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A Kantian-Type Moral Argument for Postulatory Religious Pluralism: Elements of Christianity and Sufism as Postulated Religious Beliefs in Contemporary Western Culture

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Abstract

Moral arguments for the existence of God have been a recurring form of apologetic. Perhaps the most widely known moral argument—at least among philosophers and theologians—is that of Immanuel Kant. In this work, I develop a form of moral argument that shares the logical structure of Kant's version, or what I call a 'Kantian-type' moral argument. The argument I set forth vindicates the rationality, within a Kantian framework, of belief in a supremely moral creator as that belief is internalized from within a variety of theistic traditions. I develop this claim by reference to how core aspects of Christianity and Sufism cohere with a Kantian-type moral argument for a theistic God. Lastly, I show the appeal of this argument for key elements in contemporary Western culture.

Keywords

Immanuel Kant, moral argument for God, Christianity, Sufism, practical postulates

Introduction

Contemporary Western nations have seen a significant decline in the professed belief in God. In the United States, although professions of atheism and agnosticism remain relatively rare, the rate of those identifying as either atheist or agnostic has doubled in the past two decades.¹ The rate of growth is even greater throughout Canada and Western Europe.² As sociologist Ryan Burge remarks, this trend indicates a culturally significant openness to atheism and agnosticism across Western societies.³ Writing in substantial measure in response to these developments, philosophers of faith have advanced new defenses of belief in God in our era of mounting religious skepticism. Prominent scholars have renewed the cosmological argument,⁴ the teleological argument,⁵ and the ontological argument.⁶

Renewal has also been seen in versions of the moral argument. In their important book, *The Moral Argument: A History*, David Baggett and Jerry Walls demonstrate how the moral argument has taken, and continues to take, a variety of forms.⁷ Within the analytic philosophy of religion, one of the most common is an ontological expression of the argument, one that addresses moral realism and asks which metaphysical view—theism or materialism—best coheres with moral realism.⁸ Other forms include the idea that if morality represents a command, then morality requires, by logical

- 1 J.M. Twenge, R.A. Sherman, J.J. Exline, J.B. Grubbs, “Declines in American Adults’ Religious Participation and Beliefs, 1972–2014” *Sage Open* 6, no. 1 (2016): 1–13.
- 2 See for example Stephen Bullivant, “Europe’s Young Adults and Religion: Findings from the European Social Survey (2014–16) to Inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops,” Report of the Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society (St. Mary’s University Twickenham and Institut Catholique de Paris, 2018), <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2018-mar-europe-young-people-report-eng.pdf>.
- 3 Yonat Shimron, “More Americans are Becoming Secular, Poll Says,” *The Washington Post*, December 17, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/12/17/secular-pew-poll/>.
- 4 See Robert J Spitzer, ed., *New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy* (Eerdmans, 2010).
- 5 See C. Stephens Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments* (Oxford, 2012).
- 6 See for example Alexander Pruss, “The Ontological Argument and the Motivational Centres of Lives,” *Religious Studies* 46 (2010): 233–249.
- 7 David Baggett and Jerry Walls, *The Moral Argument: A History* (Oxford, 2019).
- 8 David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (Oxford, 2011).

deduction, a certain kind of moral lawgiver.⁹ A further version addresses the phenomenon of human awareness of moral facts and argues, in turn, that this sense of apprehending moral facts is especially surprising and calls for an appropriate explanation, one theism best provides.¹⁰

Another form of the moral argument can be called the Kantian-type moral argument. As philosopher Andrew Chignell remarks, a Kantian-type moral argument has the following general feature: “it starts from facts about my moral obligations, hopes, and needs, and concludes with the claim that I have defeasible moral justification for faith/trust/acceptance (*Glaube*, or ‘Belief’) ... regarding what exists, even in the absence of sufficient epistemic grounds.” Holding moral justification for belief in what exists, as opposed to a scientific or metaphysical justification, constitutes no affront to reason since, on a Kantian-type argument, claims about how the world actually is based on scientific or metaphysical analysis are seen as highly questionable, whereas at least basic moral obligations are not. Hence, rational agents are entitled to postulate—to hold by moral justification—beliefs such as that a God of a particular nature exists and that features of rational moral agents, such as their free will and immortality, are true—all, notwithstanding the absence of compelling proof in a traditional sense.¹¹ For, the ultimate foundation for *Glaube* in such positions is not theoretical proof but the positive impact belief in them has on our ability to perform binding moral duties.

The Kantian-type moral argument can be expressed in a number of different forms. The one most commonly associated with Kant himself pertains to the *summum bonum*, usually defined as that condition wherein happiness is experienced by all rational beings in proportion to moral desert. The *summum bonum* is seen as a goal required to be set by our practical reason, given the drive for systematicity Kant sees as inherent in the operation of our reason. On this view, if what reason demands is not capable of being realized, our reason would produce a morally absurd outcome, since moral agents would not be able to truly see themselves as obligated to do what they register to be impossible. If that were so, individuals would begin to question moral reasoning, judging it quite capable of “misfiring.” Such an erosion in the confidence in moral reason would cause our moral

9 Mark C. Murphy, *God and Moral Law: On the Theistic Explanation of Morality* (Oxford, 2011).

10 Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2004).

11 Andrew Chignell, “Demoralization and Hope: A Psychological Reading of Kant’s Moral Argument,” *The Monist* 2, no. 106 (2023): 46–60, 47, 46.

lives to lose the rigor that comes from reason's demand for consistency as encapsulated in the categorical imperative—the idea that we must act only on maxims or principles that could stand as universally applicable laws. This erosion would permit individuals more easily to excuse self-exempting behavior—notwithstanding the recognition that doing so is unreasonable—since individuals could always tell themselves that perfect consistency in moral action (i.e. that one must not make selfish exceptions from moral demands to satisfy strong desires) is just another misfiring of reason. As such, to sustain a rigorous commitment to morality requires that we assume that an all-powerful, all-knowing, and omnibenevolent God exists who assists our efforts to realize the *summum bonum* by overcoming what we as finite beings cannot achieve. This supplies the “moral justification” for belief in God.¹²

This argument has been the object of extensive analysis, with most scholars either viewing the *summum bonum* as not a true demand of reason¹³ or arguing that a firm attachment to the *summum bonum* is inconsistent with other aspects of Kant's moral philosophy, such as his view that when acting morally agents must set aside considerations of personal happiness.¹⁴

However, a Kantian-type moral argument can be expressed in a form that does not directly address the *summum bonum*. Instead, the argument can focus squarely on the difficulty of sustaining a life committed to morality's demands—demands that, by requiring universality in actions, preclude special appeals to personal interests and selfish passions. As Karl Ameriks defines this form of the argument, a Kantian moral apologia can be based solely on “a realistic view of human psychology”¹⁵ in relation to what John Silber calls “the requirement” to “procure the moral law's ... influence over practice.”¹⁶ Chignell aptly calls this “a psychological reading” of Kant's

12 For a classic articulation of the argument in this form, see Wood's interpretation of Kant as advancing a *reductio absurdum practicum*. Allen Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Cornell University Press, 1970), *passim*.

13 See Thomas Auxter, “The Unimportance of Kant's Highest Good,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 17 (1979): 121–134.

14 See L. W. Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* (Chicago, 1960), 244–45.

15 Karl Ameriks, “Reality, Reason, and Religion in the Development of Kant's Ethics,” in Benjamin J. Bruxvoort Lipscomb and James Krueger, eds., *Kant's Moral Metaphysics* (De Gruyter, 2010), 23–47, 47

16 John Silber, “The Importance of the Highest Good in Kant's Ethics,” *Ethics* 73 (1963): 179–191, 180; and Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck, (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 389 (*GW* unless otherwise noted). See also Rex P. Stevens, *Kant on Moral Practice: A Study of Moral Success and Failure* (Mercer University Press, 1981).

moral argument for God.¹⁷ On this view, to remain committed to morality, individuals must hold that a God exists who aids us in our moral lives in such ways as rewarding moral behavior and reinforcing the importance of moral actions by announcing morality in the form of divine commands. These beliefs are seen as supports aiding one consistently to act for the sake of moral duty, and are thus claims individuals are entitled to hold by “moral justification.”

The works addressing this form of a Kantian-type moral argument have largely been consumed with showing how it is not unreasonable to read Kant as making this type of argument—that to read him in this way does not evidence debilitating inconsistency within his moral thought. It has therefore been lacking one very important element: any attempt *to defend* this argument beyond demonstrating its consistency with Kant’s moral philosophy. It is as if the writing in this area is more concerned with defending Kant the thinker—by showing he did not produce arguments riddled with contradictions—than with defending the argument itself.¹⁸ In this work, on the contrary, I take the question of whether such an argument is perfectly consistent with Kant’s moral writings to be less important than whether such an argument is intellectually persuasive and potentially capable of arresting the recent declines in belief in a theistic God.

To this end, in sections II and III, I first defend an expression of a Kantian-type moral argument for general moral theism using evidence derived from social science data and research in moral and empirical psychology. I argue that strong evidence connects belief in God to moral advancement, while also showing the importance of congregational religious

17 Chignell, “Demoralization and Hope: A Psychological Reading of Kant’s Moral Argument.”

18 For example, one such defense of Kant’s moral argument for God, which sees Kant defending belief in God as part of warding off “frustration and disappointment” with the world, rests content only with arguing that such a view is not “extravagant” within a Kantian framework, and that it makes Kant’s moral argument “something more interesting” than is recognized by its critics. David Sussman, “Something to Love: Kant and Faith in Reason,” in *Kant’s Moral Metaphysics*, 133–148, 148, 134. Further, John Hare, in a work defending the coherence of a Kantian moral argument centering around the requirements of “perseverance in the moral life,” makes only one faint reference to “interesting empirical evidence” that could support the moral argument. John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God’s Assistance* (Oxford, 2002), 91 fn.51, 92.

affiliation for consistent moral action—a timely claim in Western societies where, among those still professing belief in theism, rates of congregational disaffiliation have steadily increased.¹⁹ As such, agents committed to moral rigor are entitled to postulate the existence of a generally theistic God who should be revered in a congregational setting.

In Sections IV-VI, I next argue that belief in a concrete manifestation of the general theistic framework further enhances moral behavior, and that it should for this reason also be postulated. I then argue that various theistic traditions and practices equally can assist a robust moral life, a point which has not been developed in detail in the literature on the moral argument.²⁰ I argue, based on a close review of sacred texts and leading theological thinkers in each tradition, that elements within Christianity and Sufi Islam each support moral strength. Further, I maintain that such pluralism of theistic beliefs and practices can be postulated by different people at the same time without any scandal to reason, as long as the coexistence of various religious communities only aids moral behavior. In turn, I argue that this can be seen as true, since the coexistence of different morally empowering theistic belief systems can stimulate competition for moral excellence. These sections, in sum, serve to defend what I call postulatory religious pluralism.

In section VII, I argue that the specific Kantian-type moral apologia I develop is one likely to resonate well with key elements in contemporary Western society and is thus an especially appropriate argument to meet current challenges. The reason for this lies first in the general features of Kantian thought, and, second, in specific features of this moral argument. As to the argument's general Kantian framework, this coheres with what Juergen Habermas has called the "Kantian cognitive attitude" among many in the West²¹—an attitude conjoining high confidence in the clarity and certainty of moral judgments with a deep skepticism of metaphysical claims.

19 Twenge, Sherman, Exline, and Grubbs, "Declines in American Adults' Religious Participation," 1–13.

20 Chris Firestone and Nathan Jacobs—two of the most prominent commentators on Kant's moral argument—mention in their work, *In Defense of Kant's Religion*, only that Kant's moral argument, in their judgment, permits "any historical faith" to be seen as a "candidate" for being a faith that properly empowers moral action. They then argue that Christianity can serve this function, while leaving entirely unexamined the question of whether any other religious traditions can do so as well. Chris L. Firestone and Nathan Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant's Religion* (Indiana University Press, 2008), 198.

