

# Losing My Religion: Spiritual Discouragement amongst Christian Therapists due to Spiritual Immaturity in Christian Clients

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This paper addresses the spiritual discouragement and religious doubt that can arise in the Christian therapist who repeatedly experiences spiritual immaturity and crisis amongst his or her Christian clients. While Christians certainly aren't perfect, they often fall so far short of that ideal that one can reasonably wonder whether the Christian faith possesses resources that effectively bring about positive growth and change. We contend that witnessing repeated spiritual immaturity, failure, and related crises amongst Christian clients can bring about intrapersonal spiritual struggle for the Christian therapist of those clients. In response to this problem, a religious orienting system is proposed that includes both epistemological and theological features that aid the Christian therapist in navigating the disillusionment and disorientation that can occur from repeat exposure to spiritual immaturity amongst Christian clients.

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*Consider this, the hint of the century. Consider this, the slip that brought me to my knees, failed.*

—R.E.M., "Losing My Religion"

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## Introduction

Christians believe in a God of hope, redemption, healing, and change. "Come unto me," Jesus says, "and you will find *rest* for your souls...for my way is *easy* and my burden is *light*" (Matt. 11:28–29). Or consider Paul, who writes, "For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity...so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification" (Rom. 6:19). Christian psychotherapists often have front-row seats for these stories of redemption, healing, and change, and with that comes great blessing and encouragement. Alternatively, and often concurrently, Christian therapists often have front-row seats for stories of failure, betrayal, cruelty, and despair, and with that can come discouragement. While Christians are realists about sin and the deep brokenness of the world, the overall trajectory of the Christian story is one of rescue and deliverance—and not just in the age to come, but even in the here and now (e.g., Willard, 1998).

And yet, perhaps more often than not, the psychotherapist's office is the scene more of despair and brokenness than rescue and deliverance, especially at the time of intake. Indeed, Christian psychotherapists are often repeatedly exposed through their Christian clients to the worst of the Christian community, leaving the therapist to reasonably wonder how much rescue and deliverance actually exists within the Christian community. Therapists regularly deal with cases of moral failure, hypocrisy, abuse, abandonment, addiction, and other forms of intrapsychic, interpersonal, and spiritual distress that can seem out of step with the Christian narrative of redemption. While some

of these clients might be less mature believers, others have spent decades in the faith, including pastors, missionaries, church leaders, and their family members. It makes sense that repeated exposure to these sorts of crises amongst Christian clients can lead to spiritual discouragement, disorientation, and disillusionment amongst Christian therapists.

Within the research literature, much has been written on the potential ill-effects of therapeutic work as it applies to the therapist. Burnout, for example, is often associated with feelings of hopelessness and low vocational self-efficacy (Craig & Sprang, 2010) and is quite prevalent in helping professions (Maslach & Jackson, 1984). Another related term, secondary traumatic stress, refers to the potential of individuals indirectly exposed to traumatic material (e.g., therapists listening to the trauma narratives of their clients) going on to develop trauma symptoms of their own (Bride, Robinson, Yegidis, & Figley, 2004; Wang, Strosky, & Fletes, 2014). Yet another related term, vicarious trauma, makes reference to the more pervasive and cumulative effects of indirect exposure to trauma over time, such as potential long-term modifications to an individual's way of experiencing themselves, others, and the world (Newell & MacNeil, 2010; Trippany, White, & Wilcoxon, 2004), along with the many negative beliefs (e.g., concerning one's safety, power, control, and self-esteem) that may accompany these changes (Elwood, Mott, Lohr, & Galovski, 2011).

While these factors are certainly in play for Christian therapists, we are not focusing here on matters such as burnout, secondary traumatic stress, or vicarious traumatization, but rather a way in which the Christian therapist's own faith is uniquely vulnerable to the spiritual struggles of their Christian clients. In particular, we want to draw attention to a form of "intrapersonal spiritual struggle" (Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005; Exline, 2002) that can arise for the Christian therapist through repeated exposure to Christian clients in spiritual crisis. More specifically, this paper argues that over the course of providing therapy to Christian clients in various forms of spiritual crisis, the Christian therapist appears uniquely vulnerable to an eroding confidence in the truth and efficacy of Christian resources for healing and growth. This is because a real and looming question can tend to arise in the mind of the Christian therapist as to how it can be the case that Christian claims regarding salvation and sanctification are true while many well-established and well-intentioned Christians have seemingly made such little progress when it comes to healing and change.

