

The evidential force of spiritual maturity and the Christian doctrine of sanctification

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Abstract: The truth of one's religious beliefs can be questioned by appeal to hypocrisy or blatant moral failure amongst the adherents of one's religion. Such an appeal implies that the absence of spiritual maturity within a religious individual or group can serve in some way as evidence against the truth of that religion and (presumably), conversely, that spiritual maturity within a religious individual or group can be thought of as providing some sort of evidence for the truth of that religion. The first part of this article attempts to get clear on what sort of evidential force the presence or absence of spiritual maturity has for the rational assessment of religious belief in general. This part of the article concludes that the evidential force of spiritual maturity must ultimately be assessed within the contours of a particular religion with a firm grasp on the sort of moral formational process envisaged by that religion. So, in the second part of the article, the evidential force of spiritual maturity is considered from a Christian perspective and an interpersonal model of sanctification is appealed to as an explanation of the lack of spiritual maturity amongst Christian believers.

Introduction

Within religious epistemology, significant attention has been given to the role of religious experience in the rational assessment of religious belief, but the type of religious experience in focus has often been some sort of perception-like awareness of God.¹ Far less attention has been given to what Caroline Franks-Davis has called 'regenerative experiences' (Franks-Davis (1989), 44–48). Franks-Davis writes,

Regenerative experiences, as their name suggests, tend to renew the subject's faith and improve his spiritual, moral, physical or psychological well-being ... [they are] seen as

'religious' because they are obtained during a religious activity such as prayer, apparently brought about by a divine power, or accompanied by the sense of a divine presence . . .
(*ibid.*, 44–45)

Franks-Davis understands regenerative experiences as encompassing a wide range of experiences (e.g. healing, conversion, renewed strength) and one sub-type is improvement in one's spiritual and moral well-being the cause of which is at least partly attributed to one's religious involvement. It is this sub-type of regenerative experience that is referred to in this article as spiritual maturity.

Spiritual maturity, then, is understood here as the kind and degree of moral change over time that is valued and expected by a religion the cause of which is at least partly attributed to religious involvement. This moral change can be understood as involving a degree of maturation in morally good acts, and/or morally good character-traits, and/or morally relevant attitudinal states (e.g. joy, peace, etc.). To refer to this as *spiritual* maturity is to draw attention to the thought that the moral change in question would include behaviours, character-traits, and/or attitudes that are valued and expected by a particular religion and that the cause of the moral change is at least partly attributed to religious-spiritual involvement of some type. Understood in this way, the experience of spiritual maturity does not necessarily involve an awareness of God. Rather, it involves a subjective evaluation of the kind and degree of moral change that has taken place in one's own or another's life that is thought at least partly caused by some feature or features of the religion in question. The idea is that such experience has evidential force provided that the religion in question includes the notion that spiritual maturity of some sort will be helped along by the religion. In such a case, the perceived presence of spiritual maturity can be best explained by the truth of the religion in question.

This way of putting things suggests the argument takes the form of an inference to the best explanation. That is, one is aware of a certain kind and degree of spiritual maturity, and then one assesses what the best explanation of that spiritual maturity might be. Perhaps there is a rich kind and degree of spiritual maturity the presence of which makes best sense only if certain of one's religious beliefs are true. Presumably, this alone would not be adequate to rationally justify one's religious beliefs, but might be part of an overall case for the rationality of one's religious beliefs. Alternatively, perhaps there is a rather mediocre level of spiritual maturity that is best explained by the falsity of one's religious beliefs. In this case the evidential force of spiritual maturity takes the form of a potential defeater of the justification one might otherwise have for one's religious beliefs.²

It is sensible to suppose that many religious believers enter into an informal, epistemic assessment along these lines at least partly because their moral life is readily available to them and because many religious traditions lead their adherents to expect significant moral progress due, at least in part, to the purported truthfulness of their religion.³ Moreover, religious believers live out their moral

lives before other persons and, to the degree that spiritual maturity is publicly observable, these other persons might make a similar sort of rational assessment of the religion in question based on their experience of the level of spiritual maturity of the adherents of that religion.

For example, G. K. Chesterton quipped (as a Christian): ‘There is only one unanswerable argument against Christianity: Christians’ (Chesterton (1991), xx). Friedrich Nietzsche made a similar indictment of an apparently dour group of Christians:

if your belief makes you blessed then appear to be blessed! Your faces have always been more injurious to your belief than our objections have! If these glad tidings of your Bible were written on your faces, you would not need to insist so obstinately on the authority of that book . . . (Nietzsche (1986), § 98).

A more positive estimation comes from H. H. Price:

[A spiritual person] has a certain serenity and inward peace which others cannot help envying and even admiring. They cannot see he is in the least entitled to have it, in a world so full of troubles as this world is. Yet it seems a little unpalatable to suppose that this serene attitude is just the product of a state of mental confusion. Indeed, the existence of such persons is in practice the most persuasive argument in favour of a religious world-outlook, and probably always has been. When we meet such a person we can hardly help wishing that we ourselves could be like him and we cannot help wondering whether there may not be something to be said for the world-outlook which he accepts however strange or even absurd that outlook may seem to us to be. (Price (1969), 475)

Assuming such anecdotes are representative of many, it appears that both religious and non-religious persons evaluate religious truth-claims due, at least in part, to the perceived level of spiritual maturity of one or more adherents of a religion.⁴ The issue here is what sort of epistemic considerations ought to govern such evaluation.