21 Juergen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays* (Polity, 2004), Chapter 8, "The Boundary between Faith and Knowledge: On the Reception and Contemporary Importance of Kant's Philosophy of Religion," 209–248, 228.

Yet, western culture is not entirely as Habermas would like: it is not based solely on secular rationality as many, at times vague, religious elements still run deep in western culture. Yet for many in the West, a religious claim could only be adopted if it could be shown to affirm religious pluralism, given the rising embrace of religious pluralism occurring across many western nations. What is more, survey data in several western countries indicates a special openness to Sufism, a point that partly justifies the special attention given to it in this work (with the large number of adherents of Sufi and Sufi-inspired movements being another²²). Lastly, many throughout the contemporary West remain committed to capitalist concepts of competition, seeing competition as an engine of progress, which is a belief, in turn, that can facilitate an openness to viewing religious competition as beneficial. These dynamics, taken together, can enhance the appeal of the moral argument, permitting it to serve for many as an effective defense of theistic belief in the contemporary West.²³

To guide our assessment, I first provide an outline of this moral argument in full.

I. An Outline of the Moral Argument

- a) Many individuals recognize that they are subject to strong moral duties, and that these duties call for a lifetime of moral action, with true moral action requiring concern for the moral good itself rather than concern for instrumental gain.
- b) The call of moral conscience, so understood, is registered by many as a deeply important and urgent call.
- c) Many individuals also recognize that humans face many temptations, and have a certain kind of constitutional weakness, in terms of reliably performing moral duty and doing so for the sake of the moral good.
- d) Agents who recognize an urgent call for a life in conformity

22 By some accounts, approximately half of the world's Muslims practice some variety of Sufism. See Dale Hadaway, *The Muslim Majority: Folk Islam and the Seventy Percent* (B&H Academic, 2021), 40.

23 To this extent we can think of my argument as a form of contextual apologetics, defining this to mean an approach that secures "beachheads" in a particular milieu for the position being missioned. See, Benno van den Torren, *Christian Apologetics as Cross-cultural Dialogue* (Continuum, 2011).

to moral duty so understood, face a collateral duty to do all they reasonably and ethically can to live according to this call; they must confront, as best they can within these restraints, the challenge of living life morally.

- e) Humans cannot know the world as it exists in itself, and thus cannot acquire knowledge of whether a God exists, nor what the true nature of human capabilities are.
- f) Since humans are unable to have knowledge of these things, there is no prohibition per se on assuming that a God exists or assuming that individuals possess certain capabilities.
- g) Postulating the existence of entities such as a God and the existence of certain human capabilities is extravagant, unwarranted, and potentially dangerous unless doing so is tightly connected with improving moral behavior.
- h) Moral agents who believe that a God of a certain kind exists, and also that certain human capacities exist, are greatly benefited in the performance of their moral duties.
- i) Moral agents as described in premises d-h are, therefore, under a presumptive moral obligation to postulate the existence of such a God and such human capacities as described in premise h, as long as these agents are capable of sustaining these beliefs for a sufficient period of time for the beliefs appreciably to improve their moral behavior. That is, they are presumptively morally obligated to assume that a God and certain human capabilities as described in premise h do exist, but only on the further condition that they can overcome a potential difficulty arising from the postulated character of their beliefs, namely, the difficulty that these beliefs might always be recognized as only the agents' mental constructions, which could make holding them with sufficient strength and for a sufficient time unlikely.
- j) Agents can hold to belief in a posited God and in posited human capabilities sufficiently for these beliefs positively to inform their moral behavior.
- k) If it is possible to deepen further the faith one holds in the content of premise h such that these beliefs become more secure, doing so becomes an additional duty.

- l) Believing in a particularized manifestation of the theistic framework found in premise h would facilitate a deeper level of belief in the framework and thereby advance moral behavior. As such, individuals face a presumptive moral duty to postulate a particularized embodiment of the theistic framework, were such manifestations to exist.
- m) There are multiple concrete manifestations that equally serve to deepen faith in the general theistic framework.
- n) Reason imposes no requirement for singularity in this context, and so a plurality of moral theisms instantiating the general theistic framework is not extravagant or unjustifiable.
- o) Those who recognize an urgent call of conscience to perform throughout their lives moral behavior, and moral behavior done for its own sake, face, therefore, a presumptive moral demand to postulate the existence of such a God, and such human capabilities, as found in premise h and as concretized in those beliefs expressed in premise m.
- p) This presumption can be defeated, but only if an alternative set of beliefs to those described in premises h or m can provide as good or superior a degree of moral assistance; and the burden of proof will fall on those who so allege, given the weight of the evidence supplied in defense of these two premises, coupled with the need for caution lest the performance of moral duties be compromised.

II. Starting the Defense

Since I am working in the context of a Kantian-type argument, I shall in this work assume premises a-g, which together form core elements of any argument of this type. The question I first address relates to premise h. To vindicate this premise, we must be able to answer affirmatively the following question: is there a concept of God and of human capabilities the belief in which we can, on a sufficiently rational basis, conclude will assist the performance of our moral duties? I believe there is, as can be seen in reference to the following six beliefs about God and human capacities, and their corresponding influence on moral behavior.

1. *A God Gifts Us the Power to Combat our Many Moral Weaknesses*

If we could strongly affirm to ourselves that we are capable of living life morally in a full and robust way, and so can transcend our selfish desires and follow morality in the fullness of the moral mindset—the mindset of doing what is moral for the sake of moral goodness—our moral lives would be fortified. A powerful way to affirm this about ourselves is to see our capacity to follow moral demands as itself a gift of a God. Seeing ourselves as having been gifted by a divine source the power to overcome the tugs impressing on us from those forces referenced in premise c would aid our ethical striving. Indeed, if we see our own inner nature as approximating to some degree, by dint of a divine gift, the capacity for free action and moral strength possessed by a moral creator God—one who freely creates us and who is a powerful moral being— these beliefs would morally invigorate us.

Empirical research supports this inference. First, a “substantial body of scientific research” has highlighted the “prosocial benefits”—that is, the morally enhancing impact—of believing in our own free will.²⁴ Baumeister et al., among other researchers, have demonstrated that people who believe in free will exhibit higher prosocial and also altruistic behavior.²⁵ According to Baumeister, believing in free will increases one’s “motivation and willingness to make [moral] efforts, therefore resulting in higher self-control,” which enhances moral action.²⁶

Yet, there remain difficult burdens that confront us daily in the effort to live life morally. Believing firmly in our ability to act freely and morally does not itself remove the force of the personal urges and self-serving passions that beset us; such beliefs can weaken the force of these obstacles, but they do not remove them. Indeed, the research of J.B. Miles has shown that merely possessing a belief in one’s free will often only have relatively

24 Emilie A Caspar, Laurène Vuillaume, Pedro A Magalhães De Saldanha da Gama, Axel Cleeremans, “The Influence of (Dis)belief in Free Will on Immoral Behavior,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 8, no. 20 (2017): 1–9.

25 R. F. Baumeister, “Free Will in Scientific Psychology. *Perspectives in Psychological Science* 3 (2008): 14–19; T. F. Stillman, R.F. Baumeister, K.D. Vohs, N.M. Lambert, F.D. Fincham, L.E. Brewer L. E., “Personal Philosophy and Personnel Achievement: Belief in Free Will Predicts Better Job Performance,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 1 (2010): 43–50.

26 Baumeister, “Free Will in Scientific Psychology”; Caspar et al., “The Influence of (Dis)belief in Free Will,” *passim*.

minor—although real—morally enhancing effects.²⁷ Hence, adding to the belief in one's free will the conception of one's free will as being precious, and precious because a divine gift, will augment the morally beneficial consequences of simply believing one has free will.

2. *God as a Demanding Source of Moral Law*

An additional way by which our moral lives would be annealed would be for us to hold that the God who gifts us free will also speaks directly to our conscience the instruction always to follow moral duty, a command we hold to be a grave matter of deep importance to God. The seriousness of a divine command can be imparted in a number of ways. Two stand out. First, a God could communicate the seriousness of his moral commands by indicating that he sees all our actions and also all of our thoughts—all our morally relevant thoughts and actions being worthy of his examination. Second, the God could punish us on the basis of our immoral thoughts and actions and reward our moral thoughts and behavior. In turn, agents who hold these convictions are likely to experience enhanced moral motivation and resulting ethical behavior.

This contention is supported by empirical research in moral psychology. Research measuring moral behavior has shown that those who have, proximate to the moment of moral decision making, the idea in mind of a God observing and judging their behavior, have higher rates of moral action. In their influential work, "The Origin and Evolution of Religious Prosociality," Ara Norenzayan and Azim Shariff demonstrate that those who act with a sense that a moral God is watching and judging what they do are, indeed, more likely consistently to act morally than those without this belief.²⁸

3. *Yet a God Who Avoids Heteronomy by Counseling and Modeling Motivational Compartmentalization*

We must now attend to a potentially vitiating conclusion derivable from what we have so far advanced: having actions informed by a sense that God is

27 J.B. Miles, "‘Irresponsible and a Disservice’: The Integrity of Social Psychology Turns on the Free Will Dilemma," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 52 (2013): 205–218.

28 Ara Norenzayan and Azim F. Shariff, "The Origin and Evolution of Religious Prosociality," *Science* 322 (2008): 58–62, 62.

watching us and judging us could entail what Kant calls “heteronomy”—the conducting of moral commands out of a desire other than respect for moral goodness, such as avoiding punishment or earning favor—which would result in behavior inconsistent with the genuine demands of the moral life as defined in premise a. If this is so, thinking of an all-watchful, morally righteous judge who assigns or allocates rewards and punishments would be no support to our moral life, so defined. But here we must draw important distinctions.

First, the idea of seeing moral duty as a divine command, watched over by a morally zealous and interactive God, should be conceived only as a belief to be prevailed upon in addressing the precarity of our moral lives—that is, the ease with which we can and do fail to do our moral duty. With this in mind, an initial compatibility of moral actions being done for their own sake and seeing moral action as a command of an all-watching God surfaces. The idea of seeing morality as a divine command can be construed as a belief there to be seized upon if and when we lose the proper moral framework—if and when we lose the framework of doing moral goodness in a way that Kant calls “autonomously,” or for its own moral sake. Since such moral autonomy is, we can assume by premise c, bold and precarious work, having a belief in a God who commands us to assume the vantage point of acting according to what is moral for its own sake is especially useful for those times when we need to be stirred to resume just this mindset.

However, what being able to seize upon the idea of a God who commands moral duties as a way to incite us to reassume just this autonomous mindset presupposes, is a certain kind of doublemindedness. It requires that when we *are* stirred to act for the sake of the moral good, we can submerge our belief in moral duties as externally imposed commands. It presupposes that we are capable of compartmentalizing our moral minds. As such, having a belief in a God who imprints this capacity for doublemindedness within us, and who also models it for us, and by these two means empowers us to maintain that we too can be doubleminded in just this way, would be morally fortifying.

4. A God Who by Knowing Not Only Our Actions but Our Innermost Motivations Can Judge if We Have Transitioned to the Full Moral Mindset

Implicit in what we have said so far is the following conclusion, which, when made explicit, shows itself to be a further aid to the moral life. Specifically, in those moments of moral weakness when we are seeking to regain the

moral perspective and thus regain our autonomy, we would further be morally fortified should we believe that God will see whether we make this transition, being under the watchfulness of a God who sees not only our external actions, but our innermost motivations. To be sure, we cannot focus on divine watchfulness at the moment of our moral decisions lest we fall into heteronomy, but in those moments—alas, likely to be many—when we are falling away from a full moral stance, it is empowering for us to say to ourselves that we are being watched as to whether we transition into the position of moral autonomy—which, again, when entered into, submerges considerations of rewards and punishments, given a sense of ourselves as capable of the appropriate doublemindedness.