This way of putting things suggests that, at least in part, the Christian therapist is vulnerable to religious doubt. Dein (2013) defines religious doubt as "a feeling of uncertainty toward, and a questioning of, religious teachings and beliefs. It is not the same as unbelief or ambivalence. Unbelief is a rejecting state while doubt is a hesitant reaction, a temporary and divided state of mind created 'by the collision of evidence with prior belief or one belief with another' (Allport, 1957, p. 100)" (p. 201–202). For the Christian therapist, there can be a collision of the evidence of the Christian persons in their waiting rooms against the prior belief that Christianity is true. If "they will know we are Christians by our love for another," the Christian therapist might reasonably wonder, "what has gone wrong?"

The focus of this paper, then, is on an explanation for spiritual immaturity given the truth of Christianity. We are not attempting to provide an explanation of the occurrence of pain and evil given the goodness and power of God (Hall & Johnson, 2001). While having a religious orienting system from which to integrate the occurrence of pain and evil with the existence of a good and loving God is crucially important for the Christian psychotherapist, we are focusing attention on the sort of pain and suffering amongst Christians that is of the type that one might reasonably think should be taken care of if Christian claims regarding growth and change are true. The question here is not "why is there pain and evil if God exists?" or "why is there so much pain and evil if God exists?" but rather, "why is there so much spiritual immaturity amongst Christians if Jesus is Lord and the Spirit has been sent?"

In order to clarify what we mean by "spiritual immaturity," consider what we would *not* see in the psychotherapist's office if something like the following regularly took place amongst Christ-followers:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ...Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality...jealousy, fits of anger,...envy, drunkenness...But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:16, 22–23).

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness...In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the

new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator (Col. 3:5, 7–11).

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life... But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matt. 6:25, 33).

Biblical passages, like these, put forward a way of life in Christ by his Spirit that leads gradually towards the diminishment of fear and anxiety, the emergence of peace and joy, and the resultant putting off of vices and putting on of virtues. Moreover, passages such as these can be easily multiplied (e.g., 2 Pet. 1; Phil. 3; Eph. 3; Rom. 8; etc.). And it is just these sorts of passages and the views of sanctification to which they tend to give rise that would, if true, seemingly clear out many private practices of Christian psychotherapists. As one Christian therapist said to us recently, “Sadly, it’s the church that keeps me in business.” But how can this be the case if Christians have unique relational access to the God of the universe and are indwelt by his sanctifying Holy Spirit?

This paper is intended to be a source of encouragement to those Christian psychotherapists who find themselves to varying degrees discouraged in their faith by the overwhelming needs, problems, and deficiencies within the Christian community as experienced through their Christian clients. In particular, we aim to address the question: how can Christianity be true and yet many long-standing Christians fail to consistently live out the truth of it in their actual lives? We begin by outlining the ways in which Christian therapists are uniquely vulnerable to doubts about the truth and efficacy of Christian growth. We then draw on discussions in religious epistemology and Christian theology in order to develop an epistemological-theological explanatory framework (or religious orienting system) of how it could be the case that there can be widespread and prominent spiritual immaturity amongst Christians while, at the same time, Christian claims regarding growth and healing are true. This epistemological-theological framework is meant to assist the Christian therapist in maintaining a healthy confidence in the truth of Christianity, even in the face of frequent exposure to spiritual crisis on the part of her or his clients.

### The Precarious Situation of the Christian Psychotherapist

When it comes to maintaining a confident faith in the truth and efficacy of Christian growth, Christian psychotherapists appear to be in a peculiarly precari-

ous situation. For one, all psychotherapists, whether Christian or not, often bear witness to more than their fair share of humanity’s pain and evil. Akin to other first-responders (e.g., ER nurses, social workers, etc.), psychotherapists regularly encounter in their clients’ lives both moral evil (e.g., abuse, betrayal, cruelty, neglect, self-harm, injustice, etc.) as well as natural evil (e.g., mental illness, terminal illness, chronic pain, traumatic death, horrific accidents, etc.). In many respects the therapist’s role is much more difficult than the role of the medical or social worker, for the psychotherapist is not there, for example, to lessen the pain with a morphine drip or assist one in moving to a safer location. Much more helplessly, and therefore vulnerably, the psychotherapist is called to enter into the pain of the other, to sit in the other’s ashes. In his book, *Lament for a Son*, Nicholas Wolterstorff (1987) recounts his grief over the death of his son in a mountain climbing accident. Wolterstorff (1987) writes:

Don’t say it’s not really so bad. Because it is. Death is awful, demonic. If you think your task as comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it’s not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief but place yourself off in the distance away from me. Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench (p. 34).