This article sets out to address that matter by answering two questions. First, in what manner does it count for or against the reasonableness of a particular religion that the adherents of that religion do or do not manifest spiritual maturity? As part of the answer to this first question, it will be seen that the rational evaluation of a religion in light of spiritual maturity depends heavily on the specific contours of the religion in question. When it comes to spiritual maturity, some religions are on the hook in a way that others are not and some religions purport to have resources on hand that make better or worse sense of the presence and/or absence of spiritual maturity. Christian theism is one religious tradition within which spiritual maturity of a certain sort is to be expected and yet on at least one view of Christian sanctification this expectation is partly mitigated. Or so it will be argued. This leads to the second question: how should the Christian person, in particular, approach the rational assessment of her religious beliefs in light of her spiritual maturity or immaturity? In order to get a running start at these questions, this article begins with a consideration of John Hick’s treatment of both questions.

Hick's moral argument for religious pluralism

Hick is one recent philosopher who has drawn attention to the evidential import of spiritual maturity within religious epistemology.⁵ Indeed, Hick contends that the only available means to evaluate religious truth is the empirical evidence of the transformational effectiveness of religious traditions:

[Each of the great world religions] claims to constitute an effective context within which the transformation of human existence can and does take place from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. How are we to judge such claims? We cannot directly observe the inner spiritual quality of a human relationship to the Real; but we can observe how that relationship, as one's deepest and most pervasive orientation, affects the moral and spiritual quality of a human personality and of a man's or woman's relationship to others. It would seem, then, that we can only assess these salvation-projects insofar as we are able to observe their fruits in human life. The inquiry has to be, in a broad sense, empirical. (Hick (2000), 56)⁶

Hick maintains that a religious tradition's tendency to bring about transformation from self-centredness to other-centredness is pragmatic proof that the religious tradition is accurately aligned with Ultimate Reality (what Hick terms, 'the Real'). And yet, Hick's assessment is that 'all that we can presently arrive at is the cautious and negative conclusion that we have no good reason to believe that any one of the great religious traditions has proved itself to be more productive of love/compassion than another' (*ibid.*, 58). Hick goes on to contend that this apparent lack of moral superiority amongst the adherents of any particular major religion counts against the idea that any of those particular religions are more aligned with religious reality than the others. For Hick there is some expectation that if a particular religion is uniquely true, then the adherents of that religion would stand out in human history as morally superior to the adherents of other religions. Hick, thinking specifically of Christian theism, writes:

the virtues and vices seem to be spread more or less evenly among human beings, regardless of whether they are Christians or . . . Jews, Muslims, Hindus (including Sikhs), or Buddhists. 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 5:22-23), be more evident in Christian than in non-Christian lives? (Hick (1995), 41)

So, for Hick, spiritual transformation counts in favour of the existence of the Real in that the existence of the Real best explains the moral transformation that takes place amongst various world religions.⁷ But since the adherents of any one religion do not stand out as morally superior to others, that fact counts against the unique truthfulness of any particular religious tradition. According to Hick, any religion that maintains that it is uniquely true amongst the world's religions must demonstrate that privileged position in the superiority of its moral fruits. Since, according to Hick's view of things, no one religion stands out in this way, this is a reason to think that there is no one uniquely true religion.

The evidential force of spiritual maturity reconsidered

While there is something to Hick's argument, it wrongly assumes that if a religion promises spiritual maturation and does not deliver, then that counts against the unique truth of that religion. Moral transformation does not track religious truth as tightly as Hick contends. For one, there are other explanations of why a religion might fail to bring about spiritual maturity besides that religion being false. For instance, imagine that a particular religion is true and does have, in principle, greater efficacy in bringing about spiritual transformation, but the way of transformation is extremely rigorous and the adherents of that religion find it difficult to maintain the commitment required for change. While there might be some reason to think a true religion would be morally efficacious, there is no *a priori* reason to think that a true religion would bring about moral progress easily. In this sort of case, the lack of moral superiority does not automatically count against the religion's being true because there is another equally good explanation as to why the religion fails to bring about significant moral change.

But this first consideration suggests an even more serious way in which religious truth and spiritual maturity come apart. For it is easy to imagine a religion that is *ex hypothesi* false but nevertheless brings about significant moral change – perhaps even something that looks like moral superiority. This is because sincere belief in religious propositions of the requisite sort can motivate moral behaviour and the development of virtuous dispositions whether or not those religious propositions are true. For instance, the sincere belief that Allah is always watching me combined with other background beliefs about Allah may strongly motivate behaviour in keeping with Allah whether or not it is the case that Allah is always watching. Or, becoming mindful, in the Buddhist sense, that my seemingly enduring ego is an illusion will diminish anxiety about my future whether or not it is true that my seemingly enduring ego is an illusion. Or, sincere belief that my wrongdoings have been forgiven by God through Jesus' atoning sacrifice can powerfully motivate my forgiveness of others' wrongdoings whether or not it is true that I have been forgiven by God on the basis of Jesus' atonement. So a religion could deliver on promised spiritual maturation and yet be false. Or, to put it differently, the positive moral results of a religious tradition do not necessarily imply the truth of that religion. Indeed, positive moral results of a religion may not have any epistemic import for the rational assessment of that religion since what counts as moral progress can occur by means of natural processes alone. By definition, what might be called *natural* moral formation does not require the existence of any religious realities to bring about moral change.

