

# Gods, Rituals, and the Moral Order

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*The functionalist “law” that religion sustains the moral order must be amended. As is demonstrated in this study, religion has this effect only as it is based on belief in powerful, active, conscious, morally-concerned gods. Contrary to Durkheim’s claims, participation in religious rituals per se has little independent impact on morality and none when done on behalf of gods conceived as unconscious essences, or as conscious gods of small scope and lacking moral concerns. Thus, the link between gods and morality is limited mainly to societies having more complex cultures, but even in some highly developed societies a religious basis for morality is missing. Quantitative results are based on 427 societies included in the Atlas of World Cultures, and on surveys of the United States and 33 other nations.*

*Religion functions to sustain the moral order.* This classic proposition, handed down from the founders, is regarded by many as the closest thing to a “law” that the social scientific study of religion possesses.

In his Burnett Lectures, W. Robertson Smith explained that “even in its rudest form Religion was a moral force, the powers that men revered were on the side of social order and moral law; and the fear of the gods was a motive to enforce the laws of society, which were also the laws of morality” (1889:53). Emile Durkheim, of course, argued that religion exists *because* it unites humans into moral communities, and while law and custom also regulate conduct, religion alone “asserts itself not only over conduct but over the *conscience*. It not only dictates actions but ideas and sentiments” ([1886] 1994:21). And, according to Bronislaw Malinowski, “every religion implies some reward of virtue and punishment of sin” (1935:viii).

In one form or another, this proposition undoubtedly appears in every introductory sociology and anthropology text on the market. But, as will be seen, it’s wrong. Moreover, it wasn’t even handed down from the founders, at least not unanimously! Indeed, the founder of British anthropology, Edward Tylor, and the founder of British sociology, Herbert Spencer,<sup>1</sup> both took pains to point out that only *some kinds* of religions have moral implications.

Tylor ([1871] 1958:446) reported:

To some the statement may seem startling, yet the evidence seems to justify it, that the relation of morality to religion is one that only belongs in its rudiments, or not at all, to rudimentary civilization. The comparison of savage and civilized religions bring into view . . . a deep-lying contrast in their practical action on human life . . . the popular idea that the moral government of the universe is an essential tenet of natural religion simply falls to the ground. Savage animism [religion] is almost devoid of that ethical element which to the educated modern mind is the very mainspring of practical religion. Not, as I have said, that morality is absent from the life of the lower [cultures] . . . . But these ethical laws stand on their own ground of tradition and public opinion, comparatively independent of the animistic beliefs and rites which exist beside them. The lower animism is not immoral, it is unmoral.

Spencer (1896 II:808–09) also noted that many religions ignore morality, and he went even farther by suggesting that some religions actively encourage crime and immorality: “At the present time in India, we have freebooters like the Domras, among whom a successful theft is always celebrated by a sacrifice to their chief god Gandak.”

Although little noticed, this dissenting view has continued among anthropologists. In 1922, J. P. Mills (p. 121) noted that the religion of the Lhotas includes no moral code: “Whatever it be

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which causes so many Lhotas to lead virtuous lives it is not their religion.” In his distinguished study of the Manus of New Guinea, Reo Fortune (1935:357) contrasted the moral aspects of their religion with that of the typical tribe, agreeing that “Tylor is entirely correct in stating that in most primitive regions of the world religion and morality maintain themselves independently.” Ruth Benedict (1938:633) also argued that to generalize the link between religion and morality “is to misconceive” the “history of religions.” She suggested that this linkage probably is typical only of “the higher ethical religions.” Ralph Barton (1946) reported that the Ifugaos impute their own unscrupulous exchange practices to their gods and seize every opportunity to cheat them. Peter Lawrence (1964) found that the Garia of New Guinea have no conception whatever of “sin,” and “no idea of rewards in the next world for good works.” And Mary Douglas (1975:77) flatly asserted that there is no “inherent relation between religion and morality: there are primitives who can be religious without being moral and moral without being religious.”

Tylor’s observation that not all religions support the moral order always should have been obvious to anyone familiar with Greek and Roman mythology. The Greco-Roman gods were quite morally deficient. They were thought to do terrible things to one another and to humans as well—sometimes merely for amusement. And while they were quite apt to do wicked things to humans if the humans failed to propitiate them, the gods had no interest in anything (wicked or otherwise) humans might do to one another. Instead, the Greek and Roman gods only concerned themselves with direct affronts. For example, no religious sanctions were incurred by young women who engaged in premarital sex *unless* they immersed themselves in sacred waters reserved for virgins (MacMullen 1981:58). Because Aristotle taught that the gods were incapable of caring about mere humans (MacMullen 1981:53), he could not have concurred that religion serves the function of sustaining and legitimating the moral order. Indeed, classical philosophers would have ridiculed such a proposition as peculiar to Jews and Christians—and they would have been correct (MacMullen 1981; Meeks 1993; Stark 1996). As will be seen, the proposition about the moral functions of religion requires a particular conception of supernatural beings as deeply concerned about the behavior of humans toward one another. Such a conception of the gods is found in many of the major world faiths, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, but it appears to be largely lacking in the supernatural conceptions prevalent in much of Asia and in animism and folk religions generally.

It would seem to follow, therefore, that the moral behavior of individuals would be influenced by their religious commitments *only* in societies where the dominant religious organizations give clear and consistent expression to divine moral imperatives. Thus, for example, were proper survey data available, they should show that those who frequented the temples in Greco-Roman times were *no more* observant of the prevailing moral codes than were those who were lax in their religious practice. As Tylor pointed out, this is not to suggest that societies in antiquity lacked moral codes, but only that these were not predicated on religious foundations.

When and why, then, did social scientists get it so wrong? The error began when Durkheim and the other early functionalists (including Robertson Smith and Malinowski) dismissed gods as unimportant window-dressing, stressing instead that rites and rituals are the fundamental stuff of religion. In a long review of Part VI of Herbert Spencer’s *Principles of Sociology*, Emile Durkheim ([1886] 1994:19) condemned Spencer for reducing religion “to being merely a collection of beliefs and practices relating to a supernatural agent.” Seen from the perspective of real sociology (i.e., French functionalism):

The idea of God which seemed to be the sum total of religion a short while ago, is now no more than a minor accident. It is a psychological phenomenon which has got mixed up with a whole sociological process whose importance is of quite a different order . . . . We might perhaps be able to discover what is thus hidden beneath this quite superficial phenomenon . . . .

