The New Trinity of Religious Moral Character: The Cooperator, the Crusader, and the Complicit

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The New Trinity of Religious Moral Character: The Cooperator, the
Crusader, and the Complicit

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Abstract: Does religion make people good or bad? We suggest that there are at least three
distinct profiles of religious morality: the Cooperator, the Crusader, and the Complicit.
Cooperators forego selfishness to benefit others, crusaders harm outgroups to bolster their own
religious community, and the complicit use religion to justify selfish behavior and reduce blame.
Different aspects of religion motivate each character: religious reverence makes people
cooperators, religious tribalism makes people crusaders, and religious absolution makes people
complicit. This framework makes sense of previous research by explaining when and how
religion can make people more or less moral.

Keywords: religion, morality, religious belief, ritual, moral character

1. Introduction

Does God make you good? People have strong convictions about the answer to this question. Plato's Timaeus [1] and Aristotle's Nicomachean ethics [2] argue that God is responsible for the very idea of morality, and William of Ockham [3] advocated "Divine Command Theory," suggesting that everything God does is virtuous—even murder. Most people around the world believe that religion is necessary for morality [4], but others challenge the link between God and goodness. Bentham [5] and Nietzsche [6] both claimed that ethics are distinct from religion, and the "New Atheism" movement argues that religion makes people selfish, violent, and evil [7-10].

Pundits and philosophers may believe that religion makes people either fundamentally good or evil, but psychology reveals a more complex truth. Both "religion" and "morality" contain multitudes, and so their relationship likely does too. Here we summarize the complex effects of religion on morality through a taxonomy of three moral characters: *the Cooperator*, *the Crusader*, and *the Complicit* (see Figure 1). Cooperators sacrifice self-interest for the benefit of others, crusaders show conviction to their religious community by harming unbelievers, and the complicit use religion to justify selfish behavior.

Each of these three religious moral characters is driven by different aspects of religion. *Religious reverence*—aspects that reward cooperation and punish antisocial behavior—encourages cooperators to forego selfishness, a dynamic that is illustrated vividly as Dante descends into the seven layers of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*. *Religious tribalism*—aspects that foster social cohesion—justifies crusaders in harming outgroups, as when the Catholic crusaders of the 11th-13th centuries killed and tortured non-Christians. Lastly, *religious absolution*—aspects that excuse moral blame—licenses the complicit to act in their self-interest, as when someone shrugs off their own immoral behavior by appealing to God's forgiveness. This trichotomy of moral characters emphasizes that morality involves more than just isolated acts of help or harm. Morality is also about character [11], a broader person-level understanding of morality that reflects both situational factors and personal features. Here, we synthesize the literature on religion and (im)morality through the lens of each of these characters.
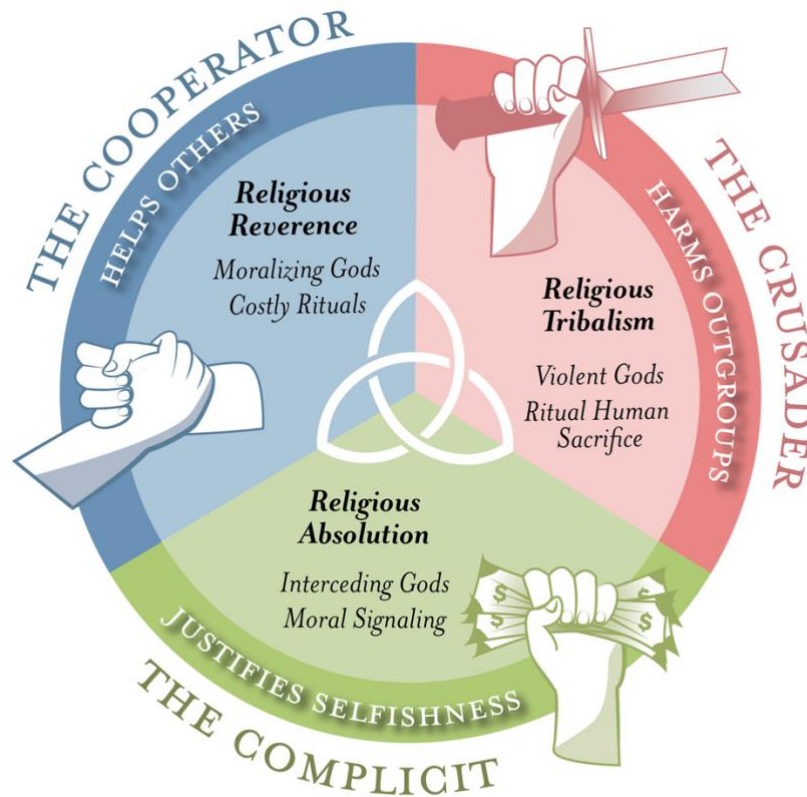
Figure 1. The trinity of religious moral character. Religious reverence encourages The Cooperator to avoid selfish behavior, religious tribalism compels The Crusader to harm outgroups, and religious absolution allows The Complicit to justify selfish behavior. Figure credit: Avital Glibicky.