5. *A God Who Forgives while Remaining Morally Demanding*

Although these considerations will empower our moral life, the difficulty of consistent moral action drives us to ask if we are able to provide to ourselves any further assistance in our moral labors. Here I believe we helpfully can refer to arguments Kant develops in his own work on moral thought and theology. In addition to advancing much of what we have developed above,²⁹ Kant addresses another important factor involved in moral strength: the morally debilitating consequences of not understanding oneself as a recipient of divine forgiveness when one fails to adhere to moral duties. In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant reflects on “the human being’s hope of absolution from his guilt,” and how failure to reduce or eliminate the weight of moral guilt “might be disadvantageous to reason in many respects, most of all morally.”³⁰ Kant is here suggesting that those who can feel a sense of “absolution” before the bar of “divine justice” will experience enhanced moral behavior. Specifically, Kant is arguing that the failure to act consistently out of moral motivation can engender feelings of guilt that can imperil further moral action, whereas a sense of divine forgiveness, subsequent to moral failings, can empower a resumption of moral action. It

29 See especially the *Metaphysics of Morals* [hereafter *MM*] in which he asserts: “the moral law stands over” our natural and socially reinforced impulses as an “accuser,” and “the accuser would certainly lose every time” were it not seen as the voice of “an external source.” This external source must in turn be a God: “conscience must be conceived as the subjective principle of being accountable to God for one’s deeds.” Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 7:250, 7:252.

30 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* [hereafter *Rel.*], trans. Theodore M. Green and Hoyt H. Hudson (Harper and Row, 1960), 6:76.

is for this reason that we can affirm Patrick Frierson's claim that "Kant seems to think that the belief in divine mercy is rationally required by anyone seriously pursuing personal [moral] virtue."³¹

Importantly, however, any sense of divine forgiveness must be construed by moral agents always as coming from the will of a being who embodies and desires justice: it can never be construed as a gift of divine indulgence mitigating the requirement ceaselessly to endeavor to live life morally. This absolution, instead, must be seen as a means by which ceaseless moral improvement is furthered. And Kant believes just this.

Kant's argument has been reinforced by research in contemporary moral psychology. A sense of having been genuinely forgiven by a divine source has been shown to decrease immoral behavior among those experiencing guilt for prior moral wrongs. This is firstly due in part to how self-punitiveness, or the desire to punish oneself in response to immoral behavior, is a frequent result of acts of immorality agents feel they have not fully been forgiven for. As Lydia Woodyatt and Michael Wenzel have established, self-punitiveness is often causally associated with "avoidance [of others], egocentric focus, and negative relational outcomes" in the form of decreased empathy.³² These features over time "undermine" ethical behavior.³³ In addition, research by Neal Krause has shown that when morally erring individuals see God as the being who forgives them, a particularly strong psychological effect ensues. His research shows that "people who believe that they have been forgiven by God" have a greater reduction in self-punitiveness than those whose sense of forgiveness comes only from efforts to forgive themselves. Since self-punitiveness undermines moral behavior as shown in the findings both of Krause and Woodyatt and Wenzel, a feeling of divine forgiveness will enhance moral behavior.³⁴

Moreover, Kant argues in his *Lectures on Ethics* that "proper self-respect" is related to sustained moral activity, and that "proper self-respect" has two dimensions: a sense of humility and a sense of noble pride at one's continued moral exertions despite prior moral failings. Kant writes that "humility ... is inspired by how in the light of the law of morality, which is holy and perfect

31 Patrick R. Frierson, "Providence and Divine Mercy in Kant's Ethical Cosmopolitanism," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 24, no. 2 (2007): 144–164, 156.

32 Lydia Woodyatt and Michael Wenzel, "Self-forgiveness and Restoration," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 32, no. 2 (2013): 225–259, 254–255.

33 Woodyatt and Wenzel, "Self-forgiveness," 231.

34 Neal Krause, "Religious Involvement and Self-forgiveness," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 20, no. 2 (2017): 1–15.

... our defects stand out with glaring distinctness in comparing ourselves with this standard of perfection”; but additionally, when we persevere despite prior failings, we stir in ourselves “true, noble pride.” These two factors—humility and a certain kind of pridefulness—together form the “elements of proper self-respect.”³⁵ This sense of proper self-respect, Kant argues, propels further moral behavior.

This conclusion is also reinforced by work in contemporary moral psychology. Robin Dillon has shown that a strong sense of being forgiven tends to generate what she labels “humble self-respect”: a feeling of self-respect, because the forgiven agent does not wallow in a sense of being “bad,” and also because the agent feels a measure of pride at the prospect of continuing self-improvement; yet a humble sense, because of the recognition by the agent of her moral failures. This feeling of “humble self-respect,” Dillon finds, is morally invigorating, since it reduces arrogance and stimulates a desire for moral advancement.³⁶

A further point, however, must still be confronted. If an enhanced belief in our own abilities to be moral can threaten to cause a debilitating self-reproach, could it also be that a strong sense of others’ abilities to be moral would cause us to reproach them, and thus cause lapses in moral judgment that could take the form of an overly vindictive attitude to those who fall morally short? We could hope one’s sense of being forgiven that comes from the beliefs we have just sketched would transfer into a similar forgiving attitude to others, such that overly vindictive responses to the failures of others would be arrested. However, the “crooked timber” of humanity is such that we should not expect this conclusion always to inform individual behavior.³⁷ Indeed, social science data suggest that an enhanced belief in *others’* having a strong capacity for self-control, which is associated with a belief in *their* free will, can incline many to be especially punitive toward those who are so perceived.³⁸ As such, the problem emerges that a strong belief in free will (in this case, that of others) could be morally *harmful*.

35 Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (Hackett, 1980), 126.

36 Woodyatt and Wenzel, “Self-forgiveness,” 254, 230–232; and Robin S. Dillon, “Self-forgiveness and Self-respect,” *Ethics* 112, no. 1 (2021): 53–83, 82–3.

37 Kant uses the phrase “crooked timber of humanity” in his 1784 essay, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose.” Moreover, the ease of humans believing in self-exemption or self-preferencing, and its associated idea of holding to “forgiveness for me, but not for thee,” is a cornerstone of Kant’s view of mankind’s moral difficulties, difficulties he comes to call our “radical evil.”

38 F. Krueger, M. Hoffman, H. Walter J. Grafman, “An fMRI Investigation of the Effects of Belief in Free Will on Third-party Punishment. *Social Cognitive and Affective*

In response to this problem, the belief that the forgiving God extends forgiveness not just to oneself or to one's family, tribe, or clan, but to all whom one comes in contact with—while remaining at the same time morally demanding of all individuals—would have a morally edifying impact, as it could stay the hand of immoral vindictiveness.

6. *A God who Counsels the Reinforcing Power of Congregational Religious Life*

Can we take things even further in advancing the bold and precarious work of living life morally? Kant thinks so. He holds that congregational religious life can enhance fidelity to moral duty.³⁹ Here, again, empirical evidence supports his contention. Congregational religious activity, at least of a certain kind, has been shown to enhance certain moral and morally relevant actions.

Social and psychological science supports this conclusion in at least two ways. First, a line of research advanced by Norenzayan, Shariff, and others, discloses what we can call the amplifying effect of congregational religious participation on religious ideas. That is, repeated practice of congregational activity wherein religious images—be they communicated verbally or through representational art or liturgical ritual—are made central, empowers individuals to be able more readily to bring to mind these religious ideas throughout their lives.⁴⁰ “Repeated religious rituals” serve to embed “religious reminders” that can underscore one's religious ideas; therefore, evidence suggests that the more one attends “religious services or engages in ritual performance” the more likely one is to bring to mind one's image or conception of God.⁴¹

The implication of this in the context of the religious ideas we have itemized is apparent: engagement in congregational affiliation which expresses the ideas of God that we have summarized—a God who gifts us the capacity to be moral, who commands moral duty, yet who affirms our motivational compartmentalization, and who is both morally demanding and ever-forgiving—serves to reinforce these very ideas, and allows

Neuroscience 9 (2014): 1143–1149.

39 See Kristi Sweet, *Kant on Practical Life: From Duty to History* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 181–183.

40 Martin Lang, Panagiotis Mitkidis, Radek Kundt, Aaron Nichols, Lenka Krajčíková and Dimitris Xygalatas, “Music as a Sacred Cue? Effects of Religious Music on Moral Behavior,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 7, article 814 (2016): 1–13, 2; Norenzayan and Shariff, “Origin and Evolution,” 62.

41 Norenzayan and Shariff, “The Origin and Evolution of Religious Prosociality,” 62.

one to bring them into greater focus across one's life. Hence, given the positive impact these ideas have been shown to have on ethical behavior, congregational participation is, in effect, a moral multiplier.

Second, the work of Krause, Hill, and Ironson demonstrates that attendance in communal religious activities in which “spiritual support” is extended to participants is causally related to increased expressions of having compassionate and forgiving beliefs and behaviors.⁴² Spiritual support is defined as “informal assistance that is provided by fellow church members with the explicit purpose of increasing the religious belief and behaviors of the support recipient.”⁴³ They show that individuals “who receive more spiritual support” within the social context of congregational participation have a “greater likelihood of adopting the social virtues” of both compassion toward others and forgiveness of others.⁴⁴ This work reinforces earlier findings by Krause that “study participants who receive spiritual support” in congregational settings “more often tend to be more compassionate”⁴⁵; and his 2016 work showing that “people who receive more spiritual support are more likely to forgive others.”⁴⁶ Under the conditions of the intersection of spiritual support and a communal religious setting, individuals often experience increased pro-sociality, such as a tendency to be patient, to forgive, and to be compassionate.

Importantly, forgiveness and compassion toward others very often empower individuals to execute moral duties. Kant himself notes specifically the importance of compassion to the reliable and consistent exercise of moral obligations. In *MM*, he argues that it is a “duty to sympathize actively in the sufferings” of others. Why? It is such precisely because compassion with the sufferings of others is a useful tool to enhance moral behavior. We must “cultivate,” Kant says, “compassionate ... feelings in us, and make use of them as so many means” to our moral improvement.⁴⁷ In fact, Kant goes so far as to say that compassion stirs in us the power “to do what

42 Neal Krause, Peter C. Hill, Gail Ironson, “Evaluating the Relationships among Religion, Social Virtues, and Meaning in Life,” *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 41, no. 1 (2019): 53–70.

43 Neal Krause, *Aging in the Church: How Social Relationships Affect Health* (Templeton, 2008), 6.

44 Krause, Hill, Ironson, “Evaluating the Relationships among Religion,” 64.

45 Neal Krause, “Assessing the Religious Roots of Volunteer Work in Middle and Late Life,” *Research on Aging* 37 (2015): 429–463.

46 Neal Krause, “Compassion, Acts of Contrition, and Forgiveness in Middle and Late Life,” *Pastoral Psychology* 65 (2016): 127–141.

47 *MM*, 250–51.

the representation of duty alone would not accomplish.”⁴⁸ Such is high praise indeed of the morally vivifying prowess of personal compassion. In turn, since this important engine of sustaining moral motivation has been shown, by the research of Krause, Hall, and Ironson, to be augmented by communal religious affiliation and participation involving the extending of spiritual support, belief in a God who calls us to engage in just this kind of congregational activity would empower our moral lives.⁴⁹

One final point concerning congregational participation merits attention. Congregational religious life has a tendency to elevate as inspiring role models exemplars of the faith. Their ennobling example helps to sustain the faith of the group. If these exemplars also embody moral excellence, congregants’ faith in the possibility of moral excellence will be enhanced. Kant himself notes the importance of moral exemplars in the Doctrine of Method in *MM*: “good examples (of exemplary conduct) . . . serve as proof that it is really possible to act in conformity with duty.”⁵⁰ Religious communities that extol moral exemplars will all the more reinforce the moral vivacity of their members.

III. A Sustainable Set of Beliefs Over Time

We have shown that were we to have a belief in a divine being of the sort specified above, and of such associated human capacities as also described, these beliefs would anneal our moral life. We have also assumed premises f and g—the claims that belief in this being is warranted, and not extravagant,

48 *MM*, 250–1. For this reason Kant further says that “it is therefore a duty not to avoid the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found but rather to seek them out, and not to shun sick-rooms or debtors’ prisons and so forth in order to avoid sharing painful feelings one may not be able to resist.” *MM*, 6:457.