Psychotherapists are not exposed to pain and evil “off in the distance;” they “have to come close,” and in coming close therapists open themselves emotionally to the pain of their clients and, in some manner, the evil from which it originated.

Moreover, for Christian therapists who see Christian clients, there can be the additional complication of exposure to pain and evil that at least partly involves spiritual immaturity on the part of Christians (either the client themselves or other believers they come into contact with). For instance, it is horrific enough to be exposed to the child who has suffered abuse, but this horror is compounded for the person of faith when the abuse occurs at the hands of a longstanding, trusted person within one’s own faith-tradition. In the first case, there are certainly questions of God’s goodness and power in allowing the abuse to occur, but in the second case, there are additional questions of how such hypocrisy and immaturity could persist given the Christian realities of redemption by Jesus, on-going empowerment by the Spirit, and the transformational grace

of God. Of course, the Christian therapist can easily explain one or two cases of Christian moral and spiritual failure, but presumably for at least some Christian therapists it is not just one or two cases. Through their Christian clients, these Christian therapists regularly encounter cases of sexual misconduct, abuse, betrayal, addiction, and other forms of psychological distress that are at least partly caused or compounded by the spiritual immaturity and failures of the Christian client him or herself, the client's Christian spouse or family members, church leaders, or the broader Christian community. For these therapists, the question might not simply be "God, where is your goodness?" but "Jesus, where is your reality?"

Of course, the Christian psychotherapist's own latent doubts and spiritual disorientation can add to the disillusionment of recurrent exposure to the spiritual crises of Christian clients (Ano & Pargament, 2013). In one recent study, perceiving God as distant was highly predictive of doubt about God's existence (Exline, Grubbs, & Homolka, 2015). If one's own Christian experience of growth, change, and God's presence within the Christian community has been confusing or painful, then it will be all the more tempting to think that Christianity is, at best, impotent and, at worst, a primary causal contributor to psychological distress. Freud's (1927/2008) conclusion that religion was part of the etiology of psychopathology can begin to make more and more sense for therapists who repeatedly deal with Christians in psychological crisis that is compounded by their or others' spiritual immaturity.

So, it seems that Christian therapists are uniquely vulnerable to spiritual discouragement, including doubts about the truth of Christianity, due to repeated exposure to their Christian clients' spiritual immaturity as well as the immaturity of other Christians involved in their clients' lives. Self-care in a variety of forms is called for in this precarious situation (see Harrison & Westwood, 2009). Harrison and Westwood (2009) note that the effects of client material on therapists depends largely on the extent to which therapists are able to engage in their own process of integration and transformation of client material. When this processing does not occur, it can negatively impact the therapist's worldview, such as spiritual doubt. It seems to us that this processing incorporates relational, affective, and cognitive components. Relationally, embeddedness in healthy Christian community and ongoing processing in God's presence are helpful. Affectively, therapists must be attuned to ways in which their own spiritual histories (including their attachment relationship to

God and significant experiences in the church) may make them vulnerable to negative effects from client material and may require them to continue processing their own histories in this light. In this paper, we focus on a particular form of self-care that is primarily cognitive, though it also intersects with the relational and affective dimensions. Our focus is on the meaning-making that can be achieved through attending to one's epistemological-theological framework or religious worldview.

Religions are the most comprehensive meaning systems available (Newton & McIntosh, 2013), forming our worldview in various ways. Worldviews give a sense of order and stability to our lives, structuring the way we interpret our experiences and providing guidance for our choices in life. When lived experiences don't make sense in the context of our worldview, it is often distressing. The type of religious doubt and discouragement described above can be conceptualized as this kind of tension between experience and worldview. In order to reduce the distress, meaning-making must occur, thereby reducing the discrepancy between experience and worldview. Research on self-care in the context of vicarious trauma points repeatedly to the need for spiritual meaning-making. Newton and McIntosh (2013), for example, noted the importance of creating or perceiving meaning, and found that thriving therapists described "a sense of connection to a spiritual realm or a sense of larger meaning ... [that] is sustaining of therapists' professional efforts and personal well-being ..." (p. 207). These therapists also reported meaning-making in the following way: "They purposefully remind themselves of other ways of viewing life ... to encompass wider horizons of possibility and counterbalance their skewed perspective on the world" (p. 210). Our proposal can be understood in this context. Essentially, we propose a refinement to the orienting epistemological-theological framework that allows spiritual immaturity to be more easily assimilated by the Christian therapist's worldview.