Thus the sociologist will pay scant attention to the different ways in which men and peoples have conceived the unknown cause and mysterious depth of things. He will set aside all such metaphysical speculations and will see in religion only a social discipline.

Thus began a new social science orthodoxy: it is only through participation in collective rituals that people are bound into a moral community. Eventually this line of analysis “bottomed out” in such absurdities as Rodney Needham’s (1972) denial of the existence of *any* “interior state” that might be called religious belief and S. R. F. Price’s (1984) claim that religious belief is a purely Christian invention, so that when “primitives” pray for things, they don’t really mean it. In any event, it long has been regarded as self-evident that all religions exist as rituals designed to sustain the moral order.

In this essay I will more fully develop and test the thesis that it is particular conceptions of God, not participation in rites and rituals, that empower religions to sustain the moral order. I will formulate my views as specific hypotheses, which I will test on appropriate cross-cultural and cross-national data.

### GODS AND MORALITY

Durkheim to the contrary, the foundation of all religions rests on some conception of the *supernatural*—of essences, forces, entities, realities, or beings beyond or outside nature, which are thought to be able, at least to some extent, to suspend, alter, or ignore physical forces. Beyond this vague generalization, however, there is unending conflict among religions about what the supernatural is like, and intense disputes concerning what it does, if anything. In some religions, the supernatural is conceived of as an omnipresent *essence* or principle governing all life, but that is impersonal, remote, and definitely not a being. In others, the supernatural takes the form of conscious beings called gods.

I will examine these variations in images of God more fully when specific religions are discussed later in the article. Here it suffices to recognize that divine essences are unable to issue commandments or make moral judgments. Thus, conceptions of the supernatural are irrelevant to the moral order unless the supernatural is conceived of as a *being*—a thing having consciousness and desires. Put another way, only beings can desire moral conformity. Even that is not sufficient. Gods can lend sanctions to the moral order only if they are *concerned* about, informed about, and act on behalf of humans. Moreover, to promote virtue among humans, gods must be virtuous—they must *favor good* over evil. Finally, gods will be effective in sustaining moral precepts depending on their *scope*—that is, the greater the diversity of their powers, the greater will be the range of their influence. All-powerful, all-seeing gods ruling the entire universe are the ultimate deterrent.

Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the Lord. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the Lord. (*Jeremiah 23:24*)

This analysis does, of course, imply progress from less to more complex cultures and that the linkage between religion and morality reflects such a progression. In a colorful passage, Ruth Benedict (1938:633) wrote that moral concerns *become* a central value of “religion in man’s history just as the pearl constitutes the value of the oyster.” But, she noted, just as oysters must develop pearls, religions must develop moral engagement. This development occurs as the prevailing conceptions of the gods shift in the direction of fewer gods or greater scope, a shift that usually takes place as part of the development of a more complex culture (Stark and Bainbridge [1987] 1996).

The discussion can be summed up in four hypotheses:

**H1:** *In many societies, religion and morality will not be linked.*

**H2:** *This linkage will tend to be limited to more complex cultures.*

**H3:** *The effects of religiousness on individual morality are contingent on images of gods as conscious, morally-concerned beings; religiousness based on impersonal or unmoral gods will not influence moral choices.*

**H4:** *Participation in religious rites and rituals will have little or no independent effect on morality.*

In the remainder of the essay I test these hypotheses.

#### RELIGION, MORALITY, AND “PROGRESS”

Both Tylor and Spencer believed that the connection between religion and morality was a mark of cultural progress—that it was something to be found in the religions of more “advanced” peoples. They based this conclusion on their immense knowledge of ethnographic reports. However, a less impressionistic evaluation of this hypothesis became possible with the advent of quantitative cross-cultural studies, pioneered by George Peter Murdock (1949, 1981; Murdock and White 1969) and his colleagues following World War II. In *The Birth of the Gods* (1960), Guy E. Swanson selected 37 premodern societies from Murdock’s then-current set of 556 and coded them as to whether or not the supernatural was believed to impose sanctions on “immoral” behavior. Even though his criteria for coding the presence of such sanctions were very generous, Swanson found no such sanctions in a quarter of these societies. He interpreted this as evidence against Tylor (*H1*), noting that “Contrary to Tylor’s formulation, a considerable proportion of the simpler peoples do make a connection between supernatural sanctions and moral behavior” (p. 174). As is obvious, Swanson’s study suffered from a very small number of cases. In addition, Swanson’s theoretical approach was relentlessly psychological and this led him to try to relate the presence of supernatural sanctions to various possible sources of “tension” affecting the individual. Most of these turned out not to be correlated significantly with the presence of supernatural sanctions, but four, including the prevalence of personal debts, the existence of social classes, private property ownership, and primogeniture, were significantly correlated with supernatural sanctioning. Swanson took this as mixed support for his hypothesis concerning tension as the basis for the link between the gods and morality. But, of course, Tylor and Spencer would have noticed that the variables yielding significant results all measure aspects of cultural and social complexity, or what they called “civilization.” Thus, Swanson’s discovery that each of the above variables was significantly, positively associated with divine sanctions was confirmation of Hypothesis 2. Although Swanson was one of the few contemporary social scientists who was aware of Tylor and Spencer’s hypothesis (*H2*), if he recognized these implications of his results, he chose to ignore them. A somewhat abortive attempt to replicate Swanson’s study, based on 72 Native North American societies, also ignored the matter (Peregrine 1996).

For nearly 20 years it has been possible to test these two key hypotheses on a very large selection of cases (although I can find no indications that anyone has done so). When Murdock published the *Atlas of World Cultures* (1981), he responded to Swanson’s earlier work by coding whether or not the “High Gods” in each of 427 societies were “active, and specifically supportive of human morality” (183 of these societies lacked any notion of a High God). Moreover, for a decade, these and other of Murdock’s “samples” have been available in a carefully cross-checked, electronic format from the MicroCase Corporation, and that is the version I have used.