Natural moral formation and supernatural moral formation

This identification of natural moral formation as an effective means of moral progress throws into question the value of spiritual maturity in

considerations of the rationality of religious belief. The problem is that for any given religion the mechanism of moral change can be comprised of purely natural, non-religiously oriented means, such as: self-effort, reward and punishment, moral education, guilt and shame motivators, the imitation of exemplars, enculturation, the practice of moral behaviours and the subsequent habituation of virtuous dispositions, sociological pressure, and so on. Each of these naturalistic means can help motivate and bring about moral progress within a religion whether or not that religion is true. A particular religion might ground these naturalistic means in a religious story (e.g. God will reward you for doing act *x* and punish you for not doing *x*; Jesus lived a perfect human life and you should imitate his life; Allah is always watching; etc.) and such a sincerely believed narrative might increase the motivational power for naturalistic, moral change. But that, of course, should not ultimately count in favour of the religion being true. It is only necessary that a religious person *believe* in the requisite religious propositions and act in accordance with them in order for moral progress to occur *via* otherwise naturalistic processes.⁸ Any moral progress that takes place on this naturalistic plane can be adequately explained whether or not the religion in question is true. So, then, contra Hick, spiritual maturity has no substantial evidential force when it comes to the epistemic evaluation of religious belief.⁹

But this conclusion is correct only for those religions that appeal solely to naturalistic formational processes along with various religious beliefs and practices that could be used to support such formation. The conclusion is incorrect for those religions that posit what might be called *supernatural* moral formation. Supernatural formation is the notion that there is a non-natural source of power or mechanism of moral change that is in some manner an additive to natural moral formation, the efficacy of which is contingent on that source or mechanism actually existing (see Porter (2012)). It would not be a matter of merely believing in and/or practising as if the mechanism exists, but rather, the only way for the mechanism to function effectively as a moral additive would be if it actually existed. Such a mechanism, if it were real, would increase the power for good in a religious person above and beyond what would occur through sincere belief in the mechanism and/or practising as if the mechanism were true.

Not all religions that posit supernatural realities concerned with moral change advocate supernatural moral formation.¹⁰ For instance, Vedanta Hinduism posits a karmic system of moral retribution whereby persons come to reap the lawlike consequences of their prior actions (Perrett (1998), 64–66). But even if this karmic system were true, the actuality of it would *not* increase the power for good in the devout Vedantic Hindu above and beyond what would occur through sincere belief in the karmic mechanism and/or acting as if the karmic mechanism were true. In other words, Vedantic karma produces moral change by means of a mechanism of natural moral formation – viz. moral formation by means of the expected utility of a certain course of action – and *not* supernatural formation – viz. moral formation by means of interaction with a morally

efficacious supernatural reality. Sincere belief in karma every time one acts would increase one's moral motivation whether or not the world is actually governed by karmic justice. So, any increased level of spiritual maturity amongst adherents to Vedantic karma would not count as evidence for the truth of Vedantic karma since mere belief in karma coupled with principles of natural formation is an adequate explanation of the increase in spiritual maturity.¹¹

This leads to the conclusion that in order for spiritual maturity to have evidential value for evaluating the truth of a religion, the religion must posit a supernatural mechanism of moral change that provides increased power for good above and beyond what would exist from natural formation including sincere belief in the relevant religious propositions and/or consistent action as if the supernatural mechanism were true. This is because once supernatural formation is in play within a religious tradition, there is now reason to expect, all else being equal, a greater degree of moral change in the adherents of that religion than what would be expected given natural formation alone. If the kind and/or degree of spiritual maturity could not be adequately explained by appeal to natural formation alone, then that would provide positive evidence for thinking that the supernatural mechanism exists. It would be akin to driving a car that purportedly has a turbocharger added to the normal powertrain of the car's engine. Once one has an experience of the turbocharger kicking in, that surge of power is confirmatory evidence that the car does indeed have a turbocharger because that kind of power and the speed it creates would not be expected from the normal powertrain of the vehicle. Of course, this analogy presses the problem of the difficulty involved in judging whether or not one's spiritual maturity is actually the product of a purported supernatural mechanism of change. To this problem we now turn.

The evidential force of supernatural moral formation

While it has been argued that the display of spiritual maturity could provide positive epistemic value for a religion that posits a supernatural mechanism of change, the problem arises as to how to ground a religious person's attribution of moral change to a supernatural source. Since naturalistic formation alone will always be available as a competing explanation of moral change and accurate assessment of one's moral life is fraught with difficulties, it seems fairly difficult to demarcate whether the kind and/or degree of spiritual maturity is actually the result of supernatural formation. It would seem, for instance, that the virtue of patience looks and feels the same whether it is produced through natural virtue formation or supernatural virtue formation. While it could be that there is a unique phenomenology to supernatural formation or special circumstances under which the presence of a virtue seems best attributed to supernatural formation, the presence of the supernatural source of the virtue would have to be salient enough to overcome the competing naturalistic explanation of formation. Minus these special features of the formational experience, all that can be said from

the point of view of the religious person experiencing spiritual maturity is that she finds herself with the sort and degree of spiritual maturity that could be both adequately explained by the existence of the supernatural mechanism and/or by natural formational mechanisms. That is to say, while the religious person's moral change is consistent with what would be expected if the purported supernatural mechanism were true, it also seems consistent with what would be expected by natural formation alone. While consistency of one's moral life with the reality of one's religion's purported supernatural mechanism is better than the opposite, given the seeming equal explanatory power of natural formation, such consistency is extremely weak confirmatory evidence. The positive force of the evidence would always be mitigated by the difficulty of assessing whether the maturation in question is actually the result of a supernatural mechanism.¹²

But the evidential force of the *absence* of spiritual maturity would be a different matter. The absence of spiritual maturity one would expect from a religion's purported supernatural mechanism of moral change generates a potential defeater of the justificatory status of one's religious beliefs. If the supposed actuality of a religion's supernatural mechanism of moral change leads one to expect spiritual maturity of a certain kind and degree and that maturity is not forthcoming for a sincere adherent of that religion, then that would need to be explained. One relevant explanation would be that the supposed supernatural mechanism does not exist. While there is a ready-made competing explanation for positive moral change (i.e. natural formation) there is not a ready-made alternative explanation for the lack of moral change. An explanation like *akrasia*, for instance, would be inadequate as the moral formational process is purported to be a supernatural one that runs independently, at least in principle, of naturalistic formation. Without some other explanation of a purported supernatural mechanism's inability to bring about the expected moral change, the absence of change would stand as a potential, partial defeater of one's justificatory status. This shows that, *prima facie*, the absence of expected spiritual maturity has greater evidential force than the presence of expected spiritual maturity given the initial explanatory frameworks in which maturity and immaturity occur.