### **The Role of One's Epistemological-Theological Framework**

In this section we draw attention to a particular form of self-care, namely carefully attending to the epistemological-theological framework out of which the psychotherapist interprets spiritual immaturity. By referring to this framework as *epistemological* and *theological*, we are attempting to highlight the role of both epistemic and theological features in one's conceptual framework or belief-system. Epistemic features

refer to the sort of epistemological or evidential basis one has for those theological beliefs that are relevant to interpreting or explaining or in some other way conceptualizing one's experience of frequent crisis amongst Christian clients. In other words, the epistemic features of one's conceptual framework have to do with the sort of evidential or justificatory process one went through to form those beliefs and therefore the sort of supporting reasons to which one would appeal as the basis for their belief (see Porter, 2006). For instance, if my reason for thinking God's goodness is consistent with the occurrence of evil is that my high school youth pastor told me so 35 years ago, that sort of epistemological basis probably will not sustain much confidence in that belief when it is under threat by experiences to the contrary. If, on the other hand, my reasons for thinking God's goodness is consistent with evil came about through serious wrestling with that question over a painful battle with a terminal illness, we might expect that this sort of evidential base would yield fairly sturdy beliefs. This is central to our argument—the way the Christian therapist formed her or his theological beliefs about suffering, God and evil, sanctification, and the like is relevant to the degree to which that belief system will engender confidence in those beliefs in the face of frequent experiences of spiritual immaturity amongst their Christian clients.

While the epistemological features of one's conceptual framework have to do with the process of belief-formation and the resulting evidential basis of one's beliefs, the theological features of one's conceptual framework have to do with the actual content of one's theological beliefs, that is, what one actually believes. For example, do I believe God is all-powerful or limited in power? Do I believe God causes or merely allows evil? Do I believe God desires to relieve pain, or do I believe pain is God's way of disciplining His children? Do I believe that the Spirit instantly transforms Christians, or do I believe that formation by the Spirit is gradual? Do I believe that Christians ought to stand out in the world as moral and spiritual exemplars, or do I believe that moral and spiritual growth is largely reserved for the afterlife? The content of these and many other theological beliefs are highly relevant to how we conceptualize our own and others' pain, distress, spiritual immaturity, and the like (see Wilt, Exline, Grubbs, Park & Pargament, 2016). When we bring together the content of our beliefs, along with the evidential basis for them, we have a complex theoretical system that we are referring to as one's epistemological-theological

framework.<sup>1</sup> Of course, different theological traditions will answer these and other relevant questions in distinct manners. The point here is not so much to give particular answers to these questions, but rather to highlight the importance of both what the Christian therapist believes about these matters and how those beliefs were formed.

It deserves to be mentioned that this could be perceived as an overly cognitive approach to dealing with spiritual discouragement. If carefully attending to one's epistemological-theological framework is the *only* thing done to deal with spiritual discouragement, then indeed, this is an overly cognitive approach. But we see the value of emphasizing the epistemological-theological framework within a broader strategy of dealing with spiritual discouragement that would be sensitive to the particularities of specific persons as well as being proactive about other forms of helpful self-care (e.g., the therapist's own therapy). Stressing the importance of one's belief system, Pargament et al. (2005) write:

Whether life events elicit spiritual struggles may also depend on the character of the orienting system the individual brings to these experiences. The orienting system enables people to understand and deal with a variety of challenges and tasks in life (Pargament, 1997). It is made up of personality traits, worldviews, beliefs, attitudes, values, practices, emotions, and relationships. Spirituality is also a part of the orienting system. Some orienting systems, however, are stronger than others. People are most vulnerable to "disorientation," spiritual and otherwise, when they encounter life experiences that push them beyond the capacity of their orienting systems. Thus, spiritual struggles may grow out of orienting systems that are characterized by weakness and vulnerability in personal, social, and spiritual domains (p. 251).

