, not just of helping in a way that would promote a gay lifestyle” (Batson 2013, p. 101). This result did not go unchallenged, however. A study by another team found evidence showing that “intrinsic appear to be relatively accepting of homosexual people, but not of homosexual behavior” (Fulton et al. 1999, p. 19). Perhaps also some of the findings in Whitley’s meta-analysis could be due to the researchers’ failure to properly differentiate between homosexual persons and homosexual behavior. However, such a failure hardly explains the positive correlation between prejudice and intrinsic religion in all studies.

5.2. Religious Fundamentalism Is Normal

While the relationship between intrinsic religion and prejudice is messy, the link between religious fundamentalism and prejudice seems clearer. For instance, in a survey of sixteen papers (with 25 samples) from 1990 to 2003, in every case, fundamentalism was positively linked to negative attitudes toward gay/lesbian persons, women, Communists, and religious outgroups, as well as to the personality trait called right-wing authoritarianism (39/39 findings in total) (Hunsberger and Jackson 2005). While the relationship between fundamentalism and racial/ethnic prejudice was little less clear in that survey, a meta-analysis of 55 studies from 1964 to 2008 showed that “greater religious identification, greater extrinsic religiosity, and greater religious fundamentalism were all positively related to racism” (Hall et al. 2010, p. 130). Even if churches are unclear about what kinds of attitudes and behaviors toward homosexuals are sinful, most of them condemn racism.

It is important to note that fundamentalism is not a marginal phenomenon among Christians. Those scoring high on the Religious Fundamentalism scale agree with claims such as “God has given humanity a complete, unfailing guide to happiness and salvation, which must be totally followed”; “the basic cause of evil in this world is Satan, who is still constantly and ferociously fighting against God”; and “when you get right down to it, there are basically only two kinds of people in the world: the Righteous, who will be rewarded by God, and the rest, who will not” (Altemeyer 2006, p. 106). These are not marginal beliefs, but traditional convictions shared by many conservative Christians. Many evangelicals score high on the Religious Fundamentalism scale (Altemeyer 2006, pp. 110–11). Moreover, almost 30% of Americans prefer “fundamentalist” over “moderate” or “liberal” in describing their religious orientation (Davis and Smith 2008).⁹ Hence, there seems to be a link between prejudice and conservative Christianity.

5.3. Is Prejudice a Sin?

While prejudice is rarely considered a virtue, is it always a sin? Is it something that we could expect the Holy Spirit to weed out from the hearts of believers? After all, our evolved cognitive bias toward prejudice seems to be beneficial in certain situations, and thus it is not completely irrational (e.g., Chadeaux and Helbing 2012). However, common expressions of prejudice seem to run counter to neighborly love. In the New Testament, Christians are not only exhorted to show love to their brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus stressed also loving those whom we find difficult to love, even our enemies (Matt. 5:44). The parable of the Good Samaritan indicates that neighborly love is supremely displayed in helping and serving a member of an outgroup (Luke 10:25–37). Neighborly love is not simply recommended but commanded; it is as important as loving God (Matt. 22:39). Paul likewise calls Christians to bless their enemies (1. Cor. 4:12) and to do good to them (Rom. 12:20–21). This way, believers are imitating God, who sent his Son to die for God’s enemies (Rom. 5:10). If Christian moral formation is about becoming Christ-like, we should expect the Holy Spirit to gradually produce a loving disposition toward people outside of

one's ingroup. Even if prejudice is not sinful in each and every instance, the ways many Christians view and treat homosexuals or Muslims, for examples, conflict with the teaching and the example of their Lord.

The empirical results reviewed above are not what we would expect on the basis of the New Testament teaching on moral transformation. It seems, therefore, that we have some evidence—even if not strong or conclusive evidence—against CMT. Next, we turn to consider the evidence that is consistent with sanctification.