The results show that only about a fourth (23.9 percent) of these societies acknowledged a “High God” who was concerned with human morality, thus confirming Tylor and Spencer’s judgment that most premodern societies *do not* link religion and morality. However, some of the gods in societies lacking High Gods might also promote human morality—that was not part of the coding scheme. But, even if we omit all societies without High Gods, the High Gods in 58 percent of the remaining 244 societies *do not* support human morality. Either way, in keeping with Hypothesis 1, a lack of connection between religion and morality is common in premodern societies.

What about Hypothesis 2, that this linkage develops as societies become more culturally sophisticated? Table 1 offers very striking confirmation. The presence of “Moral Gods” is very

**TABLE 1**  
**CORRELATIONS BETWEEN “CULTURAL**  
**COMPLEXITY” AND “MORAL GODS”**

	Correlations with the Presence of Moral Gods
Dairy herds	0.898**
Domesticated large animals	0.876**
Existence of the state	0.790**
Metal working	0.777**
Weaving	0.718**
Cereal-based agriculture	0.689**
Pottery making	0.655**

n = 427.

\*\* Significant above 0.000.

highly correlated (Gamma) with seven measures of “Cultural Complexity.” Thus it seems that the linkage between religion and morality generally is limited to the more “advanced religions,” just as the early anthropologists claimed.

I devote the remainder of this article to testing Hypotheses 3 and 4 in various societies that differ in their general conceptions of God.

#### GOD AND MORALITY

Items included in the World Values Surveys<sup>2</sup> of 1990–1991 include some adequate for testing the relationship between images of God and the moral order. These surveys consist of national polls conducted in many nations, using the same questions (translated into the local language) in each. While not all items were asked in each nation, most were, making it possible to replicate findings in a great variety of cultures and social settings. Respondents in most nations were presented with a battery of items asking their approval or disapproval of various kinds of behavior subject to moral interpretations. Most of these behaviors lacked cross-cultural consensus—in at least a few nations the majority did not disapprove. These included items concerning prostitution, abortion, homosexuality, divorce, lying, euthanasia, and suicide. However, three suitable items were judged as unjustified by a substantial majority in each nation.

Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between.

Buying something you knew was stolen. (Stolen Goods)

Failing to report damage you’ve done accidentally to a parked car. (Hit/Run)

Taking the drug marijuana or hashish. (Smoke Dope)

Respondents were asked to place themselves on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being always justified, and 1 being never justified. In similar fashion, respondents were asked, “How important is God in your life?” and asked to place themselves on a scale from 1 (“not at all”) to 10 (“very important”).

Table 2 shows that in the United States the importance placed on God is very significantly, negatively correlated (Gamma) with each of the three measures of tolerance for immorality. No doubt, Durkheim would propose the counterhypothesis that the real basis for these correlations is participation in collective religious rituals as these sustain *both* belief in the supernatural and commitment to the moral order. However, this claim is refuted by the second row of correlations, which report the effects of ritual, measured as church attendance. Attendance is an eight-point

**TABLE 2**  
**GOD, CHURCH ATTENDANCE, AND THE MORAL ORDER IN THE UNITED STATES**

	Stolen Goods	Hit/Run	Smoke Dope
Correlations with Importance of God	-0.30**	-0.23**	-0.38**
Correlations with Church Attendance	-0.20**	-0.15**	-0.26**
Regression Analysis	Standardized Betas		
God	-0.138**	-0.085*	-0.243**
Church Attendance	-0.040	-0.052	-0.038
R <sup>2</sup> =	0.026**	0.015**	0.163**

\*\* Significant above 0.01.

\* Significant above 0.05.

scale, ranging from (8) "More than once a week" to (1) "Never, or practically never." Both belief and attendance are correlated with morality, but in all three comparisons the ritual effect is notably weaker than the God effect. Moreover, when entered into a regression analysis, the God variable eliminates all effects of church attendance. Contrary to Durkheim's revisionism, it appears that Tylor and Spencer were right that ideas about God rather than rituals are the most fundamental basis of religion. People may take part in ritual activities, especially those pursued in public, for many nonreligious reasons. But, belief in God is religiousness per se. Thus, Hypotheses 3 and 4 are strongly supported by U.S. data.

In the remainder of this article I will repeat this analysis of the joint effects of the importance placed on God and ritual participation on morality in 33 nations. Because the nature of God is left unspecified in the item, I will depend on cultural contexts to define God. For societies where God generally is conceived of as a conscious being who imposes moral demands, Hypothesis 3 anticipates negative correlations between the importance placed on God and willingness to condone moral violations. But in societies where God(s) generally is regarded as unconcerned about morality, or as an impersonal essence, no correlations should exist between the importance placed on God and willingness to condone moral violations. And, in accord with Hypothesis 4, the effects of ritual participation should be weaker than, and contingent on, images of God(s). I shall proceed on the basis of appropriate geocultural blocs, as will be seen.

#### GOD AND MORALITY IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

Table 3 shows the correlations between the importance of God in one's life and the three measures of adherence to the moral order in five nations of the Western Hemisphere: Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Chile, and Argentina. While these nations differ greatly in many ways, they share a general conception of God as an active, divine being who imposes moral standards. Therefore, the correlations with the importance of God should be negative, and they are. Each of the 15 correlations is negative and highly statistically significant. Hypothesis 3 is strongly confirmed. The table also includes the correlations with church attendance. In 14 of the 15 comparisons with the God effects, the church attendance effect is weaker—usually substantially weaker. Only on smoking marijuana in Argentina does this generalization not hold and that probably can be dismissed as a random fluctuation. Again, Hypothesis 4 is confirmed.

#### GOD AND MORALITY IN WESTERN EUROPE

By Durkheim's definition, many nations of Western Europe are quite irreligious, church attendance being so low that few people are involved in collective religious rituals. But, as defined

**TABLE 3**  
**GOD AND THE MORAL ORDER IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE**

	Correlations with Importance of God		
	Stolen Goods	Hit/Run	Smoke Dope
Canada	-0.24**	-0.19**	-0.34**
Mexico	-0.17**	-0.11**	-0.25**
Brazil	-0.39**	-0.22**	-0.50**
Chile	-0.29**	-0.11**	-0.38**
Argentina	-0.37**	-0.20**	-0.30**
	Correlations with Church Attendance		
Canada	-0.19**	-0.09*	-0.25**
Mexico	-0.04	-0.08*	-0.13**
Brazil	-0.22**	-0.17**	-0.39**
Chile	-0.12**	-0.08*	-0.26**
Argentina	-0.30**	-0.16**	-0.41**

\*\* Significant above 0.01.