As Pargament et al. (2005) maintain, the "orienting system" or epistemological-theological framework out of which one conceptualizes one's own or another's

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<sup>1</sup> Construing human persons as having such a framework does not commit us to any particular view of the mind/brain. We realize that this is an idealized account of human cognition, but for our purposes what is of import is that there is some sense to be made of the claim that human persons think about pain and suffering within certain meaning-making contexts that include, amongst other features, their background beliefs. Whatever impact these background beliefs have, at least in some instances, it appears to be significant.

pain can drastically impact one's experience for better or worse (see Ano & Pargament, 2013). That is, the theoretical and cognitive have at least some bearing on the existential and emotional. For instance, a theology that leads me to believe that the abuse I have suffered is God punishing me for my sins makes my existential suffering worse, not better (see Fitzgerald, 2014). The faulty epistemological-theological framework does not alleviate pain, but aggravates it. Alternatively, a person who has deeply internalized a well-formed theology of the love and goodness of God is often able to navigate the first-person experience of suffering with a continued confidence in, and even experience of, God's faithfulness (Hall, 2016). So, while the theoretical and cognitive can be inappropriately applied to the existential and emotional, there remains an important interconnection between one's epistemological-theological framework and how one processes the pain and suffering to which one is exposed. Indeed, our suffering itself can be accentuated or to some degree soothed depending on how we conceptualize it vis-à-vis God and other truths of the Christian faith.

The question, then, of this paper is: what sort of epistemological-theological framework is available to help make sense of and find meaning in the apparent inconsistency between Christian claims of growth and the spiritual immaturity of Christians that is often witnessed by psychotherapists? In the face of repeated exposure to Christians in crisis, a generalized account of sin is inadequate. In other words, it is not enough to simply say that "we live downstream of the fall," or "the world is broken," or "sin will not be totally eradicated until the return of Jesus." While these claims are indeed true and relevant, they are too general and lack the explanatory power that is needed when faced with numerous and poignant cases of spiritual immaturity within the Christian community.

In the attempt to develop at least part of an epistemological-theological framework to help conceptualize the immaturity of Christian clients, we will first focus on two epistemological points and then develop two central theological claims.

### **An Epistemic Matter: Religious Truth, Spiritual Maturity, and Confirmation Bias**

The first epistemic point is that the Christian psychotherapist who is discouraged by repeated exposure to the spiritual immaturity of Christians might be under the influence of an understandable, though fallacious, logical inference. He or she might tend to think that if Christianity were true, then there wouldn't be

such widespread and prominent examples of spiritual immaturity amongst Christians. Said differently, since there are widespread and prominent examples of spiritual immaturity amongst Christians, Christianity, therefore, must not be true. The corrective epistemic point is simply this: widespread and prominent examples of spiritual immaturity amongst Christians does not automatically count against the truth of Christianity. In other words, Christianity can be true *and* there can be widespread and prominent examples of spiritual failure and immaturity amongst Christians. In order to make this point clear, it is helpful to look at an actual claim to the contrary.

The late philosopher and theologian John Hick (1995) abandoned conservative, evangelical Christianity for a form of religious pluralism partly due to the widespread absence of spiritual maturity amongst Christians. Hick reasoned that if a particular religion, such as Christianity, is uniquely true amongst the world's religions, then the adherents of that religion should stand out in human history as morally and spiritually superior to the adherents of other religions. But since Hick judged that no one religious community, including the Christian community, stands out in this manner, he concluded that no one religious view of the world was uniquely true. Hick (1995) 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? (p. 41).

So, for Hick, since Christians do not stand out as more mature than others, that fact counts against the unique truthfulness of Christianity. 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 and spiritual fruits. If Hick is right about this, then the Christian psychotherapist is right to be discouraged by the lack of maturity to which she bears witness.

While there is some substance to Hick's point of view (to which we will return later), his argument includes the fallacious logical inference mentioned ear-

lier. That is, he assumes that if a religion promises spiritual maturation and does not deliver, then that counts against the unique truth of that religion. But this inference doesn't go through in that spiritual maturity does not track religious truth as tightly as Hick assumes. For one, there are other explanations of why a religion, including Christianity, 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 maturity, but the way of transformation involves a psychologically rigorous and emotionally demanding process such that many adherents of that religion find it difficult to maintain the commitment required for significant change. While there might be some reason to think a true religion would be morally and spiritually efficacious, there is no *a priori* reason to think that a true religion would bring about moral and spiritual progress easily or quickly. As we will address in more detail below, Christianity, even given the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, does not imply an easy or quick pathway of change. Yes, Jesus' yoke is easy and His burden light, but also "the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matt. 7:14).