6. Good Christian Behavior and Character

6.1. *The Sunday Effect and Other Situationist Worries*

Several studies show that (Christian) religion is negatively linked to several behaviors that Christians view as sinful.¹⁰ Since the 1970s, research has consistently shown that religiosity predicts lower levels of alcohol and substance abuse. Similar relationships have been established between religiosity and criminal behavior. A negative correlation between religion and domestic violence also exists, although there is also evidence that sometimes domestic violence may be justified by patriarchal values found among conservative religious groups. Research has generally found that stronger religious beliefs and involvement are associated with self-reported decreased nonmarital sexual activity, especially premarital sex. Christians, then, seem to be avoiding several sins more than their non-Christian neighbors. Moreover, while fundamentalism is linked to prejudice toward several groups—as we just saw—quest religion and possibly also intrinsic religion are related to racial tolerance (Hall et al. 2010, p. 130).¹¹

Such results are obviously consistent with CMT. However, it is another question whether they serve as good evidence for sanctification. A character trait has to do with a stable, enduring disposition to feel, think, and act in certain ways. When we explain a person's habit of donating to charity by reference to her generous character, we indicate that she is likely to donate to various causes (not only to homeless cats), and that minor changes in her environment would not easily turn her into the Scrooge.

Situationism is a psychological theory claiming that variance in human behavior is typically a function of the situation rather than any character traits a person possesses (see Upton 2009). Changes in the environment can help reduce bad behavior. Consider smoking.¹² In the 1950s, nearly half of the population in the U.S. and 80 percent in the U.K. smoked. Increased awareness of the health risks of smoking did not help lower the numbers for two decades. But once smoking was made illegal in public places, the number of smokers started going down. Nowadays, only 15 percent of Americans and 28 percent of Europeans light up regularly.

While beliefs and values do influence human behavior, the social context is often a more powerful predictor of behavior than belief. The fact that Christians engage in many types of sinful behavior less frequently than others might be easily explained by reference to situational factors instead of differences in character between believers and nonbelievers. Religious environments are effective in keeping especially young people out of trouble. For instance, in the US, a student in a Christian college is less likely to face the temptation to drink, do drugs, or have premarital sex than a student in a secular college. There are fewer opportunities for sinful behavior, and peer pressure supports a godly lifestyle.

However, as an anonymous reviewer has pointed out, perhaps we should not understand character too individualistically as if we could neatly separate between the person and her environment. After all, they argue, even the apostle Paul and many of his contemporary interpreters (some whom I have quoted above) take a relational and communal understanding of a human being. I am willing to grant that character is not independent of context. However, situationism still raises worries. Consider something called the Sunday Effect. As we have seen, Christians abstain from nonmarital sexual activity but seem to be viewing porn as much as others. Why is this? Perhaps a Christian environment helps believers keep away from extramarital affairs, but much of that context is removed when it's just you and the internet. One study found that there were no statistically significant

differences in the downloads of porn between the more religious and the less religious states in the USA (Edelman 2009). There was one important difference, however. On Sundays, porn consumption dropped drastically in the religious states. In Malhotra's (2008) study, Christians responded to charity appeals more than nonreligious individuals on Sundays, but on other days of the week there was no difference. One explanation for the Sunday Effect is that Christians tend to think of God and his moral standards more on Sundays (see Norenzayan 2013, pp. 37–41).

6.2. Helping Behavior

Let us turn to data I consider as the best support for CMT. The Holy Spirit supposedly not only weakens the proclivity for sin, but also strengthens the disposition toward righteous behavior. A large body of research suggests that there exists a strong relationship between religion and helping behavior. Consider, for instance, this summary of the findings by social scientist Arthur Brooks (2006):

Brooks (2006) found that those who regularly attended religious services were 25% more likely to give than those who did rarely or said they were not religious (91 to 66 percent). They were also 23% more likely to volunteer (67 to 44 percent). In 2000, they gave away 3.5 times more money per year (\$2210 versus \$642) and volunteered more than twice as much (12 times versus 5.8 times). Similar robust results were found when other measures of religiosity were used, such as prayer frequency, spiritual intensity, and merely belonging to a congregation, regardless of attendance rate. These trends extended to other forms of charity: "In 2002, religious people were far more likely to donate blood than secularists, to give food or money to a homeless person, to return change (p. 109) mistakenly given them by a cashier, and to express empathy for less fortunate people . . . religious people were 57 percent more likely than secularists to help a homeless person at least once a month." (Miller 2012, p. 108).