2. The Cooperator

"Just so the livid dead are sealed in place up to the part at which they blushed for shame... Each holds his face bowed toward the ice, each of them testifies to the cold with his chattering mouth, to his heart's grief with tears that flood forever."

–Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*

The final and most horrific circle of Hell in Dante's *Inferno* is reserved for those who have committed betrayal [12]. Dante's character is disgusted by their evils and ultimately commits to rejecting sin and selfishness in his own life. The promise of divine rewards for goodness and punishments for evil occurs in many religious traditions, and the religious beliefs and practices that reinforce these ideas cultivate religious reverence—which in turn motivates believers to be "cooperators" who sacrifice self-interest and help others.

Some research suggests that religion may help people cooperate because they fear divine punishment. The closely related theories of "supernatural monitoring" and "supernatural punishment" suggest that believing in moralizing gods that punish noncooperation increases people's honesty and generosity, as people fear punishment for acting selfishly [13-16]. Many

studies show that "priming" religious concepts by asking people to unscramble religious words or reflect on religious ideals increases prosociality [17-19] and decreases lying or cheating [20-23] in economic games. Believing in divine punishment/monitoring also predicts charitable giving [24-27] and impartiality [28].

Fear of punishment may be a key motivator of cooperative behavior, but some suggest that positive emotions like awe, respect, and gratitude are just as important to religious prosociality [29-30]. Viewing God as benevolent and loving predicts accepting or helping others—even those outside one's religious or social group [31-34]—likely because these God concepts are associated with a more generous self-identity [33]. Experimental inductions of awe lead religious people to feel a greater sense of oneness with others [35] and increased intentions to be social across religiosity [36].

Reverence for religious rituals and practices also encourages cooperation. It is difficult for members of large-scale societies to monitor one another's behavior, but costly rituals allow group members to signal their commitment to mutual cooperation—and also weed out the noncommitted [37]. Costly rituals that elicit pain and physiological arousal are especially useful for promoting cooperation, as field studies in Mauritius show. Participation in the grueling Hindu Kavadi Attam ritual increases people's charitable donations to their community [38-39]. Similarly, lab simulations show that high-arousal rituals increase group cooperation more than low-arousal rituals [40-41].

The power of religion to increase prosocial behavior is both logical and plausible, but recent work suggests that religion's effects on prosociality are still up for debate. Large-scale preregistered replications have found that religious primes may not always inspire prosocial behavior, especially among non-believers [42-43]. Cross-cultural analyses have also questioned how much moralizing gods are essential for the development of large-scale cooperation [44-45]. These studies do not necessarily challenge the claim that religion can increase cooperation, but they do suggest that religion's effects on cooperation are more context- and method-sensitive than we might think. These accounts of religion and morality also often neglect the ways that religion can encourage more sinister behavior.

3. The Crusader

"Caedite eos. Novit enim Dominus qui sunt eius (Kill them all. For the Lord knows those that are His own)."

–Arnaud Amaury

Cooperators may fear punishment, but religion can lead believers to be "crusaders" who punish others [46]. Roman Catholic crusaders like Amaury killed and tortured millions as they waged holy wars on non-Catholics. The crusades vividly illustrate how religion can bind people into moral communities [47] while also promoting hostility toward people outside those communities [48].