Or, suppose a particular religion is true and would produce spiritually mature adherents except that, for various historical and sociological reasons, the religion in question has lost its ability to effectively transmit the knowledge required to make moral and spiritual progress. Again, there is no *a priori* reason to think that a true religion would be immune from practical difficulties in transmitting the knowledge required to make spiritual progress. It seems, then, that in these sorts of cases, the widespread and prominent lack of spiritual maturity often witnessed in the therapy office should not automatically count against the religion's being true because there are other equal, if not better, explanations as to why the religion in question fails to bring about significant moral and spiritual change.

Conversely, it is easy to imagine a religion that is, in actual fact, false but nevertheless brings about significant spiritual maturity. This is because sincere belief in religious propositions of the requisite sort can motivate moral behavior and the development of virtuous dispositions regardless of 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 behavior in keeping with Allah's teachings whether or not it is the case that Allah is always watching. Similarly, becoming rightly mindful, in the Bud-

dhist 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 indeed an illusion. Consequently, a religion could deliver on promised spiritual maturation and yet be false. To put the point differently, the positive moral and spiritual results of a religious tradition do not necessarily imply the truth of that religion.

So, a religion could be true and not bring about spiritual maturity, and a religion could be false and nevertheless bring about spiritual maturity. Since these possibilities are real, the inference from widespread and prominent spiritual immaturity amongst Christians does not automatically count against the truth of Christianity. We say "automatically" because what our counter-examples show is that the evidential impact of widespread and prominent spiritual immaturity on the truth of Christianity depends on a variety of factors, including whether or not there is some other equal or better explanation for the prevalence of immaturity. While the crises in one's therapy office have some relevance to the truth of Christianity, the direct inference from widespread and prominent spiritual immaturity to the falsity of Christianity does not logically follow.

A second epistemic point has to do with information processing biases. Cognitive psychological research has demonstrated that everyday rationality is characterized by various information processing biases that can lead to reasoning errors, among which confirmation bias is prominent. Confirmation bias is the tendency to selectively search for information that validates the view that one holds (Nickerson, 1998). Confirmation bias can affect reasoning, even when it leads to distressing outcomes, as in anxious individuals who show an exaggerated focus on evidence of danger and threat in their environments. Information processing biases, such as confirmation bias, often operate in response to an unmet striving for internal consistency. When one's ideas are at odds with one's repeated experiences, this can result in cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962), causing discomfort until the dissonance can be resolved. In the situation we are noting, therapists may hold to certain ideals regarding Christian growth that are repeatedly violated by their experiences with clients. This cognitive dissonance may erode the ideals regarding Christian growth, which then leads to an erosion of the therapist's own faith. Confirmation bias steps in to confirm that this loss of belief is warranted. The Christian therapist begins to selectively notice more and more evidence of spiritual immaturity amongst Christians in the world

around them at the expense of available evidence of positive spiritual growth, which reinforces their sense that the Christian faith lacks the formational resources it purports to have.

The epistemological corrective here is for Christian therapists to bear in mind that they are exposed to a thin and selective slice of negative Christian experience. Indeed, part of epistemological self-care for the Christian therapist should involve intentional efforts to actively participate in narratives of healing and restoration as well as celebrations of the various fruits of God's people. If Christian therapists are repeatedly called upon to sit in the ashes, they need to take care to show up as well in the seasons of joy. Otherwise, the Christian therapist will be increasingly susceptible to the sort of confirmation bias discussed above.

But these epistemological points, while to some degree reassuring, present us with a new challenge: if it is not the falsity of Christianity that best explains widespread and prominent spiritual immaturity amongst Christians, how can immaturity be adequately explained from a Christian point of view? This is where we need to turn to two central theological points to bolster our epistemological-theological framework.

### A Theological Matter: Relational Transformation and Relational Resistance

Let us imagine that the properly epistemically chastened Christian psychotherapist does not make the faulty inference discussed above and does not succumb to confirmation bias when it comes to cases of spiritual immaturity. Nonetheless, how is the Christian psychotherapist meant to understand the seemingly widespread and prominent examples of spiritual immaturity amongst Christians? If the transformational claims and resources of Christianity are indeed true and efficacious, then what is the theological explanation of spiritual immaturity?