\* Significant above 0.05.

by Tylor and Spencer, most people in Western Europe remain religious. Atheists are few (seldom more than 5 percent) and the great majority consider themselves to be “a religious person”—they are “believing non-belongers” as Grace Davie (1994) so aptly put it. Moreover, the prevailing conception of God is the conventional Christian deity. These nations of Western Europe make it possible to examine the effects of God on morality in settings where belief is not confounded with participation in religious rituals, as it is in the Western Hemisphere where both belief and church attendance are high. Indeed, in accord with Hypothesis 4, within the European context the correlations ought to be as strongly negative in Scandinavia, where religious participation is extremely low, as in Southern Europe, where participation is high. Put another way, data from Western Europe allow comparisons of Catholic and Protestant cultures.

Table 4 confirms that belief in God is highly correlated with morality in all these nations, Protestant or Catholic, having high church attendance or low. Of the 48 correlations shown, all are negative and only one falls short of statistical significance (smoking dope in Sweden). Moreover, the correlations are about of equal strength in Scandinavia and Southern Europe. In addition, (not shown) in only 7 of the 48 comparisons does the church attendance correlation equal or exceed the God effect. As in the Western Hemisphere, the church attendance correlations typically were substantially lower, lending support to Hypothesis 4.

#### GOD AND MORALITY IN EASTERN EUROPE

Thus far I have been hypothesizing negative correlations between the importance placed on God and acceptance of moral violations because of the conception of God prevalent in the nations examined. However, for parts of Eastern Europe I do not anticipate such effects, in part because Eastern Orthodoxy stresses rite and ritual, icons and incense, and has remarkably little to say about sin—“The emphasis is not so much on truth and justice as on beauty and love” (Weaver 1998:76). Consequently, orthodoxy projects a comparatively remote and nonjudgmental image of God. Unfortunately, in the nations available for analysis, this religious factor is partly confounded with a long history of Communist repression of religion and with the collaboration of most orthodox churches with their repressors (Filatov 1994)—both these factors ought to have weakened the link between religion and morality.

**TABLE 4**  
**GOD AND THE MORAL ORDER IN WESTERN EUROPE**

	Correlations with Importance of God		
	Stolen Goods	Hit/Run	Smoke Dope
Great Britain	-0.29**	-0.23**	-0.31**
Ireland	-0.43**	-0.29**	-0.45**
Northern Ireland	-0.59**	-0.39**	-0.57**
<i>Scandinavia</i>			
Norway	-0.37**	-0.21**	-0.41**
Sweden	-0.24**	-0.27**	-0.12
Finland	-0.31**	-0.20**	-0.25**
Denmark	-0.30**	-0.16**	-0.31**
Iceland	-0.37**	-0.21**	-0.41**
<i>Northern Europe</i>			
West Germany	-0.35**	-0.24**	-0.33**
Netherlands	-0.23**	-0.13**	-0.32**
Belgium	-0.22**	-0.17**	-0.26**
Switzerland	-0.26**	-0.24**	-0.32**
<i>Southern Europe</i>			
France	-0.24**	-0.15**	-0.29**
Italy	-0.35**	-0.10**	-0.38**
Spain	-0.21**	-0.18**	-0.35**
Portugal	-0.30**	-0.20**	-0.37**

\*\* Significant above 0.01.

\* Significant above 0.05.

Compared with Christianity in the West, Eastern Orthodoxy far more closely fits the model of religion proposed by Durkheim and the functionalists in that it is a religion of collective ritual and rite, putting far greater emphasis on the sacraments than on a direct relationship with God. An indication of this is the virtual absence of any discussion of sin and the almost exclusive focus on sacraments in the few discussions of sin that do appear in recent summaries of orthodox theology (Ware 1997, 1979; Clendenin 1995). Indeed, orthodox writers stress that confession of sins (if sincere) *automatically* results in complete forgiveness and they are very critical of the "Latin church" for "teaching of penalties and punishments," including the concept of purgatory, "all of which the Orthodox church most strenuously rejects" (Karmiris 1973:29). Nicolas Zernov (1959:101) offers this contrast:

In the Roman Church the role of the priest in the confessional is that of judge . . . . In the East the priest is not a judge, but a witness.

However, rather than emphasizing a personal relationship between the penitent and God, this orthodox approach to confession seems to have quite the opposite effect of making the process impersonal. Moreover, the distaste for punishment of sin (and even the concept of sin) carries over into orthodox teaching about salvation. Bishop Kallistos (Anthony) Ware (1997:262) explained that in the Orthodox view, although:

Hell exists as a final possibility . . . several of the Fathers have none the less believed that in the end all will be reconciled to God. It is heretical to say that all *must* be saved, for this is to deny free will; but it is legitimate to hope that all *may* be saved.



As Nikos Kokosalakis (1994:143) noted, “There is a remarkable flexibility, approaching permissiveness, in the Orthodox Church.”

Orthodoxy also stresses the collective nature even of salvation—as Aleksei Khomiakov (1895:216) explained, “no one is saved alone.” Nicolas Zernov (1959:98) drew this contrast:

Orthodoxy starts with community, and sees the individual as a member thereof. Western Christianity begins with the individual, and interprets the community as the outcome of a decision made by individuals to act together.

The greater emphasis on the individual in the West may have originated in (or been greatly increased by) the Reformation and the Counter Reformation, neither of which had any impact on orthodoxy. In any event, the emphasis on collectivity and ritual shows up in prayer as orthodoxy discourages attempts to establish a direct, personal relationship with God of the sort typical of the devotional life in the West (albeit there are denominational differences in the West too).

These differences in doctrine may seem subtle, but they are quite apparent as the religion is experienced by the laity—from the pew, God seems remote and rather inactive. However, in and of itself, I would only expect this aspect of the orthodox conception of God to *reduce*, not eliminate, the link between the individual’s commitment to God and his or her moral conformity. That is, I would expect negative, significant, *but substantially weaker* correlations in orthodox nations than in the West. Unfortunately, as mentioned, the effects of orthodoxy are confounded with the effects of Communism, which also ought to reduce the correlations.