All of this to say, it is not the case that spiritual maturity has evidential force *per se*, but rather the evidential force of spiritual maturity is sensitive to the sorts of mechanisms of change (natural or supernatural) with which a religious believer takes himself to be engaged as well as the availability of competing explanations for the presence or absence of spiritual maturity. Only those religions that posit supernatural mechanisms of change will be rationally assessable on the basis of the presence or absence of spiritual maturity. But since the presence of spiritual maturity is susceptible to explanation by natural formation alone, in the usual case the most that can be claimed in terms of positive evidence is that one's moral life is consistent with what would be expected if the supernatural mechanism actually exists. A lack of anticipated spiritual maturity is a different matter in that such a lack presents an inconsistency with what would be expected if the

supernatural mechanism actually exists. This inconsistency requires an explanation.

Christian sanctification and the evidential force of spiritual maturity

One important point that falls out of this discussion is that the evidential force of spiritual maturity must ultimately be assessed within the contours of a particular religion with a firm grasp on the sort of moral formational process envisaged by that religion. Some religions do not posit a supernatural mechanism of moral change and so those religions are not susceptible to the sort of rational evaluation envisioned above. Other religions, such as Christianity, do maintain a supernatural mechanism.

Indeed, the Christian tradition maintains that the third person of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit – indwells Christians and has the primary function of bringing about a positive moral influence on the Christian’s attitudes, character traits, and behaviour. As Hick noted above, according to the book of Galatians, ‘the fruit [or result] of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control’ (Gal. 5:22). This is *supernatural* moral formation because, by definition, this formation happens *via* an agency or power that is beyond the natural. Formation by the Holy Spirit is neither strictly opposed to nor indifferent to natural formation, but it is meant to be an additive to what can be accomplished by natural processes alone. The Spirit is meant to function as a moral-formational agent within the motivational centre of the Christian’s life. Moreover, the Spirit is meant to do that by means of his actual presence, not mere sincere belief in his presence and/or acting as if one is indwelt with such person. So, unlike the case of karma, if the Holy Spirit is actually indwelling the Christian, there is a greater degree of change to be expected. Sincere belief in and practice aligned with the presence of the Spirit plus the actuality of the Spirit should bring about greater maturation than sincere belief and practice alone. This is because the referent of the sincere belief in the case of Christianity is not simply a reinforcement of naturalistically formed moral motivators but is posited as an additional source of formational power. The Christian claim is that if Christians are not availing themselves of the Spirit’s empowering presence, then they are living by mere natural human powers alone, which is a morally inferior existence (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:4).

While the type of spiritual formation envisioned within the Christian tradition can be described in various ways, one plausible picture includes a significant increase in qualitatively good attitudinal states (e.g. joy, peace, contentment, etc.) that psychologically ground virtuous character-traits (e.g. love, patience, compassion, kindness, etc.) as well as morally good behaviours flowing from those character-traits (e.g. service to others, generous deeds, kind words, honesty, etc.). There is in Christianity a crucial emphasis on the alignment of the inner moral life of a person (attitudes and dispositions) with the outer moral

life (behaviours). This emphasis can be located in Jesus' teaching as recorded in the Gospels in which he emphasized the interconnection between a morally good inner life (the good tree; abiding in the vine; cleaning the inside of the cup) leading to a morally good outer life (the good tree produces good fruit; abiding in the vine bears much fruit; cleaning the inside of the cup cleans the outside also) (see Matthew 7, John 15, and Matthew 23). Without getting into a full discussion of the moral content that Christianity commends to the Christ-follower, we can present the following sort of picture: the maturing Christian is right to expect an attitudinal state of increasing joy, peace, contentment, and the like that helps foster dispositions to be loving, patient, compassionate, kind, and so on that in turn motivate consistent acts of service, honesty, enemy love, and the like.

In order to bring about this rather idealized picture of human moral life, Christianity posits a supernatural mechanism of moral change of the highest order – the Spirit of God's morally perfect, transformational presence. Since the Spirit inhabits all Christians and in so doing brings about immediate, minimal moral transformation (the theological notion of regeneration) which is meant to progress over the course of a Christian's life (the theological notion of sanctification), it does not appear at first glance that the Spirit would be difficult to access as a mechanism of moral change. So, one might reasonably expect given this Christian view of things that being inhabited by the Spirit of a morally perfect God would make a morally significant difference in one's life.

Since Christianity posits such a supernatural mechanism of change, if a Christian person experiences the kind and degree of spiritual maturity described above, then such spiritual maturity would be consistent with what one would expect if the purported supernatural mechanism were indeed real and would thereby provide the type of weak confirmatory evidence for the person in question previously discussed. Again, the difficulty of achieving more significant evidential value has to do with the problem of confidently attributing one's own maturity to the result of the supernatural mechanism rather than explanatorily equal natural mechanisms. As was mentioned previously, there could be a unique phenomenology or circumstances under which the maturation occurred that would bring about stronger positive evidence. For instance, Paul Moser maintains that the Spirit's transformational work involves a direct, experiential awareness of and volitional struggle with the Spirit of God the phenomenology of which grounds the claim that the maturation is indeed the working of the Spirit and not the result of natural formation.¹³ But minus these sorts of special features, the experience of spiritual maturity of the kind and degree predicted within Christianity only offers a slight bump in justificatory status for the person in question.