49 The arguments in this section are all consistent with correlational data that shows those who attend religious services more often commit fewer crimes. See Elizabeth Kelly, Joshua R. Polanin, Sung Joon Jang, and Byron R. Johnson, “Religion, Delinquency, and Drug Use: A Meta-Analysis,” *Criminal Justice Review* 40, no. 4 (2015): 505–523, 506, 505. These points are also consistent with the more general point that correlational data shows an association between identifying as a religious “none” and higher rates of committing rape. Philip Truscott, “Rape, Suicide, and the Rise of the Nones,” *Journal of Sociology and Christianity* 14, no. 2 (2004): 34–58. We must recognize, of course, the limitations of this data given the difficulty of establishing causation and the many factors involved in avoiding or committing crimes.

50 *MM*, 6:480.

given our nescience about the world of external objects (including our own genuine capabilities) and given the connection between these beliefs and moral improvement. Yet, just how realistic is it that we could hold belief for any sustained period of time in a being, and in human capabilities, which we concede are only our own practical postulates? Just saying it would be morally helpful to have these beliefs, and that it is epistemically permissible to hold them due to our nescience about the world “in itself,” does not establish that we are *psychologically* capable of forming, and holding over time, these beliefs, given their status as suppositional tools to our own moral improvement. As A. W. Moore remarks in reference to Kant’s argument for the practical postulation of God, free will, and immortality, such is “one of the most basic questions concerning the postulates.”⁵¹ This question takes on an added force in the contemporary context of rising skepticism of religious claims among many of our family members, our neighbors, and our fellow citizens, and given the various, and now-deeply entrenched cultural patterns favoring irreligion (such as licentious popular entertainment). Surely these militate against belief in a moral God, and a fortiori our belief in a postulated moral God, by the way they could drive us to remind to ourselves the purely suppositional status of our religious beliefs.

The intensity of congregational participation, with its reinforcing prowess, supplies part of an answer. But the creep of the “problem of postulation” can also enter congregational life, eroding over time a community’s strength of faith. History, after all, is replete with congregational religious movements which have perished. So, something more is needed than just congregational religious activity.

Here, it is important to note that recent work in empirical psychology shows that repeated experiences of awe can elicit an openness of mind to there existing an external creator. Moreover, this openness to the genuine existence of a creative force can be sustained over time even within a Kantian framework, due to how a reduced requirement for cognitive closure is also associated with repeated exposure to events or phenomena internalized as awe-inspiring. And a range of liturgical religious practices can elicit just such feelings of awe. Empirical research by psychologists Piercarlo Valdesdo, Jesse Graham, and Andrew Tix has found that a sense of awe is doxically related to an increased belief in an external supernatural creative

51 A. W. Moore, *Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty: Themes and Variations in Kant’s Moral and Religious Philosophy* (Routledge, 2003), 166.

force.⁵² This research documents that awe-inspiring beauty or sublimity can elicit a conviction that what one sees is the product of an external creative agent. They find that “experiencing awe, compared with other emotional states, heightened participants ‘agency detection,’” that is, their openness to believe in an externally real, “supernatural” agency who, by “intentional design” is responsible for that which is registered as awe-inspiring.⁵³ One tends to see, in other words, the hand of a God at work in the objects that fill one with awe.

However, within the framework of a Kantian-type argument, this sentiment is likely to elicit a deep feeling of inconsistency. The feelings of awe allow us to be pulled toward thinking of the existence of an external creative force, yet by the premises of our Kantian-type argument, we have no basis for holding that one actually does exist beyond the morally supportive effect believe in this being elicits. Yet just here we should note that further empirical research supports the prowess of awe to minimize demands for rigid logical congruence and to enhance the capacity to live amidst paradox. N.M. Shiota, et al. have shown that when “individuals become accustomed to the psychological consequences associated with the state of awe” they are “less likely to demonstrate ... a need ... for cognitive closure.”⁵⁴ D.M. Webster and A.W. Kruglanski have provided a widely cited definition of cognitive closure as “discomfort with uncertainty and desire for consistency.”⁵⁵ Based on the interaction among these findings, individuals who experience awe are often placed in a frame of mind that inclines them to believe in an external causal agent, and, if this feeling of awe continues through multiple iterations, such agents tend to become less demanding of holding a complete set of internally consistent beliefs. In the context of a Kantian-type argument, these findings entail a strengthening of one’s ability to live amidst the ambiguity and uncertainty of a felt belief in an external agent and the limits of knowledge as expressed in premise e. The latter would not exile the former. In such a condition of living amidst paradox and

52 P. Valdesdo and J. Graham, “Awe, Uncertainty, and Agency Detection,” *Psychological Science* 25 (2014): 170–178, 177. See also Andrew Tix, “Overwhelmed by Greatness: The Psychological Significance of Awe in Christian Experience and Formation,” *The Table*, Center for Christian Thought, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, October 26, 2015.

53 Valdesdo and Graham, “Awe, Uncertainty, and Agency,” 171.

54 Valdesdo and Graham, “Awe, Uncertainty, and Agency,” 170 referencing N.M. Shiota, D. Keltner, A. Mossman, “The Nature of Awe: Elicitors, Appraisals, and Effects on Self-Concept,” *Cognition and Emotion* 21 (2007): 944–63.

55 D.M. Webster and A.W. Kruglanski, “Individual Differences in Need for Cognitive Closure,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67 (1994): 1049–1062, 1049.

uncertainty, an opening would be achieved for practical faith to take lasting root.⁵⁶

For these reasons, moral agents can be said to have a duty to “seek out” not only “the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found” (a duty Kant holds we have in relation to compassion) but also to seek out liturgical religious events that would elicit repeated experiences perceived as awe-inspiring.

IV. The Doxastic Force of Particularity

The question now emerges whether individuals should postulate anything more specific regarding a divine being and human capacities beyond what has so far been sketched. It might at first seem that all rational agents should postulate is one divine force with the attributes itemized above, a being naked of any further characteristics. However, this claim must be subjected to a rational examination of the human condition. Such examination strongly suggests that most individuals need particularity in their religious lives; such particularity deepens their faith. As such, since faith in the general theistic framework can enhance moral behavior and should be postulated on this basis, that which enhances this faith further should also be postulated, as expressed in premise k. The result is a presumptive duty to postulate religious particularity. This presumption could be defeated by a showing that faith in the general theistic framework alone is possible to be as deep or deeper without a particular manifestation of it, but, for the sake of upholding moral duty, the defeater should be acknowledged only upon a compelling showing.

56 Moreover, it is possible to see a mutually reinforcing relationship among awe, morality, and belief in God. Research on awe also suggests it has an independent causal effect on moral behavior. In one study, research participants writing about a personal experience involving awe reported feeling less impatient and said they were more likely to give time and money to a worthy cause—inclinations supportive of following moral laws. It seems not only the case that the more one experiences awe, the more one is open to practical faith, and that the more one is open to practical faith the more one is empowered to act morally; but also, the more one experiences awe, the more one is directly inclined toward ethical behavior. See M. Rudd, K.D. Vohs, and J. Aaker, “Awe Expands People’s Perception of Time, Alters Decision Making, and Enhances Well-Being,” *Psychological Science* 23 (2012):1130–36.

One way we can appreciate the power of particularity in religious life is by referring to the arguments Kant himself makes to this effect.⁵⁷ These are especially probative because of Kant's high estimation of rational uniformity—which, after all, is the core of the universalizability principle at the heart of his ethical system. If a thinker as prone to conceptualizing in terms of universality comes to acknowledge the importance of religious particularity for sustained religious belief (which in turn is a deep support to moral behavior), this would provide highly suggestive evidence for the prowess of particularity in religious life.

Kant remarks in *Religion* that “no doctrine exclusively based on reason would seem to the people to make an unalterable norm; they demand a divine revelation, hence a historical authentication of its authority through the deduction of its origin.”⁵⁸ As Marcello Pera states in summary of Kant's position, “If God is to be intended as ‘one who knows the heart’ and rewards and punishes, and if His commands are to be considered as our duties, the duties we living creatures ought to follow here and now, then He needs to manifest himself and we need to give Him a face and a voice.”⁵⁹ This for Kant is simply an unavoidable “natural need” for the vast majority of humans.⁶⁰ Hence, Pera continues, “[p]ure rational religion,” or what we have called the general theistic framework, “cannot merely be an abstract doctrine referring to an abstract God worshipped in an abstract way in abstract temples. Pure rational religion does not warm up men's hearts as it ought to if they are to feel their moral duty.” People need “something that the senses can hold on to” and so need “a visible church.”⁶¹ As Kant reiterates, “due to a peculiar weakness of human nature, pure faith can never be relied on as much as it deserves.”⁶² And so “Kant does not feel that such a universal faith can establish community and be successfully propagated without the help of a historical faith.”⁶³ Hence, for Kant it is “a fact ... that by their very nature

57 Hegel also supplies extensive argumentation about the need for concrete instantiations of what reason establishes; see G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (Oxford, 1977), 329, 335, 340, 464.

58 *Rel.*, 6:112.

59 Marcello Pera, “Kant on Politics, Religion, and Secularism,” in “Universal Rights in a World of Diversity: The Case of Religious Freedom,” *Universal Rights in a World of Diversity. The Case of Religious Freedom, Acta 17* (Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, 2012): 546–577, 562.

60 *Rel.*, 6:109.

61 *Rel.*, 6:109, 6:158.

62 *Rel.*, 6:103.

63 Firestone and Jacobs, *Defense*, 194.

human beings, made of blood and flesh, need somewhat more than rational religion.”⁶⁴

But what specific form will this more-than-abstract religion assume? Kant argues that the “ordinary human being will every time understand [the divine] by his own ecclesiastical faith, which is the one that falls within the grasp of his senses.”⁶⁵ Hence, “some historical ecclesiastical faith or other, usually already at hand, must be used.”⁶⁶ That is, a faith ready at hand must be adopted as long as its substantive content is morally empowering. To be sure, any historical faith must be tested to see if it is in harmony with moral duty,⁶⁷ and only those conceptions of the divine and those liturgies in service of them which are compatible with morality are worthy of a moral man’s worship. But worthy indeed are those which inspire our moral vocation. To this extent, therefore, individuals can be seen as presumptively morally obligated to postulate, and congregationally to revere, a God understood within morally enhancing elements or sub-traditions of distinctive historical faiths. That is, were such to exist.

V. A Plurality of Instantiations: Elements in Christianity and Sufism

This presumptive duty would be impossible were no historical, particular faiths ready to hand for individuals to embrace which satisfy these criteria. However, there are, in fact, multiple traditions which contain substantial elements that instantiate the general theistic framework, and so can be adopted for the purpose of solidifying the performance of moral duties. To illustrate the pluralism of moral theisms consonant with moral duty, I briefly survey elements within both Christianity and Sufi Islam that meet the requirements above, and which are ready to hand and thus meet the requirement of relatability to personal and cultural experience. What follows is not at all intended to be a comprehensive survey of these two great religious movements, but simply a short survey of illustrative examples taken from within their theologies that exhibit the morally supportive features that we’ve described above. Nor is the claim that these characteristics are necessarily exclusive to these two movements.

64 Pera, “Kant on Politics,” 562.

65 *Rel.*, 6:109.

66 *Rel.*, 6:109.