In the wake of the Russian Revolution, the Communist regime imposed brutal and unrelenting religious repression. On orders from Lenin (Troyanovsky 1991), thousands of priests and nuns were murdered—often in bizarre ways after extended torture (Pospelovsky 1988). Party squads also looted all the churches, many of which had very valuable art work and altar vessels—even all the church bells were confiscated and melted down for scrap (MacKenzie 1930). Most church buildings were seized, and some of the most famous and beautiful were converted into museums of scientific atheism. Following the initial campaign of terror, repression was sustained at a somewhat less ferocious level throughout the Communist era—millions were exiled to labor camps for persisting in religion, especially for practicing nonorthodox religions. Millions of others were discriminated against (excluded from the Party, from better jobs, and from higher education) because they were known to be, or suspected of being, religious (Pospelovsky 1988). At the start of the Revolution there were more than 80,000 orthodox churches in what became the Soviet Union. By 1939 there were only about 1,000 (Barrett 1982). Similarly, in 1917 there were more than 1,200 orthodox monasteries, a decade later there were none—some had been converted into prisons (Timberlake 1995). Then, in response to the need for national unity following the German invasion, Stalin slightly eased the repression, only to increase it somewhat again at the war’s end (Anderson 1994; Pospelovsky 1997). During the 1980s there were about 5,000 Christian churches in the USSR (not counting secret Protestant congregations), or about 1 per 50,000 people (Barrett 1982). Islamic groups also endured intense repression. In the former Soviet of Dagestan, for example, there had been more than 1,700 mosques in 1917. By 1988 there were only 12 to serve a far larger population than in 1917 (Bobrovnikov 1996).<sup>3</sup> Nor were Buddhists spared (Snelling 1993). Although the antireligious campaign was not directed against them until 1930, by 1936 all Buddhist monasteries had been destroyed and “Molotov could rejoice in the liquidation of the ‘parasitical lama class’ as one of the achievements of Soviet Policy” (Snelling 1993:243).

Throughout the Soviet Union the police (and on holidays volunteers from Communist youth groups) prevented anyone but elderly, regular members from entering a church or mosque to attend services. In addition to closing churches and mosques, and persecuting religious people, the Soviet regime conducted a constant program of atheist education, making it a regular part of the primary and secondary school curricula. One of the primary goals of this campaign was to disconnect morality and religion and the schools devoted considerable effort to moral education, combined with attacks on religion.

Following World War II, when the USSR imposed Communist regimes on many nations of Eastern Europe, attempts were made to impose similar levels of religious repression. Compared with the early terror campaign in Russia, far fewer clergy were murdered (although a substantial number were put to death in Albania), but large numbers were imprisoned, many churches were seized, and many others were closed. However, the effectiveness of these efforts varied depending on the level of local cooperation, which was far higher in nations dominated by the orthodox church than in Roman Catholic nations.

We now know that these Communist efforts to stamp out religion were not very successful in the sense that belief in God remains widespread in Eastern Europe—even in Russia only 8 percent identified themselves as atheists in 1991. But, repression did greatly diminish religious participation and, especially, religious education. Moreover, a side effect of religious repression was to discredit “the Church” in most nations where the Eastern Orthodox Church predominates. For a variety of reasons, the national orthodox churches were successfully coopted by local Communist regimes to such an extent that clergy frequently informed on nonorthodox religious activities and even on religious dissidents within their own ranks. Worse yet, some orthodox clergy were willing to ratify views such as, “God is identical with the Marxist concept of history” (Pásztor 1995:27), or to defend government prohibitions on church attendance by young people because “religious instruction of underage children promotes prejudices” (Johansen 1983:15). (Romania is a notable exception, as will be seen.) In contrast, in the nonorthodox nations the churches, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, managed to preserve their honor and become beacons of resistance.

I anticipate that each of these factors—repression, collaboration, and a more distant image of God—will tend to have an effect, as formulated in these subsidiary hypotheses:

1. Communist efforts to weaken the link between religion and morality will show up in substantially weaker correlations in the nonorthodox nations of Eastern Europe than found in Western Europe.
2. Within Eastern Europe, the more remote orthodox conception of God will result in correlations that are weaker in orthodox nations than in the nonorthodox nations. In combination with the effects of Communist repression, this will result in a lack of *any* significant correlations between God and morality in the orthodox nations, except for Romania.

As can be seen in Table 5, the first of these subsidiary hypotheses is strongly supported. Although significant, negative correlations obtain in 10 of the 11 instances, they do tend to be weaker than in Table 4. For example, all three correlations are much higher in the former West Germany than in the former East Germany. Only the correlations in Poland resemble the magnitudes typical in Western Europe, but, of course, nowhere in Eastern Europe was the church so effective in resisting the regime as in this nation, which produced the first non-Italian Pope in many centuries. As for Hypothesis 4, in 10 of the 11 comparisons (not shown), the church attendance effect is substantially weaker (most correlations are not significant) than the God effect.

The second subsidiary hypothesis also is strongly supported by Table 5. In Russia, all three of the correlations are minuscule. In another sample based only on the population of Moscow, again none of the three correlations is significant. Nor are there any significant correlations in Bulgaria. There are two small, significant correlations in Byelorussia, but they are in the wrong direction! That is, the more importance Byelorussians place on God, the *more* willing they are to condone immorality. I suspect that this is a meaningless finding.

Then there is Romania. It too is an orthodox nation and it too long endured Communist rule. But, all three correlations are strong, negative, and highly significant. Why? Part of the answer would seem to lie in the effective resistance of the Romanian Orthodox Church, which unlike the orthodox church in Russia,<sup>4</sup> had never been subservient to the state—for a time in the 1930s the Romanian Orthodox Patriarch also was the Prime Minister. But, perhaps the major reason behind these correlations can be traced to the idiosyncrasies of that strange tyrant Nicolae Ceaușescu, who ruled the nation from 1965 until he was executed by revolutionaries on Christmas Day, 1989. Is it uncertain what Ceaușescu’s private religious views may have been, although after

**TABLE 5**  
**GOD AND THE MORAL ORDER IN EASTERN EUROPE**

	Correlations with Importance of God		
	Stolen Goods	Hit/Run	Smoke Dope
<i>Non-Orthodox Nations</i>			
Poland	-0.17*	—	-0.21**
East Germany	-0.19**	-0.11**	-0.12**
Hungary	-0.15**	-0.08*	-0.12**
Slovenia	-0.03	-0.14**	-0.19**
<i>Orthodox Nations</i>			
Russia	0.02	-0.06	0.04
(Moscow)	0.07	0.03	-0.04
Bulgaria	-0.07	-0.07	0.00
Byelorussia	0.09*	0.05	0.10*
Romania	-0.26**	-0.22**	-0.31**

— Question not asked

\*\* Significant above 0.01.