But perhaps it goes without saying that many Christians do not claim to have such a rich experience of spiritual maturation. It is not simply that they make no claim to have attained a morally superior existence; it's that their attitudes, character-traits, and behaviours fall far short of the idealized description of the

Christian moral life considered above. It may be that the vast majority of Christians would report fairly meagre and inconsistent degrees of spiritual maturation. Whatever the actual percentages, it is immensely plausible that at least some Christians do not find in their own moral experience the kind and degree of spiritual maturity that they themselves would expect given the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit. For these Christians, the lack of spiritual maturity stands as a defeater that potentially undermines some of the justification of their religious beliefs. Furthermore, presumably many persons do not recognize in the Christians they know such a heightened level of moral goodness. It would be reasonable for such persons to wonder, knowing of the sort of moral change that Christianity predicts, how it is that the Christians they know who fail to exhibit such change respond to this challenge to the reasonableness of their faith.

Perhaps initially it seems that the intellectually honest move is for Christians who are languishing in their moral growth to admit the force of this potential defeater and reassess the rationality of their faith on that basis. But as discussed in response to Hick, this should only be done once other explanations of one's spiritual immaturity have been considered. If there were a plausible explanation of one's lack of spiritual change that is consistent with the actuality of the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, then this explanation would serve as a defeater-defeater. But casting about for such an explanation might look a bit intellectually suspicious on the part of the morally languishing Christian. It might appear that the Christian is involved in special pleading (or self-deception) whereby he develops an *ad hoc* alternative explanation that insulates his evidential base from the threat of partial defeat. The only resolution to this predicament is for the Christian to provide an alternative explanation for his lack of change that is not *ad hoc*. Does the Christian have such an alternative explanation of his lack of spiritual maturity?

The moral-formatinal work of the Spirit and human resistance

It seems that the answer to this question depends on the Christian account of how it is that the Spirit of God changes Christians. It is important to point out that by far the consensual Christian view is that the Spirit's moral-formatinal work is not instantaneous or guaranteed. For example, the Christian theologian I. Howard Marshall writes:

Just as sin can control people and make people to do wrong, so also the Spirit can control people and make them do what is right and good . . . Despite all this believers still sin – as they know from personal experience! So what is wrong? Evidently the control of the Spirit is not automatic. (Marshall (2004), 322)

Evidently so. But the mere theological assertion that the Spirit's sanctifying work is not automatic will be unsatisfactory to the Christian who is sensitive to the evidential force of his or her lack of spiritual maturity. For that matter, if the Spirit of God

is in the business of controlling people and making them do what is right and good, as Marshall suggests, then why wouldn't the Spirit's work be automatic? An explanation is surely in order.

It will be helpful to distinguish at least two accounts of how it is that the Spirit sanctifies Christians. William Alston, in an article entitled 'The Indwelling of the Spirit', has dubbed one account of the Spirit's moral-formational work the 'fiat model' (Alston (1988)). On this view, the Spirit of God forms human character instantaneously by direct command. Alston puts the view this way:

changes result from God's simply effecting them directly by exercise of his omnipotence, without in any way going through natural psychological or social processes, and without in any way evoking a response from the creature in order to carry this out. God just decides that one of my tendencies shall be weakened and another strengthened, and Presto! It is done. (*ibid.*, 126)

Spiritual change, on this view, is directly caused by divine power exercised on the person that instantaneously turns, for example, anxiety into peace, fear into joy, pride into humility, a desire to lie into a desire to tell the truth, and so on.

While Alston canvasses various theological and conceptual problems with the fiat model, the most salient worry for our purposes is that this model does not provide an explanation of why maturation is not automatic. If God's choice to immediately intervene in a Christian's life is a sufficient condition for spiritual change, it is difficult to understand why a good God would withhold spiritual maturity given the great good that full-blown maturity would be both for the person in question as well as for others. If the fiat model is the correct account of the Spirit's moral-formational work, then any lack of full-blown spiritual maturity on the part of Christians would count against the reality of the Spirit's moral-formational work.

Of course, there could be another necessary condition that must be met on the human side in order for God to do his instantaneous, fiat work. The claim could then be made that because this condition often goes unmet by humans, sanctification is slow in coming. But the problem is to come up with a human act that it would make sense for God to condition his instantaneous transformation upon. For one, God's sanctifying work is, at least on some accounts, not the result of meritorious works. But more significantly, it looks like any suggested condition will be precisely the sort of behaviour, character trait, or mental state that God could change by fiat. For instance, some candidates for the unmet condition might be engagement in prescribed spiritual practices, or greater faith in God, or certain good works, or believing certain truths about God. But, if God is in the business of moral formation by fiat, it is difficult to understand why he would not cause to arise, by fiat, the human condition that would bring about his instantaneous work.

Consider the following example. Let us imagine that God brings about moral change by fiat but conditions his fiat interventions on human participation in the Eucharist (or a certain form of prayer, or a certain set of beliefs, etc.). Let us

further imagine that God has certain good reasons for wanting Christians to participate in the Eucharist as a condition of change even though the Eucharist does not have transformational effects in and of itself.¹⁴ Once Christians know what the condition is (presumably God would inform them of this), two possibilities arise: (1) Christians would regularly engage the Eucharist and transformation by fiat would follow; or (2) Christians would not engage the Eucharist as often as they should or in the right manner due to their spiritual immaturity and, therefore, transformation would be meagre. If (1), then we have no explanation why spiritual formation is slow in coming even for those who regularly participate in the Eucharist, and yet, it is plausible to assume that many Christians consistently take part in the prescribed activities of the Christian faith and nevertheless find spiritual maturation slow in coming. If (2) is the case, then we have an explanation why spiritual formation is slow in coming, but we do not have any explanation why God would not transform by fiat the spiritual immaturity of Christians so that they would participate in the Eucharist more regularly or with the right sort of attitude and so on. So, while there might be a necessary human condition that must be met in order for God to bring about transformation by his direct command, it is dubious as to that condition being of the sort that would not itself be subject to change by fiat, which just backs our question up a level.¹⁵ The problem remains that the fiat model does not explain why sanctification would not move along quite rapidly.