Although the Crusades occurred centuries ago, crusaders are still alive and well today. Surveys show that religiosity predicts more volunteer work and charitable giving, but also more

intolerance of people with different ideologies [49-50] and ethnicities [51-52]. This prejudice is strongly related to religious fundamentalism [53], although even religious people low in fundamentalism are prone to outgroup bias [54]. Religion can motivate people to act upon outgroup bias with violence, as it predicts self-reported aggression [55] and revenge-seeking [56]. Cross-cultural research reveals that societies where religion is important in everyday life are more aggressive towards high-power and ideologically dissimilar outgroups [57].

Religion appears to sometimes promote a crusader mindset by endorsing beliefs and values that make intergroup violence morally permissible. As a demonstration of this effect, participants primed with Bible passages depicting God's violence towards other groups were more likely to punish others in competitive tasks [58]. This suggests that people are more likely to be aggressive when they believe that God sanctions such behavior.

Religious rituals can also encourage intergroup prejudice and aggression. Ethnographies of small-scale societies show how religious rituals of human sacrifice (e.g., killing virgins) [59] helped legitimize rigid social hierarchies and slavery [60]. Ritualistic synchrony has also been linked to ingroup cooperation but outgroup aggression [61]: chanting, walking, or tapping in time with other people increases ingroup prosociality [62-68], but also fosters conformity [69-70] and outgroup aggression [71]. People who engage in synchronous behavior are more likely to comply with experimenter commands to administer sound blasts to strangers [72], grind up live pill-bugs [73], and stifle minority opinions in a group [61].

Religions can draw people into tight-knit communities, but this religious tribalism can also motivate people to seriously harm others. While crusaders predominantly target outgroup members with violence and persecution, some features of religion can motivate selfishness towards the ingroup.

4. The Complicit

"I have sinned against you, my Lord, and I would ask that your precious blood would wash and cleanse every stain until it is in the seas of God's forgetfulness."

–Rev. Jimmy Swaggart

Televangelists and mega-pastors make millions by preaching Christian values, but many violate these ethics behind the scenes, like Jimmy Swaggart, who was caught with a prostitute shortly after denouncing the sexual indiscretions of two other televangelists [74]. The "complicit"—like Swaggart—are those who appeal to religious forgiveness to license and dismiss their immorality. Religious forgiveness often includes love and compassion, which can encourage cooperation [31-34], but the absolution provided by religious forgiveness allows believers to excuse moral offenses [75].

Studies on views of God suggest that divine absolution may be especially influential in allowing complicit behavior. Believing in a less punitive and more forgiving God predicts cheating in economic games [24], perhaps because people expect to be forgiven for their sins. One program of research finds that believing in divine intervention—when God personally intercedes to help believers (see Figure 2)—may encourage "passive immorality."

Rather than "active immorality" (e.g., killing non-believers) passive immorality is about being *complicit* in accepting an unethical but self-serving outcome [76-77], such as failing to mention when a cashier gives you extra change. If you think that God is personally trying to help you, it is easier to rationalize keeping a lost wallet found on the sidewalk—because He put it there for you to find. Compared to active immorality, passive immorality is more likely to elicit divine attributions, which makes them seem more permissible to believers [76]. Field studies find that religious people were more likely to perpetrate small—and passive—antisocial acts, such as failing to return an overdue library book or failing to readjust a terrible parking job [76].

1. **When a person of faith gets diagnosed with terminal cancer, God _____**

    a. Doesn't directly intervene, allowing doctors to help the person

    b. Makes sure the person gets the best doctors for their treatment

    c. Directly rids the person's body of cancer

2. **When a person of faith is struggling to pay rent, God _____**

    a. Doesn't directly intervene, allowing the person to work independently to make more money

    b. Makes sure the person finds a good job, with which they can pay off their rent

    c. Directly deposits money into the person's bank account

3. **When a person of faith is hoping to have a child, God _____**

    a. Doesn't directly intervene, allowing the person to try conception with their partner

    b. Makes sure that the person and their partner are both fertile, so that they can conceive

    c. Directly and immediately arranges for conception

4. **When a person of faith wants to lose weight, God _____**

    a. Doesn't directly intervene, allowing the person to exercise and eat better

    b. Makes sure that the person finds an effective personal trainer who can help them

    c. Directly removes fat from the person's body, and restores muscle

Figure 2. Example items from the Divine Attributions Scale [76]. Participants completed each of 10 sentences by choosing one of three alternatives—an ending with no divine intervention (a), one with indirect divine intervention (b), or one with direct divine intervention (c). People who chose option (c) were the most likely to view unethical acts as morally permissible in a separate measure.