\* Significant above 0.05.

taking power he did provide a religious funeral for his father. But, from the beginning of his rule he established very friendly, personal relationships with the heads of all religious bodies in Romania, including Protestants and Jews. Following the overthrow of the Ceausescu regime, some have condemned these relationships as collaboration (Tökés 1990). Perhaps so, but they also resulted in a religious climate unlike that in any other Communist state. For example, rather than demand that Communist Party members be staunch atheists, Ceausescu merely required that Party members not hold religious offices—many Party members were openly active Christians. In addition, under Ceausescu, the government gave extensive financial subsidies to all the churches and exempted all seminarians and clergy from military service. Most important of all, the churches were freely permitted to operate a huge system of Sunday schools (Barrett 1982). Thus, in Romania, moral education remained religious education. Writing approximately 15 years after Ceausescu took over, Earl A. Pope (1981:4) reported that:

there appears to be a very important resurgence of religious faith in Romania. Paradoxical as it may seem, the rise of Marxism has led to the inner strengthening of religious communities. In certain respects, some of them appear to be healthier now than they were in an earlier era—despite the limitations and restrictions imposed.

Granted that Ceausescu did not tolerate opposition from anyone, including church leaders, but the fact remains that the religious situation in Romania was unique among Communist states (Barrett 1982; Pope 1981, 1992).

I am unable to document that the image of God portrayed in these Romanian Sunday schools, including those that were orthodox (as most of them were), was more vigorous and morally relevant than was sustained in other orthodox nations such as Bulgaria, Byelorussia, or Russia, but that seems likely given that the Romanian Orthodox Church recently welcomed World Vision, one of the leading evangelical Protestant world mission agencies, to help with the “spiritual recovery” of Romania. In fact, the majority of staff and board members of World Vision Romania are provided by the orthodox church (Athyal 1998). This partnership with World Vision is unique among orthodox churches in Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union. Indeed, these other national orthodox churches have become militant opponents of all possible competitors, especially “outsiders” such as World Vision.

**TABLE 6**  
**GOD, MOSQUE ATTENDANCE, AND THE MORAL ORDER**  
**IN TURKEY**

	Stolen Goods	Hit/Run	Smoke Dope
Correlations with Importance of God	-0.45**	-0.31**	-0.44**
Correlations with Mosque Attendance	-0.19**	-0.12*	-0.12
Regression Analysis	Standardized Betas		
God	-0.184**	-0.138**	-0.162**
Mosque Attendance	-0.051	-0.036	-0.027
R <sup>2</sup>	0.042**	0.024**	0.030**

\*\* Significant above 0.01.

\* Significant above 0.05.

Given the great emphasis on ritual in the orthodox church, Durkheim surely would propose a counterhypothesis. However, the data (not shown) offer no support for the ritual alternative, being entirely consistent with Hypothesis 4. Only one of the 12 correlations with church attendance is significant, and it is in the wrong direction! Religion, either as God or as ritual, fails to support the moral order in these orthodox nations.

#### GOD AND MORALITY IN ISLAM

Muslims believe that the God of the Torah and of the New Testament is the same God who gave the *Qur'an* to Muhammad, the final prophet in a line beginning with Abraham.

He hath revealed unto thee (Muhammad) the Scripture with truth, confirming that which was (revealed) before it, even as He revealed the Torah and the Gospel. (*Qur'an* III:3)

Not surprisingly, the Muslim image of God's nature is very similar to that of traditional Judaism and Christianity: an all-seeing, all-powerful, eternal, conscious, virtuous, morally-concerned *being*.

Allah! There is no God save Him, the Alive, the Eternal.  
Lo! nothing in the earth or in the heavens is hidden from Allah. (*Qur'an* III:2,5)

As for morality, the *Qur'an* is entirely clear about how humans are to behave toward one another, about the immense rewards awaiting the virtuous, and about the eternal sanctions to befall those who fail to conform.

Consequently, Muslims, who place the greatest importance on God, ought to be most opposed to moral transgressions. Table 6 strongly supports Hypothesis 3—all the correlations between God and tolerance of immorality are negative, significant, and of a magnitude comparable with the highest found elsewhere. The second row of correlations shows that here, too, Durkheim's ritual alternative fails quite badly. As predicted by Hypothesis 4, the correlations with mosque attendance are far weaker and one even falls short of significance. In fact, regression analysis eliminates all traces of a mosque attendance effect.

#### GOD AND MORALITY IN INDIA

It easily could be assumed that there would be at best a very tenuous link between religion and morality in India since the general impression among Westerners is that Hinduism is polytheistic

**TABLE 7**  
**GOD, TEMPLE VISITS, AND THE MORAL ORDER IN INDIA**

	Stolen Goods	Hit/Run	Smoke Dope
Correlations with Importance of God	-0.25**	-0.20**	-0.27**
Correlations with Temple Visits	0.02	-0.05	0.08

\*\* Significant above 0.01.

\* Significant above 0.05.

and, hence, relationships with any given God are short-term and utilitarian, as is typical in polytheistic religions. But, this is quite erroneous (Fowler 1997; Knipe 1993; Parrinder 1983; Smart 1984; Weightman 1984). First of all, the Hindu gods really number only two: *Vishnu* and *Shiva*. Each of the many other apparent gods is regarded as an additional aspect, avatar, or incarnation of one of these two. Thus, while there exist many different Hindu sects devoted to different incarnations, it is understood that each incarnation really is either Vishnu or Shiva. Thus, the popular Krishna is an avatar of Vishnu. Some scholars claim that, in fact, Hindus *do not worship both* Vishnu and Shiva (Fowler 1997; Weightman 1984). Following a principle known as *ishtadeva*, “the chosen deity,” the individual Hindu worships one or the other “exclusively as the supreme God”:

one could spend a lifetime in India and never find a “polytheist” in Western terms, because even an unlettered peasant who has just made offerings at several shrines will affirm that . . . God is one. (Weightman 1984:212)

Indeed, Ninian Smart (1984:136) suggests that Hindus do not really believe that there are two gods, but only one, who can be worshipped either in the form of Vishnu or Shiva.