A second take on the mode of the Spirit's moral-formational work is what Alston refers to as the interpersonal model.¹⁶ Alston describes this model as follows:

God could make new resources available to the individual, new resources of strength of will, of energy for perseverance in the face of discouragement, of inner strength that enable one to avoid dependence on the approval of one's associates. In these and other ways God would be seeking to *influence* the individual in the direction of holiness without stepping in and directly producing such a character by fiat. By proceeding in this more indirect fashion God would be relating himself to the human person as a person, influencing the human being as one person influences another (albeit making use of some of his extraordinary powers in doing so), seeking to evoke responses, voluntary and otherwise from the other person, somewhat as each of us seeks to evoke responses from each other. (Alston (1988), 132)

On this view, what brings about moral formation is God's actual relational presence within the human person. Again, the idea is *not* that the Christian merely believes or acts as if God is relationally present. Rather, the Christian has interpersonal contact – real communion or union – with the empowering presence of God by means of the Holy Spirit. By 'interpersonal contact' it is meant that the person of the Spirit has direct access to the Christian's thoughts, attitudes, emotional states, beliefs, desires, etc. and the Spirit can influence the Christian's mental life with the Spirit's own thoughts, attitudes, emotional states, beliefs, desires, and the like. This interpersonal contact can occur, for the Christian, at the level of conscious awareness of the Spirit's presence as well as at a preconscious or unconscious level such that the Christian person is subjectively unaware of the psycho-moral influence of

the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ It is also important to note that, like any other interpersonal relationship, the relational influence of the Spirit can be received or resisted by the Christian such that the relational influence of the Spirit comes in degrees depending on the receptivity of the individual Christian. Just as one person can resist another person's expression of care or love by distracting one's self from what was communicated or devaluing what was communicated or explaining away what was communicated or in some other way distrusting what was communicated such that the psychological impact of that expression of care or love is not felt, so too the Christian can distract, devalue, explain away, or distrust the potentially moral-formational meaning brought to bear upon the human mind by the Spirit.¹⁸

While there are various ways in which interpersonal contact of the sort described can be thought to bring about moral change, one way of conceiving of it is to think about how this kind of companionship with a God of love, care, power, wisdom, and the like would impact a person who is increasingly receptive to it. For example, given that a lack of generosity often occurs because one is preoccupied with self-protection, a growing receptivity to the reality of God's love, acceptance, and care can loosen the tentacles of self-protection and propel one outward in generosity. It is important to remember that this is not just growing receptivity to the thought or belief that God loves, accepts, and cares but it is the actual psychological experience (either at the level of conscious awareness or below the threshold of conscious awareness) of being loved, accepted, and cared for by him. Or consider the experience of intense worry about a financial matter that is outside one's control and the resultant self-absorption, unjustified blaming, and impatience towards others who are involved in the situation. Again, increasing receptivity to the faithful care and companionship of God within that situation will lessen the feeling of anxiety and free one up from the self-absorption, blaming, and impatience. We might say to ourselves in such situations, 'Calm down. It will work out, it will work out.' Of course, this is either wishful thinking or a reasonable extrapolation from past experience or a bit of both. That sort of self-talk can be soothing. But with the presence of the Spirit of God there is available to the Christian, it is purported, the authoritative voice of the one who knows best and loves perfectly impressing on one's mind, 'Calm down. It will work out, it will work out.' To receive *that* sort of meaning would be to receive care from a supremely competent other in the midst of an unsettling circumstance. Such reception of care would be soothing in a manner that is far greater than our own self-talk or even the comforting words of a friend who does not possess the resources and perspective on the situation that would be true of God. Once the Christian's anxiety is decreased in this sort of way, there will be an experience of peace and contentment in the midst of the difficult circumstance that would allow one to respond to others with patience and kindness (see Porter (2012)).

The point here is that moral change through the empowering presence of the Spirit is an interpersonal process and what does the formational work is an

actual relational exchange with the Spirit of God. According to the interpersonal model, it is the qualitative nature of the Spirit's presence – his love, competent care, acceptance, loyalty, constant companionship, etc. – that, when received, brings about change in one's attitudes, emotions, and related dispositions. The Christian literally has more moral strength *via* receptivity to the Spirit that enables him or her to be disposed to feel and act in a more virtuous manner.¹⁹

So, on the interpersonal model of the Spirit's moral-formational work, a more complete picture is provided of how it is that a supernatural additive to moral formation is available to the Christian such that it is reasonable to expect that the Christian would exhibit an increasing degree of spiritual maturity. And yet, with that more complete picture emerges a built-in explanation of why spiritual maturity might often be slow in coming and, perhaps, in the end, rather meagre. Because spiritual maturation, on this view, is brought about by human receptivity to God's empowering presence and since a perfectly loving being will not coerce a person to receive the fullness of his moral-formational presence, human resistance to the empowering presence of God will stand as a barrier to change. As discussed above, resistance is a matter of choices and ingrained tendencies to rely on one's own autonomous resources rather than reliance upon the resources of God's Spirit. There are various ways to distrust the Spirit's empowering presence and thereby to be habitually dependent on one's own schemes rather than God's provision. Just as a person can remain deeply habituated to meet his own emotional and relational needs even when friends or family are there for support, there can be a deeply entrenched orientation of the Christian's mind and will towards reliance on one's own ability to manage human life apart from God's help. Indeed, much more could be said about the Christian view of the habituated stubbornness of humans to relinquish control of their lives to God and therefore the ongoing struggle to develop a more thoroughgoing trust in God.²⁰