Religion can allow moral permissibility because expressing religious belief can signal apparent moral virtue, which can mask hypocrisy and immorality [78]—as with disgraced televangelists like Swaggart who use their faith as a shield to deflect blame. Research shows that social desirability—wanting others to view you favorably—attenuates the link between religion and prosociality [79-80]. Other work raises questions about how "moral" religious moral motivations are, as religiosity is unrelated to important markers of moral concern, such as implicit moral identity or moral outrage [81]. Research with Protestant adolescents found that intrinsic religiosity predicted greater belief in the importance of helping others, but predicted less actual helping behavior [82]. These studies show how religion allows people to superficially signal virtue while acting immorally.

Knowingly or not, the complicit shield themselves from moral blame by appealing to religious absolution. This makes them more likely to justify the wrongdoing of other believers and engage in immoral behavior themselves.

5. Conclusion

Religion and morality are complex, and so is their relationship. This review makes sense of religious and moral complexity through a taxonomy of three moral characters—the Cooperator, the Crusader, and the Complicit—each of which is facilitated by different aspects of religion. Religious reverence encourages people to be cooperators, religious tribalism justifies people to behave like crusaders, and religious absolution allows people to be complicit.

Despite the usefulness of this model, no taxonomy is exhaustive, and ours likely leaves out some important intersections between religion and morality. Importantly, these characters are not mutually exclusive natural kinds. Not only do many religions contain elements that inspire all three, but people can also shift fluidly between them based on the situation. Just as an introvert can become gregarious after a few drinks, the saintly can become destructive or deceitful under certain circumstances. Nevertheless, exploring these characters independently helps clarify previous findings and guide discussion.

This review identified different moral characters across religious traditions, but future research should explore how these characters may differ between cultures or religions. Despite recent studies that examine religion and morality across cultures [83], there remain unanswered questions, especially about how small-scale religions affected human behavior [84]. Future research should more precisely define the relationship between religion and morality, especially because the term "religion" comprises a multitude of beliefs and practices [85-86], and this review alone shows how some aspects of the same religions can motivate very different moral behaviors.

The overall effect of religion on morality is still hotly debated, but this taxonomy suggests that there may be no "overall" effect of religion on morality. Instead, different aspects of religion encourage different kinds of moral and immoral behavior. It is no contradiction to invoke religion to explain both terrible massacres and extreme generosity, both ethical integrity and moral apathy.

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Two field experiments conducted among 15 diverse populations tested whether believing in watchful, punitive gods motivates charitable giving to distant coreligionists and religious outgroups. They found that higher ratings of gods as monitoring and punishing predicted decreased local favoritism in a random allocation game and increased resource-sharing with distant coreligionists in a dictator game. Between-site variability in outgroup allocations suggests that moralizing gods may motivate intergroup cooperation in the absence of intergroup hostility. Moralizing gods may have played a crucial role in expanding sustainable social interactions to distant and unfamiliar others.

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In a lab simulation, the authors test whether the effect of synchrony on group cooperation extends to complementarity—or behaviors that are not synchronous but are meaningful and mutually supportive. Participants who drummed in synchrony or in a sequential pattern (i.e., complementarily) contributed more in a public goods game than those who drummed asynchronously, an effect mediated by feelings of group solidarity. This suggests that both synchrony and complementary differences in rituals promote social cohesion and cooperation.

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The authors tested whether believing in an intervening God encouraged people to accept passive immorality (i.e., sins of omission rather than commission) across thirteen studies. Participants who believed in God's direct intervention judged morally questionable behaviors more leniently, and experimentally manipulated divine attributions in vignettes led people to see selfish and harmful behavior as less immoral. General religiosity predicted *harsher* moral judgments when controlling for intervening God beliefs, suggesting that divine intervention uniquely motivates moral permissibility in instances of passive immorality.

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