No matter which form a Hindu chooses to represent God, morality is central to Hindu teachings and is subject to divine sanctions, which take the form of “bad karma.” Moral living in this world is specified in the *dharma sutras* and the *dharma shastras*, which are essentially religious law books. And, as Simon Weightman (1984:197) explained, right living in this world, or *dharma*, is “the very centre of Hinduism.” While observing *dharma* is regarded as an end in itself, it is crucial in terms of *karma*, the doctrine that every action influences one’s future incarnations. This is closely related to another central doctrine concerning the sanctity of the caste system: that anyone’s position in *this* life is God-given and earned through sin or righteousness. Hence, if the lowest castes suffer hell on earth, that is regarded as simple justice in that they *are in hell*, having earned their punishment in a prior life. Thus, in terms of moral edification, for a Hindu to observe the misery of low caste life is tantamount to an actual visit to hell. These views have declined and softened to some extent over the past century, as has the concept of hell within Christianity, but there still ought to be a strong religious component to morality.

It follows that in India the importance given to God will be negatively correlated with tolerance for immorality. Table 7 confirms Hypothesis 3—all three correlations in the top row are negative and significant. The correlations in the second row are quite remarkable. Had no question been asked about God, forcing the use only of temple visits as a measure of religiousness, it would have seemed that religion fails to support morality in India: all three correlations are trivial. But this would have been very misleading since, in India, God matters, even if ritual participation does not. Hypotheses 3 and 4 are strongly supported.

#### GOD AND MORALITY IN JAPAN

The spiritual life of the Japanese takes the form of individual “religious portfolios” (Iannaccone 1995). There are many gods and most Japanese select a subset from whom to seek

benefits, much as cautious investors distribute their funds among various options. In addition to many gods, two major religious traditions dominate in Japan—Shinto and Buddhism—and most Japanese “belong” to both. Indeed, Buddhism, like American Protestantism, is fractured into many factions and sects, but whereas most American Protestants belong to only one group, many Japanese Buddhists adhere to several. Consequently, many Japanese report multiple religious affiliations, with the result that statistics on religious membership add up to nearly 200 percent of the total population (Parrinder 1983). As Alan S. Miller (1995:235) explained:

Probably the most accurate way a Japanese person can answer the question “what religion do you belong to?” is to reply “I am Japanese.” One does not become a Shintoist, but rather participates in some Shinto-based rituals or festivals. Similarly, one does not become a Buddhist, but rather uses Buddhist teachings as guidelines for how to care for deceased relatives or pray for spiritual assistance. And, of course, one does not stop being a Shintoist or Buddhist when one no longer needs these services.

Consequently, when asked if they are Shintoists, many Japanese probably will say “No,” and the next day drive their new automobile to a Shinto Temple to have it blessed by the priest, or invite the priest to a building site to quiet the spirits prior to construction (Nelson 1992). As this widespread reliance on Shinto demonstrates, there is a great deal of magic involved in Shinto practices. Moreover, the gods of Shinto are many, small in scope, and lacking in concern for humans. Like the Greco-Roman gods, they may provide benefits in return for proper sacrifices, but the wise supplicant seeks aid from several gods at once and is prepared to switch his or her patronage on the basis of results (Earhart 1984, 1993; Parrinder 1983).

In all of its forms, Buddhism emphasizes morality, as expressed in the five observances recited as part of devotions. These pledge the individual not to injure others, to not steal or lie, to avoid sexual immorality, and not to use alcohol or drugs (Parrinder 1983:272). However, these moral obligations are *not* associated with God’s will because most Buddhists reject the existence of a conscious, all-powerful, concerned God of the sort worshipped by Jews, Christians, or Muslims. Indeed, the existence of such a God has for many centuries been the basis of dispute between Buddhists and Hindus and “Buddhists have even gone so far as to say that belief in such a God often leads to ethical degradation” (Clough 1997:57).

However, rank and file Buddhists are not atheists and do embrace a whole “pantheon of spirits and minor deities” (Clough 1997:58) and supernatural creatures abound in Shinto (Earhart 1984, 1993). Indeed, “one of the chief characteristics of Shinto is the close and intimate relationship between humans and *kami*,” which are acknowledged in Japanese Buddhism as well (Earhart 1984:16). The *kami* are supernatural entities, but of small scope as they are subject to many of the laws of nature and are of very limited power. Other deities are known as *buddhas* (not to be confused with Buddha himself). These are closely related to the *kami* and there is a Japanese term that includes both (Earhart 1993:1115). However, the *buddhas* are deities of substantially greater power and scope and, like Hindu gods, a given *buddha* takes several forms. Thus Kannon, the goddess of mercy, who is one of the most popular *buddhas*, also takes the form of Koyasu Kannon, to whom appeals are directed for an easy childbirth, as well as the form of Bato Kannon, who serves as a sort of patron saint of livestock breeders (Earhart 1993:1117). However, while the various *kami* and *buddhas* may grant favors or inflict harm, issues of morality are not germane to pleasing them.

The core of Japanese religion consists of frequent rites and rituals, most of which are conducted at home. Most Japanese maintain a *kami-dana*, or Shinto home shrine, before which they make ceremonial offerings each morning and evening. In addition, nearly every household headed by a first son also has a Buddhist altar devoted to the spirits of the family dead. This altar contains scrolls listing ancestors of the family—ancestor “worship” is an important part of both Buddhism and Shinto. Each year, on the anniversary of each family member’s death (going back for several generations or more), the family gathers at the altar to make offerings to the ancestors—sometimes

**TABLE 8**  
**GOD, RITUALS, AND THE MORAL ORDER IN JAPAN**

	Stolen Goods	Hit/Run	Smoke Dope
Correlations with Importance of God	−0.07	−0.08	0.11
Correlations with Temple Visits	−0.06	−0.09	0.04
Correlations with Prayer or Meditation	−0.04	−0.09	0.01

\*\* Significant above 0.01.