While such results may seem to serve as good evidence for CMT, the relationship between religion and helping is not straightforward. The associations tend to be weak, and they are not always consistent from one study to another. One consistent finding, however, is that intrinsically religious individuals tend to help others in a variety of ways through their religious organizations (Hood et al. 2009, p. 407). But as Batson has argued for years, this conclusion could result partly from a self-representational bias (see Batson et al. 1993, pp. 343–58). While the quest orientation is consistently linked with helping, he argues, intrinsic religiosity is more often associated with only the appearance of helping. A desire to present oneself and one's faith in a positive light leads intrinsics to over-evaluate their helpfulness. When they do help, Batson claims, it is a sort of self-serving, Pharisee-type of helping, where the needs of others are not the motivating factor. The actual evidence for Batson's claim seems mixed, however (see Hood et al. 2009, p. 406). On the basis of the sheer number of studies (using both self-reporting and behavioral measures) that have found positive correlations, it seems safe to conclude that religious people tend to be somewhat more helpful than others. Furthermore, associations have been found between self-reported measures of religiousness and such prosocial characteristics as forgiveness, benevolence, and agreeableness (Hood et al. 2009, p. 406).

6.3. Helping as Evidence of Sanctification

Christians, then, seem to be more helpful than others. Is this good evidence of CMT? Again, one wonders how easily the correlation may be explained by situational factors. According to Christian B. Miller, a Christian philosopher specializing in character development practices such as prayer, confession, and tithing can help one become a more grateful, humble, and generous person over time (Miller 2017, pp. 227–29). Presumably, the Holy Spirit can operate through ordinary religious practices such as these. Miller, however, is not sure how good evidence helping behavior is of religion's character-building power.

What is going on at the level of motivation when religious believers are writing a check as the offering plate is going around? It could be that (certain) religious practices are helping to foster feelings of genuine compassion for others, and this compassionate motivation in turn leads to increased donations. But instead it could be that the increased donations are due to some self-interested motivation linked to religion, such as desire for rewards in the afterlife. In that case, there would not be much support for the idea that religious rituals and practices contribute significantly to compassionate character. The truth, if I can be allowed to speculate, is likely somewhere between. (Miller 2017, p. 241)

For the sake of argument, let us grant that the motives behind the donations are usually pure (besides, from a biblical perspective, believers should be storing treasures in heaven—nothing bad about it!). However, having a pure motive on Sundays is not the same as acting from a stable, generous disposition. It could be that the church context brings out people's goodwill, as Malhotra's (2008) study on the Sunday Effects suggests.

This situationist worry is not the only cause for questioning whether helping serves as good evidence for sanctification. While regular church attendance can certainly foster a generous disposition, it is still another question whether it makes sense to explain such a disposition by reference to the work of the Holy Spirit. According to political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell, "the statistics suggest that even an atheist who happened to become involved in the social life of a congregation (perhaps through a spouse) is much more likely to volunteer in a soup kitchen than the most fervent believer who prays alone. It is religious belonging that matters for neighborliness, not religious believing" (Putnam and Campbell 2010, p. 473).

Non-Christian religions may also promote habit-formation and character-building. A meta-analysis found that the relationship between religiousness and prosocial personality traits and values exists across religions and cultures (Saroglou et al. 2004, pp. 721–34). It could be that while prosocial persons tend to be religious, religious belief as such does not cause prosocial behavior. Moreover, while religious practices may contribute to moral formation, mindfulness and other nonreligious ritualistic practices are also efficient tools for developing virtues such as self-control (e.g., Elkins-Brown et al. 2007).

6.4. Does Situationism Cut Both Ways?

Therefore, although there is a lot of data that is consistent with CMT, it is less clear whether it serves as good evidence for sanctification. Christians surrounded by other believers are less likely to be tempted to overdrink, to do drugs, to engage in violence, or in nonmarital sex. While religious practices can foster virtuous behavior, this can happen even in the case of churchgoing nonbelievers who presumably do not have the Holy Spirit. It is also possible that prosocial character reinforces religiousness, not the other way around.