67 Firestone and Jacobs, *Defense*, 198.

1. *Elements in Christian Traditions*

Elements within Christianity parallel so much of what a morally responsible person is pulled to postulate. First, in Christian theology we can see a divine source of our reason and moral freedom. One example of this idea can be found in the writings of St. Athanasius. In *On the Incarnation of the Word*, the incarnation of God in Christ is seen as serving in substantial part “to re-educate humanity about its nature.”⁶⁸ Athanasius writes, “in creation, God bestowed upon human beings the impress of His own image, a share of the reasonable being of the very Word Himself, so that, reflecting Him, [humans] themselves become reasonable.”⁶⁹ We were created by God “in integrity” so to be rational, free beings.⁷⁰ Moreover, as the “divine pedagogue of the world, the creator took on a human body in order to show us [or remind us] of our dignity and honor”—including our ability to resist the “dehumanizing habits” that come from our “pursuit of inferior things.”⁷¹ The incarnation, for Athanasius, restores and thereby “re-educates” us to the recognition both of our nature as sharing in the “reasonable being of the Word” and the sweeping power we have to set aside irrational temptation and to live life morally.

Second, in Christianity moral commands originate from a divine source; and the commands are communicated as being grave and serious. For example, one without fidelity to Christian moral commands becomes, Christian scripture relates, like salt which has lost its savor now to “be trodden under foot of men” (Matt 5:13). Moreover, God “loves those who pursue righteousness” (Prov 15:9). Further, God’s very nature brings these commands to our consciousness as matters of the utmost importance: His law is “righteous altogether” (Ps 19:9), and his Son is the full righteousness of God Himself (2 Cor 5:21).

In addition, a substantial measure of internal purity understood as the absence of self-serving motivations is commanded by God: loving actions are to be done for no selfish advantage, as the “new commandment,” to “love others as I have loved you,” (John 13:34) entails, given the kenotic sacrifice of Christ for others, a self-sacrifice of one’s own self-preferring passions. To

68 Frederick D. Aquino, “The Incarnation: The Dignity and Honor of Human Personhood,” *Restoration Quarterly* 42, no. 1, is. 5 (2000): 39–46, 41.

69 Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi* (MacMillan, 1946), 3:28; Aquino, “Incarnation,” 42.

70 Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Doctrine* (Oxford, 1997), 89.

71 Aquino, “Incarnation,” 44–5.

this we can add the admonition of Paul: “Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor” (1 Cor 10:24). Further, these commitments are to be pursued without moral holiday: “be ye perfect,” Christ commands, “just as your father in heaven”—unblemished before all ages—“is perfect” (Matt 5:48). There are no moral sabbaticals for faithful Christians. Over against this, God also keeps a constant and watchful eye on humans, as all we do is done under his careful attention to the actions of every individual: “For his eyes are on the ways of a man, and he sees all his steps” (Job 34:21).

Third, Christianity overlaps with the understanding of moral psychology that arises within the thought sketched above. As we described, we should think of ourselves as agents possessing psychological and motivational compartmentalization. Yet we see in Christianity just such compartmentalization. For the commands of God and their associated divine superintendence are, in aspects of Christian thought, conjoined with a certain doublemindedness. In Matt 6:3, Jesus is held to state, “But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth” (6:3). This passage can seem strange, since the phrase, “the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing,” seems to depict an uncommendable lack of coordination, but Jesus is commending just this very lack. Yet when we see this passage in light of the exegesis of it advanced by Floyd Filson, and also in light of the first Johannine Epistle, as well as other aspects of Jesus’ teachings, we can see the passage expressing a commendation of a kind of internal doublemindedness. As Filson argues, the passage indicates that giving to those in need should come as automatic, without the “mental calculus” of seeing it as a divine command.⁷² To the question of why we should act without such a mental calculation, 1 John provides an answer: commands produce fear as they issue from a superior with authority to punish; yet, Christian love acts on its own without fear, since “there is no fear in love;” instead, “perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18). As such, perfect loving actions are to be done without consideration of their status as fear-inducing divine commands. However, at the same time, Jesus does speak of moral acts precisely as commands of God, as in Matt 15:4 where he underscores what “God commanded,” saying love and respect your father and mother; and, more generally, when at Matt 5:17 he says that his ministry affirms all the “law,” seeking not to destroy divine commands but to fulfil them. Plus, he himself issues his own (divine) commands, such as the command to reconcile with others before giving offerings (Matt 5:23-24). The teachings of Jesus, along with the faith in Jesus exegeted by Filson and described in 1 John, disclose, therefore, a powerful capacity for individuals

72 Floyd Filson, *A Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (A. & C. Black, 1960).

to exercise doublemindedness: morality, in some sense, can be seen and acted upon as an external command of God while, at other times, complete morality can be acted upon as the uncommanded actions of a loving agent. Just as described in the general theistic framework, so in Christian moral theology, divine commands are present, but they can serve to move us into assuming a moral posture that can subsequently become untinged with any measure of threat or command, and so can be free of heteronomy. Such is what it can mean for the left hand not to know what the right hand is doing.

Moreover, doublemindedness can be seen as re-doubled in terms of the ability to draw moral strength from a motivation for reward when needed, but to put that aside when the autonomous moral frame of mind has been restored. Jesus leaves his followers *both* with the command that they act lovingly without expectation of reward—as even sinners expect rewards (Luke 6:32-36)—*and* the command that they store up their treasure in heaven, where neither raiders nor rust can deprive them of their desert (Matt 6:19-21). Yet Jesus does not command the impossible. How else could his burden be easy and his yolk be light (Matt 11:30)? Jesus' commands thus serve to empower agents in the conviction that they *can* act both from a concern for an externally granted reward *and* from a love of what is good.

Fourth, we also saw that our moral life would be fortified were we to underscore to ourselves that the line between command-driven, reward-seeking, and punishment-avoiding actions and those which are fully autonomous is a line ever-watched over by God. As useful to us as divine commands, rewards and punishments in reference to moral actions can be, they must ultimately be transcended. Having before our minds, before the moments of full moral decision making, the concept of a God who judges whether we are in fact autonomous or whether we remain in our hearts driven by heteronomy, underscores to us the need to cultivate autonomous decision making, as God will always know if we make this transition. Yet, once more, elements within Christianity provide just such a conception. As expressed in the Letter to the Hebrews, “everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (4:13), as God is “discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (4:12).

Fifth, in Christian theology, we also see a concept of God as a being who forgives while remaining morally demanding—another enabling aspect of the moral life. Jesus, according to Matthew's gospel, tells his listeners that they are called to forgive, as God forgives us, “not seven times, but seventy times seven” (Matt 18:22). Yet, although the Father's forgiveness remains ever-constant, after each transgression for which we are forgiven, we are

called anew to “go and sin no more” (John 8:11). Should we not see that our forgiveness is conjoined with a command to stop doing that which requires forgiveness, we would earn the rebuke of Paul: “do you presume on the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience”? (Rom 2:4). Such a concept of forgiveness—one that still demands continuing moral striving—again evinces our capacity for mental compartmentalization: we are beings charged by God to focus on the seriousness of moral action by reference to His commands, His rewards, His punishments, and His nature, yet we are also commanded, and so must be capable of, prescinding from these considerations during moral decision making. In turn, after we morally fail (as we inevitably will), we are also able to regroup in reliance on divine forgiveness, as a way to re-commit ourselves to actions unalloyed by divine sanction, command, or fear and without presumption that are moral duties are in any sense lightened by the fact that God will, after all, surely forgive us when we fail as long as we sincerely repent. The left hand of knowing God’s great forgiveness does not know what the right hand of the grave seriousness of each moral act is doing.

Moreover, within Christianity can be found an idea of divine forgiveness as universally capacious—as not limited to any one family, tribe, or clan. Indeed, “who is my father and my sister, my mother and my father,” Jesus asks—so to underscore the breadth of his vision of the kingdom of God (Matt 12:48-50). Contained within its breadth can be discerned a conception of divine forgiveness not limited to an in-group holding to a particular creed, for “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).⁷³ Elements in Christianity can thus empower the staying of an immoral measure of vindictiveness at the moral faults of others by recognizing all as extended in some sense the forgiveness of God.

Sixth, as we saw, moral enhancement can accrue through participation in congregational religious life, fortifying one’s commitment to the complex of morally supportive concepts we enumerated. Christianity can also be read as instructing (at least most) followers to engage in congregational expressions of the faith. God can be found not only in the solitude of personal prayer, but “when two or more are assembled in my name” (Matt 18:20). Indeed, the assembling of the faithful is especially commended in First and Second

73 For a detailed treatment of forgiveness for those outside one’s fold in Christianity and other world religions, see Anne-Marie Ellithorpe, Laura Duhan-Kaplan, Hussam S. Timani, eds., *Multireligious Reflections on Friendship: Becoming Ourselves in Community* (Bloomsbury, 2023).

Thess. where Paul especially recommends the communal enterprise of extending spiritual support, admonishing the faithful to “strengthen the fainthearted,” and for Christians to become “imitators and models” so that, by collective efforts, “your faith may grow more and more” (1 Thess 5:14, 1:6-7; 2 Thess 1: 3).

As part of this congregational involvement, religious exemplars who embody these religio-moral ideals are very often extolled. In Catholicism, for example, the general importance of saintly role models is widely known. Indeed, Pope Benedict XVI (then Cardinal Ratzinger) famously argued that (in part) “the only really effective apologia for Christianity comes down to ... the saints the Church has produced.”⁷⁴ Relevant in our context might be men such as St. John Baptist de La Salle, who was devoted to learning, selfless in his commitment to expanding education, unafraid to challenge received opinions in his work as a scholar and educator, unyielding in his moral devotion, and a champion of free will and personal responsibility in opposition to the necessitarianism of others, including the Jansenists.⁷⁵ Each of these are attributes that underscore the moral vocation of humankind as understood in premises a-c. As such, saints elevated in congregational life are ready at hand to advance a moral faith.

Seventh, we must address the question of how to sustain the faith in these concepts over time. In this respect, we argued for the importance of awe and beauty in religious life. Such are also given a pride of place in many expressions of the Christian faith. As Tix argues, “[t]he Bible teaches that sensitivity to awe is a virtue that may be cultivated.”⁷⁶ For example, “individuals are encouraged to ‘be stunned and amazed’” (Isa 29:9) and to “‘stop and consider God’s wonders’” (Job 37:14).

Further, this high place for awe and wonder in the Christian life has often been connected with congregational activity. Indeed, Tix reminds us that many Christian communities have “design[ed] worship services with individuals’ experiences foremost in mind. Prayerful music, meditative silence, and the intentional use of darkness and light” all find a place throughout Church history in “stimulating awe during worship,” as does “focusing the content of services on the mystery and awesomeness of God.” Indeed, one might bring to mind again the second half of the famous

74 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, ed. Vittorio Messori (Ignatius, 1985), 129–130.

75 See “Saint John Baptist de La Salle,” uCatholic, April 7, 2025, <https://ucatholic.com/saints/john-baptist-de-la-salle/>.

76 Tix, “Overwhelmed by Greatness.”

statement of Pope Benedict XVI just referenced: in a sense, Benedict continues, “the only really effective apologia for Christianity” consists also “in ... the art which has grown in [Christianity’s] womb.”⁷⁷ Indeed, Benedict maintains, “Better witness is borne to the Lord by the splendor of...art which ha[s] arisen in the community of believers than by clever [arguments of apologetics].”⁷⁸

Moreover, just here we can see a virtuous circle. For the two elements of Benedict’s apologia are interconnected. The saints are those with a majestic radiance of life resulting from unsurpassed holiness, and they can elicit in turn a sense of spiritual awe.⁷⁹ As psychologist Barbara Fredrickson describes awe, it also includes the emotion experienced when individuals “are overwhelmed by greatness,”⁸⁰ which can include the greatness of a moral life. The long tradition of admiring the majestic holiness of saintly lives across Christian denominations evidences the deeply rooted character of this recognition of awe-inspiring moral beauty. In turn, this feature of Christianity would reinforce the way by which, in the context of a Kantian-type argument, awe can stimulate and deepen belief in God as an external creative force despite the limitations of our theoretical knowledge.

Finally, Christianity can be seen as endorsing the claim that a holy, awe-filled sense of beauty engenders a rejection of the drive for rigid cognitive closure. John Paul II’s 1999 “Letter to Artists” expresses just this idea. “Beauty,” John Paul II writes, “is a key to the mystery and a call to transcendence.”⁸¹ And as we saw, such openness to mystery and transcendence minimizes the demand for rigid coherence, which, in the context of a Kantian-type argument, would assist the mind to hold together the nescience about the world in itself and the dissonant sense that a creative force inhabits the realm of “things in themselves.”