\* Significant above 0.05.

a priest is engaged for the occasion. Thus, religion in the Japanese household approaches the functionalist ideal type, as it maximizes collective rituals and minimizes the significance of the gods.

It follows from Hypothesis 3 that, given their conceptions of the gods, there should *not be* significant correlations between the importance placed on God and moral attitudes in Japan. Table 8 confirms the hypothesis—all three correlations are insignificant.

Nor does ritual sustain morality in Japan. The second row of correlations shows that none of the three correlations involving temple visits is significant. In addition, since so much of the ritual of Japanese religious life occurs in the home, I have added a third row to examine the effects of the frequency of “prayer or meditation.” Here, too, all three correlations are trivial.

No matter how it is measured, religion does not sustain the moral order in Japan.

#### GOD AND MORALITY IN CHINA

China has four great religions: Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and the ancient, vigorous, and highly magical faith known variously as “popular religion” or as “Chinese folk religion” (Shahar and Weller 1996). The first two are indigenous and originated more as elite and “Godless” philosophies than as religions. Just as Buddha denied the existence of a God, Confucius is believed to have advised that “Absorption in the study of the supernatural is most harmful” (Giles 1993:94). As for the Tao, the Chinese do acknowledge it as a sort of First Cause in the creation of the world, but it is thought to be an inactive, nonconscious, essence—not only a nonbeing, but a “not-being” (Eichhorn 1959:393). As noted, Buddhism also originated as a “Godless” philosophy in India, but by the time it migrated to Japan about 1,500 years ago, it had acquired a pantheon of supernatural creatures. The same came to be true of Chinese Confucianism and Taoism. In fact the four religions are somewhat amalgamated. “Gods are mutually borrowed and sometimes are shared by two, three, or all four religions” (Shahar and Weller 1996:3). However, all these gods are of very limited power and scope and usually lack moral concern and even dignity (Eichhorn 1959; Lang and Ragvald 1993; Shahar and Weller 1996). Thus, Chinese who have made an offering in a temple and not received the requested boon, have been known to attack the image of the God who failed (Chen 1995:1).

For these reasons, consistent with Hypothesis 3, I would *not* expect a link between commitment to God and morality in China. Moreover, the militant campaign against religion that raged in China for 40 years (and has now resumed) also should have some effect. Indeed, antireligious propaganda and repression may be the reason that it is necessary to use a substitute “God variable” in the Chinese data. The item used in the other nations was a 10-point scale of “how important is God in your life.” In the 1991 Chinese survey, this item was essentially invariant—virtually no one in China said God was important. However, the Chinese survey also included this question concerning God:

Which one of these statements comes closest to your beliefs?

There is a personal God.

**TABLE 9**  
**GOD, PRAYER, AND THE MORAL ORDER IN CHINA**

	Stolen Goods	Hit/Run	Smoke Dope
Correlations with Belief in God	-0.01	0.04	-0.11
Correlations with Prayer or Meditation	0.32**	0.27**	0.42**

\*\* Significant above 0.01.

\* Significant above 0.05.

There is some sort of spirit or life force.

I don't really know what to think.

I don't really think there is any sort of spirit, God, or life force.

These responses can be converted into a three-point scale of the degree of belief in God. Since only 22 Chinese expressed faith in a personal God, I combined them with the 311 (of 1,000) who believed in some sort of spirit or life force and scored them as 3 to indicate belief. Those who didn't know what to think were scored 2. The nonbelievers were scored 1. It is precisely in keeping with my analysis of Chinese religion that 94 percent of the believers (those scored 3) clearly rejected the existence of God as a supernatural *being*. And, as in Japan, such a God has no influence on moral judgments in China (Table 9): all three correlations are tiny and insignificant.

It was impossible to pursue the effects of temple visits in China since almost no one goes to the temples—only 2 percent admitted doing so even once a year. On the other hand, 20 percent said they sometimes prayed or meditated. Scored as a four-point scale of the frequency of prayer or meditation, this variable resulted in a surprising effect, as can be seen in the second row of correlations. Each correlation is strong, highly significant, and *positive*! That is, the more often they pray or meditate, the more tolerant the Chinese are of immorality. I suggest that this result is due to the fact that in China, “prayer” seldom implies a long-standing, deeply-felt relationship with a God, but merely involves requests for favors from various divinities of small scope. As such, praying tends to reflect a quite self-centered and self-serving activity, consistent with rapidly shifting from one God to another on the basis of results (Chen 1995; Green 1988; Lang and Ragvold 1993). Seen in this light, a question about prayer is likely to select those somewhat lacking in terms of a social conscience. In any case, these correlations offer no support to the “law” concerning religion and the moral order.

### CONCLUSION

Durkheim made a major error when he dismissed gods as a mere religious epiphenomena. Unfortunately, his error had severe, widespread, and long-lasting consequences, for it quickly became the exclusive sociological view that religion consists of rites and ritual and that these exist only because their latent function is to integrate societies and to thereby lend sacred sanctions to the norms. In retrospect, it seems remarkable that such a notion gained such rapid acceptance and went unchallenged for so long. Stripped of its functionalist jargon, the basic argument seems to have been that since “we” know there are no gods, they can't be the real object of religion—the notion that things are real to the extent that people define them as real failed to make any headway in this area of social science.

The results presented above show that, in and of themselves, rites and rituals have little or no impact on the major effect universally attributed to religion—conformity to the moral order. Thus, it seems necessary to revise the opening line of this essay as follows: *Images of gods as conscious, powerful, morally-concerned beings function to sustain the moral order.*



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## NOTES

1. In response to Crane Brinton's rhetorical excess "Who now reads Spencer?"—quoted with glowing approval by Talcott Parsons as the opening sentence of his now unread classic *The Structure of Social Action* (1937)—it seems fitting to note that throughout my career I have cited Spencer rather more frequently than Parsons and I cannot recall ever having cited Brinton.
2. Data provided by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
3. By 1994 there were 5,000!
4. From 1700 until 1917 the Russian Orthodox Church was under strict state control, a policy begun by Peter the Great.

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