Now, does situationism cut both ways? Could context similarly explain the data suggesting that Christians are not morally superior to others in the case of cheating and lying, porn viewing, and prejudice? In some cases, such an explanation does seem to make sense. If believers view porn more often than others, for instance, it might be because they rarely engage in nonmarital sexual relationships (the latter is usually considered as a greater sin). However, situational factors cannot explain, say, why Christian students cheat in tests as often as others. Such data counts as evidence against CMT, unless we have a reason to think that believers would be *more* tempted to cheat than nonreligious students. Therefore, while situationism often cuts both ways, and while I do not think it fully explains the link between religion and desirable behavior, there is an asymmetry here. Situationist considerations seem to account for the data compatible with CMT better than for the data incompatible with CMT. In other words, the empirical evidence against CMT has more weight than evidence supporting CMT.

7. Possible Solutions

What are we to make of this? On the one hand, it is hard to say anything conclusive about the reality of sanctification on the basis of our quick overview of studies. There are numerous important studies we haven't looked at. There may also be multiple ways in which religion affects moral character and behavior which have not been studied extensively. Some Christian virtues may not manifest as external, measurable behavior (after all, Jesus warns against showing off your good deeds [Matt. 6:8]). On the other hand, the data we have considered raises a worry. If believers are really empowered by the Holy Spirit that gives rise to "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22–23), would we not expect their moral performance to be better across the board and to find empirical evidence of it?

There may be ways to resolve the apparent conflict between the biblical and scientific data, however. First, although I have tried to exclude this response from the outset, one may still insist on the point that present-day Christians neglect their spiritual health.¹³ Perhaps the results were different if more believers engaged in traditional spiritual disciplines. Even if most intrinsic Christians pray and read their Bibles and celebrate the communion regularly, they rarely engage in demanding disciplines such as fasting. Perhaps the Holy Spirit needs us to cultivate such habits in order to transform us. However, as I have argued, regenerated and Spirit-filled believers should have both the desire and the ability to engage in whatever fosters their spiritual growth. If the issue is that believers need to learn to trust Christ fully in order to be sanctified (as some have pointed out to me), then we should expect the Spirit to foster trust in Christ.

In fact, the argument that certain practices are necessary for CMT may make the theological problem worse. If anyone can learn self-control or compassion through some rigorous exercise, then a Hindu practicing yoga or an atheist practicing mindfulness may reach similar degrees of character development as a Christian engaging in meditative prayer. Arguing that the Holy Spirit is an important cause of moral growth only in the last case seems redundant. Moreover, moral transformation is supposed to be a supernatural process. One could argue that nonbelievers reaching the same levels of moral progress through natural means would be kind of miraculous.

Another type of response refers to a category mistake. For example, C. S. Lewis argued that the "world does not consist of 100 per cent Christians and 100 per cent non-Christians" but that everyone is increasing or decreasing in godliness (Lewis 2002, p. 208). Some people in other religions "are being led by God's secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it" (Lewis 2002, p. 209). Such inclusivist suggestions have been made by many respectable theologians. However, it does seem to run counter to the New Testament teaching. Paul thinks one either has the Holy Spirit or not. This response might work better if we take other sources of theology (tradition, reason, and experience) into account.

A third type of response appeals to the cultural achievements of Christianity. The origins of schools and hospitals, the abolition of slavery, the development of Western democracy, the rights of children and women, and the discovery of natural sciences are all claimed to be grounded on the Christian worldview (e.g., Spencer 2016). Is not the history of the West evidence that Christianity can bring out the best of humans? Leaving aside the obvious counterargument from evils committed in the name of Christianity, this point is not as relevant as it might seem. As a worldview, Christianity has surely had a positive impact on our world. Similarly, one might argue that Marxism–Leninism and National Socialism have had a negative impact on it. But how much of their impact can be explained by reference to the moral characters of the individuals living in the Soviet Union or in Nazi Germany at the time? Not very much, it seems, unless we think that people in these countries were more depraved on average than people elsewhere. While there surely have been quite a few rotten apples, the behavior of most citizens is more naturally explained by situational factors.