While distinct theological traditions will bring different theological resources to bear on these questions, there are two widely held and highly relevant theological points to which we would like to draw special attention. The first point is that spiritual transformation of one's inner and outer life into greater conformity to Jesus is primarily brought about on the Christian view through receptivity to the loving presence of God throughout the whole of the human personality. This is what we refer to as relational transformation—i.e., it is relationship/communion with God that brings about spiritual transformation. The second, and related, theological point is that human persons are

deeply resistant to receiving the loving presence of God throughout the whole of the human personality. This is what we refer to as relational resistance (Porter, 2014). David Benner (2003) puts both points well when he writes:

But if an encounter with divine love is really so transformational, how is it that so many of us have survived such encounters relatively unchanged? It seems that the experience of love—even God's love—does not always have transforming consequences. ... Genuine transformation requires vulnerability. It is not the fact of being loved unconditionally that is life-changing. It is the risky experience of *allowing myself* to be loved unconditionally (76).

In short, our theological proposal is that spiritual immaturity remains in Christian lives to varying degrees largely because God's primary means of spiritual transformation of human lives is His loving presence and meaning (i.e., relational transformation), and Christians are, in actual fact, deeply resistant to God's loving presence and meaning (i.e., relational resistance). While Christians have new life in Christ at the moment of salvation, that new life is meant to be a progressive reality of being "filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:19); a fullness of God towards which Christians can be resistant.

This is not a radically novel view of God's transformational work. Indeed, we take great solace in the fact that relational transformation and relational resistance are both very old theological ideas that go all the way back to the biblical writers themselves. Indeed, many different theological traditions would affirm these basic points of sanctification (see Deiter, Hoekema, Horton, View, & Walvoord, 1996). What makes these theological points radical is not their novelty but that they can often go under-appreciated and at times severely neglected by Christians, including (presumably) Christian therapists. For instance, one can find explicitly developed and/or implicitly held views of the Spirit's transforming work that do not meaningfully include these two theological features (Alston, 1988). For instance, it can easily be thought that spiritual formation is largely up to one's own willpower. On this view, the bible gives the expectations of righteousness, and Christians are expected to utilize self-effort to live up to those expectations. This is a willpower model of sanctification, and if it is true, it would not explain spiritual immaturity except as a lack of moral effort. Or, as another example, it can easily be thought that spiritual formation occurs through mere participation in various reli-

gious activities, such as prayer, bible meditation, worship, the Lord's supper, Christian fellowship, and so on. The idea here is that transformation is a matter of doing enough of the right sorts of disciplines, and "wham-o!" God changes us by fiat. The only available explanation of spiritual immaturity on this model is a lack of disciplined activity. Both of these views, which are representative of others that neglect the relational nature of sanctification, fail to adequately explain the sort of spiritual immaturity that therapists are likely to see.

A relational model of sanctification, on the other hand, sees the nature of spiritual growth from an entirely distinct vantage point. While personal volition and Christian disciplines are indeed present in this relational view, these efforts are directed towards habituated receptivity to God's inherently transformational presence. God's transformational presence is available to the Christian, but since it is a relationship of love, God does not coerce or forcefully invade the human person. On the contrary, we learn from Paul that "love is patient...It does not insist on its own way" (1 Cor. 13:4,5). Because God patiently waits for human persons to receive his transformational presence, Scripture makes clear that persons can "grieve" (Eph. 4:30), "quench" (1 Thess. 5:19), and "resist" (Acts 7:51; cf. 1 Cor. 4) the Holy Spirit, being "filled" (Eph. 5:18) instead with other things besides the Spirit of God, such that the transformation of the human person is hindered and, in some instances, largely non-existent. Indeed, elements of attachment, psychodynamic, and psychoanalytic theory can help explain why the sort of interpersonal vulnerability and receptivity that are required for spiritual change are often so elusive and how it is that relational resistance (or defendedness) can become deeply embedded in the structures of the human mind and brain. Of course, a whole theology of sanctification, with particular emphasis on the work of the Spirit within human anthropology, would be required to fully defend and elucidate relational transformation and relational resistance (see Porter, 2014). In the absence of a full-blown theological development, allow us to quote at length from the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Dutch-Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper. In his book, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (1900/1979), Kuyper nicely summarizes a view of sanctification that places an emphasis on both relational transformation and relational resistance:

And, dwelling in the elect, He [the Spirit] does not slumber, nor does He keep an eternal Sabbath, in idleness shutting Himself up in their hearts; but as divine Worker

He seeks from within to fill their individual persons, pouring the stream of His divine brightness through every space. But we should not imagine that every believer is instantly filled and permeated. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit finds him filled with all manner of evil and treachery...His method of procedure is not with divine power to *force* a [person] as though he [or she] were a stock or block, but by the power of love and compassion so to influence and energize the impulses of the feeble will that it feels the effect, is inclined, and finally consents to be the temple of the Holy Spirit...This operation is different in each person. In one it proceeds with marvelous rapidity; in another, progress is exceedingly slow, being checked by serious reaction which in some rare cases is overcome only with the last breath. There are scarcely two [persons] in whom this gracious operation is completely the same. It may not be denied that the Holy Spirit often meets serious opposition on the part of the saint...And the Holy Spirit bears all this resistance with infinite pity, and overcomes it and casts it out with eternal mercy. Who that is not a stranger to his own heart does not remember how many years it took before he would yield a certain point of resistance; how he always avoided facing it; restlessly opposed it, at last thought to end the matter by arranging for a sort of *modus vivendi* between himself and the Holy Spirit? But the Holy Spirit did not cease, gave him no rest; again and again that familiar knock was heard, the calling in his heart of that familiar voice. And after years of resistance he could not but yield in the end... (p. 529, 530).

There is much to appreciate about Kuyper's statement. What is most interesting for the subject matter of this paper is Kuyper's comment regarding "exceedingly slow" spiritual progress, which he attributes to the Holy Spirit's "power of love and compassion" often meeting "serious opposition on the part of the saint." Kuyper maintains that, since Christians resist the Spirit's work and since the Spirit does not force his transforming presence on them, sanctification can be slowed and even stalled.

While much more needs to be said about relational change, relational resistance, and other barriers to God's sanctifying work (e.g., the world, the flesh, the devil), it is important to note here that relational transformation and resistance alone would explain how it can be the case that life with God truly does bring about love, joy, peace, kindness, patience and the lot, and yet, due to habituated, relational resistance to God, Christians regularly and continually fail to make much progress in developing such traits. Christians

(and human persons in general, for that matter) struggle with characterological growth not because Christianity is false, but because Christianity is in fact deeply accurate in its assessment of the human predicament when it comes to moral change. That is, the truth of a relational model of sanctification offers a profound explanation as to why it is that both Christians and non-Christians struggle to make much progress in character-formation.

Moreover, on this account of why so many Christians struggle with immaturity, the prevalence of immature Christians in the psychotherapy office is good news, for that is precisely where they need to be. In other words, repeated exposure to Christian clients in spiritual crisis, at least in part due to their spiritual immaturity, is in a certain respect an encouraging sign of God at work and not a discouraging sign of the failure of the church. This is because there are few places of relational interaction in our society today, besides the therapist's office, where issues of relational receptivity and resistance can be explored, confronted, and hopefully repaired.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to note that we are not claiming that the *only* pathway to character-change is via the relational presence of God. There is much growth and healing that can occur apart from any special operation of God's power and presence. God has created a world in which general revelation, natural moral law, and common grace allow for much natural formation outside of any relationship to Christ or growing receptivity to God's presence (McMartin, 2015). This paper does not address the failure of Christians to avail themselves of these natural-formational resources. This is because widespread and prominent spiritual immaturity amongst Christians that arises due to the failure to pursue change and healing through natural-formational resources does not have any bearing on the truth or falsity of Christianity. But widespread and prominent spiritual immaturity amongst Christians that arises in the context of *supernatural*-formational resources does have some bearing on the truth or falsity of Christianity. For, as we have seen, barring some explanation of how Christianity can be true and yet Christians remain spiritually immature, Christian claims regarding supernaturally available growth and change appear inconsistent with the widespread and prominent spiritual immaturity Christian psychotherapists often encounter in their Christian clients. While there are many other features

that would need to be a part of a more comprehensive epistemological-theological explanatory framework for spiritual immaturity, we trust the points developed here go some way towards encouraging Christian therapists who might otherwise be discouraged by repeated exposure to the spiritual crises of their Christian clients.

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