77 Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report*, 129–130.

78 Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report*, 129–130.

79 See Robert McSwain, “Exploring Human Goodness as Evidence of God,” Templeton Religion Trust, <https://templetonreligiontrust.org/explore/the-saint-is-our-evidence/>.

80 Barbara Fredrickson, *Positivity: Groundbreaking Research Reveals How to Embrace the Hidden Strength of Positive Emotions, Overcome Negativity, and Thrive* (Crown/Harmony, 2009), 46. See also Tix, “Overwhelmed by Greatness.”

81 Pope John Paul II, “Letter to Artists,” Vatican website, April 4, 1999, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html#.

2. *Elements in Sufism as a Parallel Moral Theism*

We also see each of these aspects of theistic faith in elements within Sufi movements. First, in Sufi (as in effectively all Islamic) thought God is the source of moral laws. Sufism emphasizes this fact with tremendous devotion. Further, these moral commands are in effect ordinary moral rules—commands consistent with the judgments of most of fellow humanity. In fact, the contemporary Sufi-inspired political and religious scholar Muqtedar Khan has reminded us that the ordinary moral judgments found in much of the Decalogue are also expressed in the Shari’ah.⁸² Indeed, as leading Sufi thinker Seyyed Hossein Nasr notes, in Sufism special focus is often placed on such traditional virtues as “charity, nobility, sincerity, and truthfulness.”⁸³ This catalogue of conventional moral rules also includes in Sufism a great respect for the freedom of others. Such respect for the freedom of others arguably reaches its pinnacle in *Ihsan*, or the idea, perhaps especially prominent within Sufi Islam, of doing beautiful deeds. As Khan maintains, “the high road” of *Ihsan* repudiates “harshness, intolerance, compulsion and violence.”⁸⁴

Relatedly, these divine commands are ones to which individuals must at all times see themselves as bound. “It is not possible to follow the Sufi path ... without following the injunctions and teachings” of the divine author of moral laws, Nasr writes.⁸⁵ We thus “can never transcend the Divine Law.”⁸⁶ Moreover, these are communicated to us as grave commands. One way this is expressed is by reference to God’s very nature. For he is *nafas al-Rahman*,

82 Muqtedar Khan, “Shariah is Based on the Ten Commandments,” *Washington Post*, 26 July 2010.

83 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam’s Mystical Tradition* (HarperOne, 2007), 126.

84 Muqtedar Khan, *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan* (Palgrave, 2019), 2. Another way this respect for the freedom of others is manifested is through the high esteem accorded the teachings of Jesus among many Sufis. Sufi leader M.R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, in fact, holds that “Jesus is the soul of Allah.” M.R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, *Islam and World Peace: Explanations of a Sufi* (Fellowship, 1987). To be sure, some Sufi orders became fiercely dedicated to fighting to advance *Dar al-Islam*, as noted *infra*. Such, however, is strongly repudiated by many contemporary Sufis. Nasr remarks how Sufism is opposed to “puritanical reformism now called by many fundamentalism” (*Garden*, 154) found in Wahhabism and other movements prone to “violently” defending the faith (*Garden*, 155). It is *this* Sufism the moral person would postulate.

85 Nasr, *Garden*, 56.

86 Nasr, *Garden*, 86.

or “infinite goodness,” as Nasr defines *al-Rahman*.⁸⁷ At the same time, as the *Fatihah* relates, God is the “master of the day of Judgment,” when we shall be exposed to eternal reward or punishment. What is more, in Sufism, divine judgment is often stressed as a way to underscore “the utmost importance of our life here on earth,” underlining how our moral actions or immoral misdeeds have consequences of the greatest seriousness, which in turn emphasizes “the grandeur of the human state”: our moral decisions *matter*.⁸⁸ In Sufism a corollary of our actions mattering and bearing grave significance is that they are conducted by a divinely bestowed capacity for free will and the ability to meet our moral demands.

As to possessing free will, Nasr remarks, “the part of us that seeks to control our temper must be distinct and not determined by the part of our soul that is angry and needs control.”⁸⁹ As he continues, “we possess a will that is free. Otherwise the moral bearing of our actions would be meaningless.”⁹⁰ Possessed of free will, humans are responsible for what they do.⁹¹ Yet this is no spare and ungrounded belief in the freedom of the will. As H. Nur Arturan remarks, Allah “has given the final choice to His servants. As we believe, human beings are the only creatures to have been given free will and a freedom of choice.”⁹² Indeed, in Sufism we see an emphasis on how God gifted to humans the capacity to fulfill all that morality demands. There is, in fact, in humans a specific power to overcome immorality. As Arturan maintains, humans have the power to become “released from the bondage of worldly needs and desires.”⁹³

On these bases, Sufism shares with the broader Islamic tradition a high estimation—within the limits of our finite nature—for the stature of humankind. The angels, in fact, are to serve man,⁹⁴ the angels being creatures who do not even know their own names, as do humans (Qur’an 2:33). Indeed, our divinely gifted capacity to be free and ethical entails that man is a “being created to be able to be addressed by God and to address Him in turn,”⁹⁵ God having created a rational being in humans

87 Nasr, *Garden*, 15.

88 Nasr, *Garden*, 18.

89 Nasr, *Garden*, 8.

90 Nasr, *Garden*, 84.

91 H. Nur Arturan, “Sufism and Freedom.” July 9, 2005. Conference of the Tariqa Alawyyia, <https://www.mevlana.ch/en/sufism-and-freedom-h-nur-arturan-2015/>.

92 Arturan, “Sufism and Freedom.”

93 Arturan, “Sufism and Freedom.”

94 Qur’an 2:30: humans, not angels, act as God’s vicegerents on earth.

95 Nasr, *Garden*, 17.

“worthy of being His interlocutor, a being reflecting all the Divine Names and Qualities.”⁹⁶ Our bearing the imprint of the creator’s freedom means precisely what the Sufi writer Abu’l Shasan Shushtari relates: “Truly, I am a wondrous thing.”⁹⁷

Additionally, God in Sufism avoids suborning heteronomy. Our moral injunctions, founded on God’s will, are to be done for many Sufis with a certain kind of doublemindedness that preserves our autonomy. In its fullest expression, *Ihsan* requires, as many Sufis maintain, that one answer in the negative the question asked in Qur’an 55:50: “Is there any reward for *Ihsan* except *Ihsan*?” Reward from God for beautiful actions is misplaced once one’s focus is fully on making oneself spiritually perfect. Or, as the great Rabia Adawiyya of Basra, so highly admired among Sufis, expressed: “O God, if I worship Thee for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thy own sake, grudge me not thy everlasting beauty.”⁹⁸ As contemporary Sufi scholar Samuel Mills reiterates: “for the real disciple, devotion is its own reward.”⁹⁹ Nasr reiterates this by affirming that the Sufi “performs an act of goodness not for the sake of recompense but because of goodness itself.”¹⁰⁰

Yet, most Sufis still affirm the traditional teaching of plentiful divine rewards for those who submit to the will of Allah. There is thus a sense

96 Nasr, *Garden*, 96.

97 Martin Lings, *Sufi Poems: A Mediaeval Anthology*, trans. M. Lings (Islamic Texts Society, 2006), 87.

98 Quoted in Farid al-Din Attar, *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliya*, trans. A. J. Arberry (Routledge, 2008), 51.

99 Samuel L. Mills, “The Hardware of Sanctity: Anthropomorphic Objects in Bangladeshi Sufism” in *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults*, ed. Helene Basu, Pnina Werbner (Routledge, 2002), 31–54, 31. For a less scholarly source on this concept see, “Forgiveness Despite Repeated Sins,” *Islamonline*, <https://islamonline.net/en/forgiveness-despite-repeated-sins/>.

100 Nasr, *Garden*, 87. See also Javad Fakhkhar Toosi, Asyraf Isyraqi Jamil, and Asyraf Isyraqi Jamil, “Accepting the Autonomy’s Pillar ‘Freedom of the Will’ in Moral Education Based on Islamic Mysticism: The Capacity of South East Asia’s [sic],” *Journal of Islamic Educational Research* 3, no. 1 (2018): 1–10, 7: “Islamic mysticism is exactly in line with [Kantian] deontology by put[ting] the motive at the highest level,” which is “equivalent to that found in the theory of autonomy. Therefore, we believe that by introducing a model of Islamic mysticism in moral education, education can be driven more towards [Kantian] autonomy”; and “Islamic Mysticism opens the way for acceptance of [a] pillar of autonomy (freedom of the will),” and thus has “a great capacity to interact with [Kant’s theory],” 2.

of *taqwa*, which can be defined as a condition capable of “comb[ining] reverential fear of God with purity of action,” in the sense of having a feeling of oneself as being under divine command *and* having a detachment and interior dedication to goodness for the sake of goodness.¹⁰¹ A certain doubleness of mind is evident, therefore, in Sufi movements. One way to see this is expressed by Martin Lings in his classic commentary on Sufism. He quotes an assemblage of Quranic passages thusly: “Are not hearts at peace in the remembrance of God? Call upon Him in fear and in eager desire; [and] call upon God in humility and in secret.”¹⁰² He then maintains that in Sufi theology, the reference to secrecy refers here not to other watching humans, but to one’s own ego—which is held secret from, or separated from, one’s own search for God in furtherance of a selfish motive to advance our desires or to avoid punishment. Such motivations are “excluded from participating in the profoundest invocations” of Allah.¹⁰³ In answering how this doublemindedness is psychologically possible, Lings draws precisely the point expressed in Christian scripture: that the self is a compartmentalized soul such that we can “Let not the left hand know what the right hand doeth,” with “the left hand” being the selfish “human ego”¹⁰⁴ and the right hand being that part of us capable of a sense of *hal*, a term which can be interpreted as relating to awe (about which we will have more to say below), and which can be defined as that state wherein one is “calm, contented, and reassured, [with] the overwhelming sense of the divine presence fill[ing one’s] heart with the kind of awe that is *free from fear*.”¹⁰⁵ Through *hal*, the devotee can be lifted to the sense of being God’s loving craftsmanship free of worry or dread over the possibility of divine punishment; heteronomy, therefore, becomes banished. The human person, in sum, can be both admonished by fear-inducing divine commands and love God and his law for their own sake.

Further, in Sufism, as in the general moral theistic framework we outlined, and also as in the aspects of Christianity we emphasized, God always knows our innermost motives and not merely our external actions,

101 Nasr, *Garden*, 95.

102 Martin Lings, *What Is Sufism?* (Islamic Texts Society, 2023 [1973]), 89; Qur’an 13: 28; 7: 56; 7:55.

103 Lings, *What Is Sufism*, 90.

104 Lings, *What Is Sufism*, 90.

105 *Britannica*, “ḥāl, Ṣūfism,” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hal>. Emphasis added. This condition parallels what Qur’an 89:27 calls “the tranquil soul,” as opposed to “self-reproaching soul” spoken of in Qur’an 75:2. That humans can be described as having two souls points toward the kind of doublemindedness that we are addressing.

and so He can judge if we have transitioned into the full moral mindset—that mindset uninfluenced by rewards and punishments. Highly prized in Sufism is the interior purity of conduct—actions that may not be detectable by “outward appearance,” but which “give life” to persons.¹⁰⁶ For, “God judges our actions by our intentions.”¹⁰⁷ Sufi al-Mushasibi (whose very name means “someone who examines his conscience”) stressed this point by highlighting how individuals must be “constantly scrupulous” of “their inner motives for their actions.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Qur’an 9:105 holds, “Soon will you be brought back to the Knower of what is hidden and what is open, then will He show you the truth of all that ye did.” Hence, in Sufism God knows if we have transitioned from the lower position of acting out of fear or expectation for reward to the higher morality of acting on moral laws for its own sake. And just this knowledge of Allah’s watchfulness can help us while in the former, as we work to enter the latter.