Since, on the interpersonal model, it is maintained that (i) the Spirit morally influences human persons through his empowering presence, (ii) the Spirit respects human resistance to his empowering presence, and (iii) human resistance will be for various reasons incredibly persistent, such a view offers a sensible explanation of why the empowering presence of the Spirit will not engender the high degree of spiritual maturity initially expected. Furthermore, as long as Christians have good theological and experiential reasons to believe in an interpersonal model of the Spirit's sanctifying work, the explanation of the lack of moral change by appeal to one's resistance to the empowering presence of the Spirit is not *ad hoc*. Maturation that ebbs and flows, flat lines and declines, along with occasional surges forward, is what this model of the Spirit's work predicts. In fact, as it turns out, this middling pattern of moral change, perhaps coupled with an experience of volitional struggle with the Spirit, turns out to be the sort of pattern of spiritual maturation that it would be reasonable to expect from the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit within Christian life. Therefore, the

absence of spiritual maturity will not, on this way of viewing things, constitute a defeater of the Christian's justification for her religious beliefs.²¹

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been argued that the evidential force of spiritual maturity is ultimately only applicable to religions that posit a supernatural mechanism of moral change. In such a case, the presence of spiritual maturity provides weak confirmatory evidence for the rationality of one's religious beliefs since one's spiritual maturity is consistent with the reality of a supernatural mechanism of moral change but can also be (at least in many cases) equally explained by natural formational principles. Alternatively, the absence of spiritual maturity provides a potential partial defeater of the rationality of one's religious beliefs to the degree that the falsity of one's religion is the best explanation of one's lack of maturation. When it comes to Christian theism, it has been maintained that the Spirit of God is a supernatural mechanism of moral change that would be expected to bring about a high degree of spiritual maturation through his empowering presence but that such spiritual maturity could often be equally explained by natural formation such that a Christian's experience of such spiritual maturity provides weak confirmatory evidence in favour of her Christian beliefs. Alternatively, the absence of spiritual maturity for the Christian serves as a potential defeater of the rationality of the Christian's religious beliefs unless there is some alternative non-*ad hoc* explanation of the absence of spiritual maturity. It has been argued that on an interpersonal model of the Spirit's moral-formational work, there is a non-*ad hoc* explanation of the absence of spiritual maturity due to the Spirit's commitment to non-coercively form Christians and the plausible claim that Christians often exhibit deeply entrenched resistance to the Spirit's moral-formational work.²²

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Notes

1. For example, Richard Swinburne defines religious experience as 'an experience which seems (epistemically) to the subject to be an experience of God (either of his just being there, or doing or bringing about something) or some other supernatural thing' (Swinburne (1992), 246). See also, Alston (1991).
2. There are, of course, a variety of views on how religious experience should factor into the rational justification of religious belief. For instance, some philosophers (e.g. Plantinga (2000) and Alston (1991)) consider religious experience as having some sort of immediate/basic justification (or warrant) of religious belief, while others (e.g. Swinburne (1992) and Franks-Davis (1989)) see religious experience as part of a cumulative case argument that increases the likelihood/probability of certain religious beliefs being true. On the view I have in mind, a religious believer understands herself to be rationally justified in believing certain religious propositions, perhaps partly due to her perception-like religious experience, and then considers her spiritual maturation in light of her positive justificatory status. In this way, spiritual maturity might strengthen or weaken her justification for belief. While there are more formal ways of considering this evidentiary role, understanding it as an inference to the best explanation offers an intuitive (and, perhaps, common) way to consider such evidence.
3. For instance, the Quran states, 'Establish regular prayer: for prayer restrains from shameful and evil deeds' (29:45).
4. While the discussion that follows has implications for the assessment of religious truth from the perspective of persons outside the religion in question, I will focus my attention on the assessment of religious truth from the perspective of adherents of the religion in question. This is due to the fact that there are various difficulties in assessing from the outside some other person or persons' spiritual maturity. But, more importantly, to my mind, there is real import for religious believers when it comes to the potential defeat of their rational justification from the lack of perceived spiritual maturity in the believer's life.
5. Hick puts this argument forward in various places. For instance, Hick, (1985), 67–87; *Idem* (1995); *Idem* (2000); *Idem* (2005), 299–303, 307–314.
6. Hick writes elsewhere:

The test of the veridical character of such an experience must thus be the test of the larger religious totality which has been built around it. And such a test can only be pragmatic: is this complex of religious experience, belief and behavior soteriologically effective? Does it make possible the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness? This is an empirical rather than a rational test . . . The test is whether these visions lead to the better, and ultimately limitlessly better, quality of existence which they promise. (Hick (1985), 80, 81)

7. In one place, Hick puts the point as follows:

And it seems that each of these varying ways of thinking-and-experiencing the Real has been able to mediate its transforming presence to human life. For the different major concepts of the ultimate do not seem – so far as we can tell – to result in one religious totality being soteriologically more effective than another. (Hick (2000), 61; cf. 64)