Finally, one might argue that there is something unique about the cultural context of the United States where most studies have been conducted (or in the modern-day West in general). Perhaps believers display prejudice toward homosexuals, say, because of how they are presented in conservative media outlets. Or perhaps something in our environment, such as our luxurious lifestyle, prevents believers from reaching spiritual and moral maturity. Maybe we learn to lean on the Holy Spirit in challenging environments where resources are scarce, and our character is put to test. Such was the world of the early Christians, after all. Perhaps many studies turned out differently if we ran them in places of hardship and persecution. Philosophers of religion such as John Hick (2010) have argued that God allows suffering in order to provide opportunities for moral growth.

8. Concluding Remarks

Theologians differ on how much and what kind of moral progress we can expect to take place in this life. According to a widely held view of the New Testament teaching on sanctification, the Holy Spirit brings about a significant positive change in all believers' moral character and behavior during this lifetime. Such an optimistic view is common at least among evangelicals, charismatics, and Catholics, but less common among Lutherans. As many spiritual leaders have observed, the view is in tension with the actual moral lives of many modern-day Christians. The problem cannot be explained away, for example, by saying that believers are not willing to engage in spiritual practices that are necessary for spiritual growth.

Psychological and sociological research on the relationship between religion and morality provides data consistent and data inconsistent with CMT. I have argued that the latter data has a bit more weight. This is because the correlation between religion and desirable moral behavior can be more naturally explained by situational factors than by character differences between religious and nonreligious people. Of course, situational factors may explain also some of the undesirable behavior of believers. However, overusing situationism to explain the moral failure of Christians would suggest that the Holy Spirit is subject to environmental constraints (which would seem theologically dubious).

While sociological and psychological research seems to challenge the truth of CMT, there are promising ways to solve the apparent conflict between the biblical and the scientific data. A more systematic assessment of the relevant empirical evidence and its relation to the doctrine of sanctification is called for.

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Notes

- ¹ Steven L. Porter (2019) quotes G. K. Chesterton and Friedrich Nietzsche as expressing similar sentiments as John Hick. C. S. Lewis (2002, pp. 207–17) also addressed the issue, although I think his conclusions are unsatisfactory.
- ² The book includes contributions from Wesleyan, Reformed, Pentecostal, Keswick, and Augustinian-Dispensational perspectives.
- ³ According to Fee (1994, p. 880), Paul is not trying to give an exhaustive list of Spirit-driven virtues.
- ⁴ Peterson, *Possessed by God*, 136.
- ⁵ This analogy is in line with Alston's interpersonal model of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.
- ⁶ Studies have found a link between religiosity and higher lie scale score (Hood et al. 2009, p. 387). A lie scale is a truthfulness indicator that uses redundant questions to check if participants are answering consistently.
- ⁷ Intrinsic orientation is the opposite of the extrinsic orientation. If you score high on one scale, you're likely to score low on the other. The quest orientation and religious fundamentalism are similarly opposite to one another.

- 8 The forms of religiosity were religious fundamentalism, frequency of attendance at religious services, endorsement of Christian orthodoxy, self-ratings of religiosity, and intrinsic, extrinsic, and quest orientations. Higher quest orientation was related to positive attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. Extrinsic orientation had no relationship to these attitudes.
- 9 Of course, this self-identification must be differentiated from sociological measures of religious fundamentalism.
- 10 The following findings are drawn from the summary of Hood et al. (2009, pp. 394–409).
- 11 Since studies on religion and morality are often based on self-reports, C. Daniel Batson (2013) argues that white Christians are more motivated than others to present themselves as more tolerant and inclusive of other ethnic groups than they really are. In his view, only the quest orientation is consistently linked to tolerance.
- 12 The information about smoking habits is from Wendy Wood (2019, p. 84).
- 13 See, for instance, the discussion on the results of Lifeway Research’s Transformational Discipleship study <https://influencemagazine.com/practice/the-sanctification-gap>. (accessed on 21 June 2022)

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