In addition, in Sufism God is a being who forgives yet remains ever-demanding. Qur’an 39:53 says: “O my Servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of the Mercy of God: for God forgives all sins: for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” God’s mercy is so pronounced that, as one Sufi reading has it, God sends down a “Theophany of Merciful forgiveness” as a continuous manifestation of his forgiving nature.¹⁰⁹ The great Sufi Jalal al-Din Rumi in his famed *Mathnawi* writes: “Come... Our covenant is not of desperation. Even if you have broken your vows a hundred times, Come, come again.”¹¹⁰ Although as Nasr relates, “some [men and women] who repent may well go back to their old ways and repent again”—that is, they may become presumptuous of God’s clemency—“God does not like such a pattern in the life of a person determined to follow the path leading to Him.” Allah’s moral demandingness is unmoving and his forgiveness conjoined with what in Christianity is Jesus’ command—to go and sin no more. Nevertheless, he is “always aware of human weaknesses, and is forgiving,”¹¹¹ always giving us second chances.

106 Arturan, “Sufism and Freedom.”

107 Nasr, *Garden*, 84.

108 Carole Hillenbrand, *Introduction to Islam: Beliefs and Practices in Historical Perspective* (Thames and Hudson, 2015), 198.

109 Quoting Islamic convert and long-time Muslim Chaplain at Londonborough University, Daud Matthews, “Forgiveness Despite Repeated Sins,” *Islamonline*, <https://islamonline.net/en/forgiveness-despite-repeated-sins/>.

110 Quoted in Iftikhar Tariq Khanzada, “Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi’s Whirling Dervishes,” *Liberty Voice*, 23 October 2013, <https://guardianlv.com/2013/10/maulana-jalaluddin-rumis-whirling-dervishes/>.

111 Nasr, *Garden*, 130.

Further, this forgiveness is not limited to an in-group of blood or creed. For Allah is *Al-Ghafoor* and *Al-Rahim*—the Most Merciful. Rumi’s thought in particular is, in a way, universalistic regarding the scope of divine love and forgiveness: the passage just cited continues

Come! Come! And still come, whatever you may be ...
A fire worshipper, an idolater or if it is nothing you believe,
Our lodge is not that of despair, so come.

Yet, again, the moral demands remain despite the capacious forgiveness and loving solicitude of the benevolent creator. As Nasr continues, “the Sufis, who aspire to enter the Garden of Truth, emphasize the Divine Mercy and compassion ... without in any way forgetting the significance of inner discipline and the necessity of living according to God’s laws, thus abstaining from actions that might incur His wrath.”¹¹²

What is more, in Sufism as in the elements of Christianity we have surveyed, God calls us to bring these religious ideas to mind by congregational support and participation. Congregational faith is certainly found across Islam, yet it perhaps is most especially pronounced in Sufism. This is evident in Sufism’s strong congregational element in the form of membership in a *tariqa*, or brotherhood/sisterhood,¹¹³ and participation in a *tekke*, or lodge. As Nasr remarks, “it is generally a requirement” for Sufis “to seek to follow Sufism [by] finding a functioning order,”¹¹⁴ in the form of a congregational association dedicated to the Sufi path (there being only limited exceptions). This is so in part because, just as the research of Norenzayan, Shariff, and others finds, “repeated religious rituals” serve to embed “religious reminders” into the life and thought of congregants. Among Sufis it is often held that the “goal” of Sufi congregations is precisely that of bringing to mind “the remembrance of God, *dhikr Allah*.”¹¹⁵ Further, one critical aspect of Sufi congregational life is the extension of dedicated support to a *mureed* (novice) by a community’s *shaykh* (spiritual leader and teacher) and by one’s personal *murshid* (spiritual guide) under whom one seeks

112 Nasr, *Garden*, 93.

113 For female leadership in Sufism see such works as S.B. Abbas, *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India* (University of Texas Press, 2002); female saints are also revered, including such leading 20th century figures as Sayyidh FatimahYashrutiyyah.

114 Nasr, *Garden*, 190.

115 Nasr, *Garden*, 117.

counsel and “spiritual practice.”¹¹⁶ The empirical work of Krause, showing that “participants who receive spiritual support” in congregational settings deepen their religious convictions, resonates powerfully with Sufi experience. In sum, a gathering of Sufis (*jalwah*) is “a sacred gathering that fortifies one’s inner life.”¹¹⁷

This fortifying element has also been achieved in part by how Sufis have long extolled saints who serve as proof of the possibility of spiritual and moral progress. The *walāya*, or saints, are a core aspect of Sufism in most of its iterations. As described by Ahmet Karamustafa and others, as Sufism emerged as a form of mass piety “people reputed to be friends of God [saints] both living and deceased captured the imagination and devotion of Muslims from all walks of life and exercised an unprecedented degree of influence in society.”¹¹⁸ Sainthood retains its important role to this day.

In addition, Sufism often expresses a profound respect for and engagement with beauty and that which is awe-inspiring. The connection between beauty and *deen*, or Islamic faith, is certainly not unique to Sufism, but Sufism often treasures an especially intense connection with awe and beauty. As Nasr maintains, “Sufis seek to cling to ... the beautiful.”¹¹⁹ Doing so reinforces the mind’s orientation—just as Tix’s research shows—to the transcendent, since “one of the functions of beauty in human life is to bring about remembrance of that Celestial Beauty” of the divine creator.¹²⁰ These sentiments, so open to the power of the feeling of awe, very often find expression in Sufi congregational activity. From the whirling dervishes, to the *sama*—or the hearing of beautiful ritual music which can elicit, in Ghazali’s words, “serenity ... awe ... and softening of the heart”¹²¹—the inclusion of awe-instilling states can perhaps be called a cornerstone of much in Sufi theology. Indeed, as Nasr recounts, “in Sufism aesthetics is not separate from spiritual disciple,” a discipline so often congregational in form.¹²²

116 Nasr, *Garden*, 32.

117 Nasr, *Garden*, 115.

118 Side Emre, *Ibrahim-i Gulshani and Khalwati-Gulshani: Order Power Brokers in Ottoman Egypt* (Brill, 2007), 8.

119 Nasr, *Garden*, 56.

120 Nasr, *Garden*, 76.

121 Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, vol. 2 of *Ihya ulum al-din* (1940), *Kimiya-yi sa’ddat*, ed. Ahmad Aram (Markazi, 1954). See also Leonard Lewisohn, “The Sacred Music of Islam: Samā’ in the Persian Sufi Tradition,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 6 (1997): 1–33.

122 Nasr, *Garden*, 72. And just as we previously referred to the possibility of awe itself reinforcing morality, this too can find expression in Sufi thought. Since “one of the

Indeed, elements within Sufism place a special attention to the beauty and awe-inspiring potential of communal services and their congregational environments, and their powerful impact.

Moreover, Sufistic appreciation of beauty often circles back to the beauty of a congregationally affirmed and notable exemplar. Sufis will often extend reverence for the awe-inspiring beauty of the holiness radiating from various *awliyā*, (saints), who have a majestic “beauty of character,”¹²³ by reference to which Sufis “derive special inspiration.”¹²⁴ These individuals reinforce the commitment to moral rigor of the congregants.

Lastly, Sufism frequently seeks to cultivate a mindset resistant to cognitive closure, or the narrow search for rigid coherence. Openness to awe can facilitate this transcending of cognitive closure, as seen in how adept Sufis, who have experienced *hal*, can speak of “unknowing,” and can have the ability to “speak in silence of the mystery of existence.”¹²⁵ Further, as many great Sufis have held, the true *fuqarā* (the spiritually poor, a common term for Sufis, which itself bears a paradox as the Sufi is also, as previously noted, a most “wondrous thing”) must be a person capable of realizing that “to be really ‘here’ is also to be ‘there’ and to be ‘there’ is to be really ‘here,’” and must be able to affirm that “the Garden [of divine truth] is at once beyond us and within us.”¹²⁶ Such paradoxical sentiments resist the reduction of our experience to one logical plane and so free the Sufi from cognitive rigidity—just as in the elements of Christianity we surveyed, and as is necessary in the context of a Kantian-type moral argument to ensure the persistence of postulatory faith.

All of the above has only been an abbreviated survey of some of the elements in Christianity and Sufi Islam that are consistent with the general theistic framework developed in sections II and III.¹²⁷ However brief, the

functions of beauty in human life is to bring about remembrance” of God (Nasr, *Garden*, 76), given that bringing God frequently to mind has been shown in the empirical research noted above to enhance moral behavior, a Sufi’s experience of awesome beauty will also aid the moral life.

123 Nasr, *Garden*, 74,77.

124 Nasr, *Garden*, 151.

125 Nasr, *Garden*, 9, 44.

126 Nasr, *Garden*, 116.

127 To be sure, Sufism has found expression in forms a strict moral conscience, such as defined by Kant, might find particularly objectionable, including statements by famed Sufis that seem to collapse transcendence and immanence, which could be seen as inspiring a kind of moral antinomianism. One might reject as a morally dangerous form of mystical fanaticism the so-called “drunken” Sufi expressions

survey should suffice to highlight how traditions within Christianity and Sufism are capable of postulated assent, and are ready at hand in our world.

VI. Aporias of Postulated Pluralism and Their Resolution

Puzzles may be thought to beset a religious perspective allowing for the legitimacy of different people positing different religious views. Two aporias, which can be seen to build on each other merit further attention.

First, the religions might well in some ways be mutually inconsistent. If so, then it could be argued that special concern must be taken to avoid falling into the difficulties expressed in premise g. This premise holds that postulating the existence of entities, such as a God and the existence of certain human capabilities, is extravagant, unwarranted, and potentially dangerous unless doing so is tightly connected with improving moral behavior. A necessary implication of this premise is that postulation must work no moral hazard; it must never harm moral behavior, but only ever clearly advance it. If two religions, which may have substantive tensions between them on particular theological assertions, can both be “true,” in a postulated sense, this might incline the mind to accept bald contradictions. Such might create a moral hazard by undermining the commitment to moral integrity, perhaps allowing one, slowly and subtly, to accept that one could both be moral and a bit immoral without much problem—since contradictions just don’t matter. A bitter moral consequence might ensue should one be able to say, with Whitman: “do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes.”¹²⁸ Has a path toward

claiming to “be”—in some sense—God, e.g. al-Hallāj’s expression, “I have become the One I love, And the One I love has become me!” Hallāj, *Dīwān*, trans. H. Mason in L. Massignon, *The Passion* (B.78) 3, 42. Might a drunken Sufi, by becoming in a way equivalent with the eternal creator who is the author of moral commands, see himself as the creator of his own values? To this Nasr reminds us that in Sufism, as expressed by leaders such as abu l’asan al-Shadhili, we can never give ourselves over to a desire for union with God in a way that would reject our status as servants of Allah, or *ubudīyyah*; as such, “we must realize that as servants we can never become the Lord.” Hence, “we can never transcend the Divine Law,” as we must always recognize “the total independence of the Divine Principle” (Nasr, *Garden*, 12, 86, 42).

128 *Song of Myself* (1855), 51.

a Nietzschean transcendence of a strict duality between good and evil been cast before our feet? How could such *help* morality?¹²⁹

We can express a response to this concern by emphasizing an element central to a Kantian-type moral argument: the primacy of the practical.¹³⁰ Questions of creed must be secondary to the enterprise of empowering the moral conscience. It is precisely because Kant himself assumes the primacy of the practical that he can state in *Religion*: “Whether the devout individual makes his statutory visit at church or undertakes a pilgrimage to the sanctuaries in Loreto or Palestine; whether he takes his formulas of prayer to the heavenly with his lips, or by means of a prayer-wheel ... it is all the same and of equal worth.”¹³¹ Moreover, the religious person who has experienced the full potential of awe will be especially able to prioritize the practical even if it entails a lingering sense of paradox.