8. ‘Naturalistic’ is here being used in the sense that there is no explicit reliance on the *supernatural* in the process of moral formation.
9. Of course, all else being equal, the presence of spiritual maturity within a religion that predicts the presence spiritual maturity does increase the probability of that religion being true. It is just that the positive force of such justification is reduced to mere coherence once it is realized that the maturity in question is equally explicable through natural formational mechanisms alone. It should be noted that this conclusion leaves open the possibility of a moral argument for God’s existence in that it can be argued that even naturalistic moral facts and moral progress are best understood within theism.
10. To be clear, supernatural formation involves a non-natural mechanism of change that might be agent-like or non-agent-like (e.g. non-natural values or a cosmic force).
11. This is not to say that Vedanta does not posit a supernatural mechanism of change of some sort. Rather, it is just to provide one example (*viz.* karma) of a religious mechanism of change that would motivate moral ends whether or not the religious claims are in fact true (*i.e.* natural formation).
12. One possibility is that a religion could predict a unique kind of spiritual maturity that would be difficult to explain via natural-formational mechanisms. For instance, the love of God and enemies to the extent of martyrdom (if needed) might very well be best explained by the existence of a purported supernatural mechanism as opposed to natural mechanisms. While cases of this sort of moral change deserve special consideration, the argument of this article remains focused on the evidential force of more commonplace and generally available morally good acts, traits, and attitudes in that it is often the presence or absence of these sorts of moral fruits that is thought to be evidentially salient. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this important point to my attention.
13. See Moser (2010), 196–200. Moser takes the evidence from spiritual maturity to be direct, experiential acquaintance with the Spirit of God’s volitional pressure on the human person to love perfectly. So, for Moser, the evidence immediately grounds one’s knowledge of God himself, while on the view I am developing the evidence of spiritual change is considered independently of any sort of direct awareness of the Spirit of God bringing about that change. While I am sympathetic with Moser’s point of view, the project of this article is to evaluate the evidential force of spiritual maturity absent the sort of direct awareness of God’s Spirit that Moser countenances. Even if Moser’s account is correct, considering the evidential force of spiritual maturity absent the direct awareness of the Spirit is worthwhile for two reasons. First, there are two distinct phenomena that can be epistemologically evaluated: (i) awareness of the transforming Spirit and (ii) awareness of moral change. Second, it is plausible to suppose that at least some Christians are aware of (ii) and unaware of (i).
14. Never mind that this seems to place God in the position of asking his children to engage in behaviours as if they made a difference to one’s growth even though they have no intrinsic connection to growth, which is akin to a parent asking a child to take her medicine even though the parent has the power to make the child’s tummy feel better even if the child doesn’t take her medicine.
15. Maybe there are good acts that God desires Christians to do that fall short of merit but nonetheless are conditions upon which he initiates his immediate transformation of their characters. What if, for instance, God wants Christians to do their best *vis-à-vis* natural formation, and if they meet this bar, he tops off their natural formation with immediate supernatural transformation by fiat? One might think that God wants Christians to make some changes on their own – he doesn’t want to do it all for them. But such a consideration seems to run contrary to the spirit of the fiat model. That is, if God sees no great loss in doing substantial moral transformation immediately without the moral self-effort of Christians, why would he require minimal, moral self-effort as a condition of his immediate work?
16. Alston (1988) distinguishes the interpersonal model from what he terms the ‘sharing model’, but since the two views are not mutually exclusive, I combine them here under the term ‘interpersonal model’. For Alston the sharing model of the Spirit’s transformational work turns out to be a ‘more internal sort of interpersonal relationship’ (*ibid.*, 138). See *ibid.*, 137–140, 144. Though I should say that Alston stresses a

mode of the Spirit's moral influence that does not play a central part in the view of the Spirit's work I present here. Alston stresses a mode of influence whereby God makes the Christian aware of God's own moral attitudes and tendencies and in so doing provides 'in a specially vivid and intimate way' a moral role model to the Christian (*ibid.*, 146). Alston writes, 'the actual changes in the individual's own motivational structure come from responses, voluntary and involuntary, to these models' (*ibid.*). While I am open to the notion that the Spirit does work in this way, the problem with putting this mode of influence in the front of the line is that it can easily reduce Christian supernatural formation to naturalistic formation. That is, the actual formational mechanism is self-effort to behave like the moral exemplar. This picture of formation does not do justice to the Christian notion that the Spirit of God brings about characterological transformation.

17. There are analogues to this in human-to-human interpersonal relationships. For example, while I am not occurrently aware of my wife's recent expression of care for me, I may nevertheless be in an improved emotional state because of her recent expression of care. Even though I am not consciously thinking of her care for me, someone might ask me why I am in such a good mood, and upon reflection I realize that it is due to my wife's recent expression of care. It seems sensible to suppose that I was subconsciously experiencing the influence of her care even though I was not consciously considering her care. Some schools of psychology refer to the ongoing psychological impact of past relational interactions as internalized relationships or implicit relational representations. See, for instance, Lyons-Ruth (1998).
18. There is a question here, of course, of how an immaterial, divine mind can bring meaning to bear upon a human mind. At least, on the surface, as long as it is allowed that the Spirit has personal agency, generates meaning, and has direct access to a person's mind, it does not seem insuperable that the Spirit of God could bring his own meaning to bear on another mind. This would not have to be conceived of as audible, verbal communication, but rather could be understood as analogous to how one person can come to have a thought about what another person thinks or feels about some state of affairs even without having audibly heard that person communicate what they think or feel. For instance, I might have the thought that my wife loves me even if my wife has not said as much. In this case I am most likely inferring my interpretation of how my wife regards me from various strands of evidence, but how the thought arises is irrelevant to the basic point that one can develop a conscious grasp of another's meaning without that person having said anything at all. For a more complete discussion of how this can occur, see Willard (1999).
19. This view of moral formation places a premium on how the lack of virtue is ultimately rooted in loneliness, emptiness, insecurity, anxiety, fear, and the like that can be resolved through being loved, accepted, and cared for by a competent and consistent other.
20. Moser (2013, 91–94) refers to this struggle as a Gethsemane-like experience in which the Christian is confronted by God to trust in God's perfect will above and beyond their own will. Since Christians are not always consciously aware of resisting the Spirit, such a struggle cannot always serve as directly available evidence for God's existence. In the meantime, Christians might see their lack of growth as a potential defeater. In this vein, the theologian Abraham Kuyper offers a helpful description of the Christian's resistance to the Spirit and the Spirit's response (Kuyper (1979), 529–530).
21. While the slowness of change can be explained, it cannot be excused. The Christian remains morally culpable to do what he can to let down his resistance to the Spirit. God is also, of course, at work. Eleonore Stump (2012, 375–417) has pointed out the significance of God's allowance of suffering as a means of removing obstacles to union with God.
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