Yet these considerations give rise to a second puzzle. Would the primacy of the practical over considerations about whether creeds are compatible or incompatible imply that it is unimportant to ask which of the morally empowering faiths is “truer”? If so, this perspective might be thought inconsistent with the very mechanisms by which postulated faith was given its durability: the conjunction of the doxastic force of particularity and the power of aesthetic appreciation to secure sustainable belief. Would not the conjunction of these produce a sense that the particular creed to which one is captivated by the force of aesthetic attachment is, in some way, more in line with external reality—is, in some sense, truer? That is, postulated faith must be rendered strong by reference to a belief in its external truth, but

129 We can recall Francisco Goya’s revelatory masterpiece titled “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters” found in the 48th plate from his series “Los Caprichos” of 1799.

130 As Frederick Rauscher remarks, “the primacy of the practical” in Kantian thought means that “when the moral agent is faced with a moral decision, the practical interest in determining action ignores and even trumps *any* theoretical claims.” Rauscher, “The Priority of the Practical and the Fact of Reason,” *Naturalism and Realism in Kant’s Ethics* (Cambridge, 2015), 81, emphasis added. This would include claims about the compatibility of varying religious creeds.

131 *Rel.*, 6:173. In fact, Kant in Chignell’s words “even seems to concede that practical reason does not” univocally dictate the postulation of any God at all. This is so since, as Kant notes in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, reason “cannot prove—that is, set forth sufficiently on objective grounds—the *impossibility*” of a robust conscience and all that this entails, being empowered by the postulation of some intrinsically moralized “universal laws of nature” (5:145, emphasis added) that would be a replacement for God. Since the recognition of this possibility does not stop Kant from postulating God, Kant implicitly concedes the practical rationality of postulational pluralism. Chignell, “Demoralization and Hope,” 52.

will this very strength cause inconsistent faiths quarrelsomely to fight? If so, might this cause its own offense to premise g—the premise holding that postulating beings or creeds, etc., “must work no moral hazard?” For, doesn’t a claim to be the truer religion work to stir up animalistic passions? Hasn’t the history of religious divisions taught us that adhering to a sense of one’s faith as superior to all others can inflame passions that that can override the demands of moral conscience?¹³²

We can see a way through this second puzzle by cojoining Kantian insights with teachings derived from the insights of religious pluralism itself. Namely, Kant at various points judges religious claims on the basis of whether they can be seen as compatible with what a supremely moral creator would do. Judged on this basis, reason can establish that it would not be incompatible with such a being for there to be a plurality of morally empowering religious options. As Qur’an 49:13 states, “O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may get to know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware.” As many Islamic scholars have recorded, this passage very plausibly can be read as indicating that a pluralism of religious groups is intended by Allah as a way to stimulate competition in righteousness among them.¹³³ Indeed, as the liberal and neo-liberal traditions in economics have—or so they tell us—established, competition can breed excellence.¹³⁴ Based on viewing the pluralism of morally fortifying faiths from the perspective of a fully rational God, surat *Al-Hujurat* (49) ayat 13, read as an invitation to compete for greater levels of moral righteousness among parallel moral

132 These passions have bedeviled even Sufism and those adhering to the understanding of Christianity sketched above. See, for example, Harry Neale, *Sufi Warrior Saints: Stories of Sufi Jihad from Muslim Hagiography* (Bloomsbury, 2022) and Mark Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (University of California Press, 2015). These elements form no part of the postulated beliefs advanced in this argument—but their psychological potency requires careful attention.

133 In the influential exegesis of the Qur’an *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* we read, “The real thing that makes one person superior to others is that one should be more God-conscious, a greater avoider of evils, and a follower of the way of piety and righteousness,” <https://surahquran.com/tafsir-english-aya-13-sora-49.html>.

134 This idea of beneficial competition is found not only in liberal and neo-liberal economics, but also in the educational theories of the Renaissance period. As historian James Hankins points out, Renaissance teachers often sought to inspire a *generosa aemulatio* (noble rivalry) between pagan classical leaders and the young Christian leaders under their instruction. Hankins, “Was Renaissance Virtue Politics a Failure?” *The Good Society* no. 31, is. 1–2 (2022): 184–198.

theisms, would be just what we would expect from a morally demanding God.

Viewed in this way, a condition with a plurality of morally empowering faiths could be seen both as a condition where each faith claims to be truer than all the others, and thus as standing in competition with all others, while this competition would remain peaceable, since it would only be by a competitive showing of “the fruits” (Matt 7:16-17) of moral righteousness that one faith could prove itself to be “truer” than any sister theism (in the limited sense of truth that aesthetic appreciation allows moral agents to adopt). The agonistic quarrel over truth would be channeled to a competition over moral righteousness.

VII. The Allure of Key Premises in Western Culture

The intellectual climate that shapes many in the contemporary West makes the argument I have advanced one that can potentially resonate with significant numbers of people across Western culture. This is so for at least the following eight reasons.

1. *The Contemporary High Estimation of Moral Rigor*

No matter what the status of moral life in the aggregate is in the United States,¹³⁵ what Habermas sees as part of contemporary Western culture—that our society has a commitment to strong moral claims—remains true inasmuch as contemporary society still widely applauds the person of strong moral character. Indeed, the frequent surveys indicating and bemoaning a reduction in moral life in the United States¹³⁶ speak to this high estimation: we bemoan the absence of what we applaud.¹³⁷

135 See “US Moral Freefall—Survey Finds America’s Traditional Moral Pillars are Fading Away,” American Worldview Inventory, Cultural Research Center, Arizona Christian University, 2 June 2020, <https://www.arizonachristian.edu/2020/06/02/us-moral-freefall-survey-finds-americas-traditional-moral-pillars-are-fading-away>.

136 See, for example, Megan Brennan, “Views of State of Moral Values in U.S. at New Low,” *Gallup*, June 9, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/506960/views-state-moral-values-new-low.aspx>.

137 Habermas’s contention that Western life has a high estimation of the power of moral conscience is revealed in part by the rising political polarization in the United States which so often is driven by strongly held, but diverging, claims of moral rectitude concerning such matters as abortion.

2. *Skepticism of Theoretical Knowledge*

Yet at the same time, we also see as quite prevalent in the contemporary West the second component of the “Kantian mindset”: a deep skepticism of metaphysical truth-claims about God or human “nature.” Evidence of such skepticism can be seen all around us. We need itemize only a few aspects of the turn from metaphysics that is so powerful an element in much of the contemporary Western world. John Rawls, for example, in his influential political philosophy prescinds from any metaphysical claims on the basis of what he labels “the burdens of judgment,” which together constitute, for him as for so many others, insuperable obstacles to incorporating rationally based arguments about God or our true “human nature” into precincts beyond the purely personal.¹³⁸ To this extent, the Western mind inclines in the direction of a Kantian argument and its negative view of claims truly to know if a God exists.

3. *The Resulting Kantian “Cognitive Attitude” in the Contemporary West*

Key elements of contemporary Western culture, Habermas notes, are “an expression of a cognitive attitude that combines a genuine openness to the pessimistic objections of theoretical reason [to acquire broad metaphysical truths, such as that a creator God exists] with the optimistic determination of an unbowed practical reason.” Many in the West, for the reasons we have noted, possess just this kind of “Kantian mindset,” making a Kantian-type argument potentially quite attractive.¹³⁹

4. *Confidence in the Theoretically Unsupported*

Moreover, we can add to what Habermas described an openness by many in the West to postulating morally salutary claims about the universe. Doubtless, one of the most influential and inspiring individuals of the past six decades has been Martin Luther King Jr. On March 25, 1965, having completed

138 In his influential *Political Liberalism* (Columbia, 1993), Rawls lists among these insuperable challenges the conflicting nature and complexity of evidence; the disagreements about the relative weight that different considerations should carry; the indeterminacy of concepts and conflicts of interpretation; and how the evaluation of evidence is influenced by subjective experiences, 55–7.

139 Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 228.

the third Civil Rights March to Montgomery, King asserted, on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol¹⁴⁰ that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Such an assertion has become foundational to the thought and aspirations of many, including former President Barack Obama, who repeated the claim on numerous occasions. It is, however, a metaphysical assertion which transcends empirical evidence. So do claims of being on “the right side of history,” commonly invoked in politics today. These are postulated beliefs akin to belief in God in a Kantian-type account: they are held because of their mobilizing and bracing effects. The soil has been tilled, therefore, for a postulatory moral argument for God.

5. *Increasing Embrace of Religious Pluralism in a Society not Thoroughly Secular*

In the United States, despite growing political divisions, overall the country has increasing numbers who embrace religious pluralism. According to one survey, about two-thirds of Americans say that the fact that “the United States has a diverse population, with people of many different races, ethnicities, religions, and backgrounds,” makes the country stronger, including 40% who say it makes the country “much stronger.”¹⁴¹ This includes majorities of all religious groups. Indeed, only a minority of Americans—43%—now believe that being Christian is “somewhat or very important to being truly American”—substantially down from 53% in 2015.¹⁴² Such an embrace of religious pluralism does not bespeak a society indifferent to religion and spirituality, as a substantial majority of Americans (79%) believe there is “something spiritual beyond the natural world.”¹⁴³ A moral argument for God welcoming of parallel theistic expressions can thus find deep roots in contemporary American soil.

140 Rev. King would make this assertion on many other occasions, including during his last speech on March 31, 1968 at the Washington National Cathedral. See “Theodore Parker and the ‘Moral Universe,’” *NPR*, September 2, 2010, <https://www.npr.org/2010/09/02/129609461/theodore-parker-and-the-moral-universe>.

141 “New Polling Shows Pluralism is Still a Core American Value,” Interfaith Alliance, November 4, 2021 <https://www.interfaithalliance.org/new-polling-shows-pluralism-still-a-core-american-value/>.

142 “New Polling,” Interfaith Alliance.

143 “God, Spirits and the Natural World,” Pew Research Center, May 6, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/05/06/god-spirits-and-the-natural-world/>

6. *Rising Western Interest in Sufism*

Additionally, according to the Pew Research Center, in many Western nations “there are signs of a broader groundswell of popular interest in [Sufism],” including “the noticeable popularity” of some Sufi leaders such as Hamza Yusuf, director of the Zaytuna Institute in San Francisco.¹⁴⁴ The openness to spirituality in general that many western individuals still possess, coupled with an appreciation of Sufism in particular, makes an argument referencing Sufism potentially appealing to a growing number.

7. *A Culture in which Acceptance of Competition is Common*

So can an argument that welcomes competition as a force for progress. Indeed, as George Monbiot maintains, so much in the contemporary West is predicated on a celebration of competition, with the West being a culture that “sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations,”¹⁴⁵ and extols it as a force for progress. In this context, that a God would stir parallel faiths to compete, as *Al-Hujurat* maintains, for higher levels of moral righteousness fits our climate of opinion.

8. *Defeasible Humility and a Soft Condemnation of Atheism and Agnosticism*

The argument I have advanced supports the conclusion that individuals are presumptively morally irresponsible if they do not seek to acquire moral faith. However, we must hasten to add that there are likely some individuals who can defeat this presumption and live a robust moral life without moral faith. This argument, after all, is a defeasible one. It makes no harsh rebuke of non-believers. It thus potentially can resonate well in the context of our culture of rising disbelief, where explicit or implicit rehashings of Psalm 14:1—that only a fool disbelieves in the rational evidence for God—strike so many as grating and condemnatory, and so fall on rocky soil. Nevertheless, the argument does support just what George Washington, a contemporary

144 “Sufi Orders,” Pew Research Center, September 15, 2010, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2010/09/15/muslim-networks-and-movements-in-western-europe-sufi-orders/#fn-73945-39>.

145 George Monbiot, “Neoliberalism—the Ideology at the Root of All Our Problems,” *The Guardian*, April 15, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot>

of Kant, counseled of his fellow countrymen: “let us with *caution* indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion.”¹⁴⁶

The bold and precarious work of living life morally requires just this care and caution.

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146 George Washington, “Farewell Address,” September 19, 1796, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp, emphasis added.