

# Moral Identity versus Moral Reasoning in Religious Conservatives

## Do Christian Evangelical Leaders Really Lack Moral Maturity?

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Research using moral dilemmas has consistently found religious conservatives make poorer moral decisions than liberals. A sample of 104 Evangelical Christians leaders were found to score poorly in moral reasoning using this approach, but were also found to have high moral identity. Their moral identity correlated highly with self-reported moral behavior, yet their moral decision-making did not, suggesting moral identity is more salient than decision-making in their moral development. A sub-sample of 10 who scored low on moral decision-making but high on other moral indicators was qualitatively found to have a sophisticated morality based on different assumptions than used in past research. These findings are discussed in terms of bias in past research using moral dilemmas that denigrate religious conservatives.

There is a substantial body of research concluding that religious conservatives have lower levels of moral development than their liberal counterparts, which is indicated by various studies on their moral decision-making (e.g., Ernsberger & Manaster, 1981; Lawrence, 1987; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). This research has primarily studied Christian conservatives, but similar results have also been found with other religious conservatives (e.g., Muslims; Al-Shehab, 2002). These findings led us to question whether religious conservatives as a group really lack moral maturity or, alternatively, whether this research may reflect subtle biases. This article is based on the doctoral dissertation of the first author (Needham, 2005), who is an Evangelical Christian conservative. Her dissertation was supervised by the second author, an agnostic, liberal-leaning secular Jew. Needham's own faith as an Evangelical Christian, along with decades of her working as a clinical practitioner and graduate educator with Evangelical Christian leaders, led her to be doubtful about the claims that conservatives lack moral maturity. Friedman's decades of cross-cultural research and orientation as a transpersonal psychologist led him to a similar critical position, but from a very different perspective. Friedman has often critiqued various approaches within psychology that have unfairly elevated certain religious traditions, as well as denigrated others. For example, Wallace and Shapiro (2006) stated in the flagship journal of the largest psychological

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This paper is partially based on the first author's dissertation (Needham, 2006), and additional details on the study can be found there.

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organization in the world that Buddhism “is widely considered the most psychological of all spiritual traditions” (p. 690). This statement was challenged by Friedman (2009, 2010) as unfairly elevating Buddhism, which is openly embraced in the United States by many who would likely see themselves as religious liberals, while ignoring equally valid contributions made by others, especially more conservative, religious traditions. Concluding that religious conservatives are lower in moral development and concluding that Buddhists have the most psychological religion are both egregious examples of the misuse of psychology in the religious domain.

In a recent interview, Jonathan Haidt emphasized the importance of clearly defining morality in ways that allow both conservative and religious communities to be viewed as moral, and warned that touting any specific moral content as being universal usually ends up “excluding most communities and vindicating your own” (quoted in Weir, 2012, p. 24). Haidt also addressed inequities in psychology due to its liberal biases by noting that, at a recent conference in which approximately a thousand or more psychologists attended a presentation he made, he asked how many identified as being conservative—and only three raised their hands. He concluded that this is a major problem for psychology, as so few in psychology advocate for conservative alternatives to prevailing liberal psychological views. This may be particularly problematic for humanistic psychology, which is rooted in liberal ideology (Buss, 1979), and appears to be part of a much larger issue, namely what has been called the war against religion by psychology (Cummings, O’Donohue, & Cummings, 2009). Of course, this is nothing new, because conservative ideologies have been widely denigrated over the last two centuries in the United States, as liberals have couched their claims to power based on their supposed higher intellectual repute (Proudman, 2005).

This led us to consider how Western psychology might be biased in many of its assumptions about morality, which could lead to such an overarching conclusion denigrating religious conservatives. Others have raised the issue of religious bias in the research on morality (e.g., Richards & Davison, 1992), and it is also widely known that cultural biases exist throughout psychology. Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) pointed out that “behavioral scientists routinely publish broad claims about human psychology and behavior in the world’s top journals based on samples drawn entirely from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic” (WEIRD; p. 61) groups, extrapolating these findings as cultural universals applicable to everyone, despite being based only on culturally limited samples designated as WEIRD. Even studies that focus on cross-cultural issues can suffer from implicit biases based on Western assumptions. One of the best examples is the classic study of adult Kpelle people from Africa, who were observed to sort objects in the way Western children would, which led them to being denigrated as childlike primitives by cognitive psychologists. However, Glick (1975) described what happened when Kpelle adults were asked to sort items the way a “fool” (i.e., a Westerner, as seen from the Kpelle perspective) would, as follows:

In the sorting task, twenty items representing five types of food, five types of clothing, and five types of cooking utensils were heaped on a table in front of a Kpelle subject. When the subject had finished sorting, what was present were ten categories composed of two items each—related to each other in a functional, not categorical, manner. Thus, a knife might have been placed with an orange, a potato with a hoe, and so on. When asked, the subject would rationalize the choice with such comments as, “The knife goes with the orange because it cuts it.” When questioned further, the subject would often volunteer that a wise man would do things in this way. When an exasperated experimenter asked finally, “how would a fool do it,” he was given back sorts of the type that were initially expected—four neat piles with foods in one, tools in another, and so on. (pp. 635–636)

If there can be this degree of hubris leading to misjudging in the cognitive domain in which answers to problems are relatively straightforward, how much more likely is it that such mistakes could be made in the moral domain, in which evaluations are much more ambiguous and subject to biases? Beliefs about morality always involve factors such as relativity in values and subjectivity inherent in these evaluations, even if there are honest attempts to see them in unbiased ways that strive toward so-called scientific objectivity. Sociologists (e.g., Durkheim, 1895/1952) and anthropologists (e.g., Boas, 1911/1939) have long recognized the need for cultural relativity in dealing with morality. Unfortunately, it seems psychology has tended to be blind to its many culture-bound assumptions, which are especially poignant in the area of morality. And, although humanistic psychology has been more open to emic approaches that strive to appreciate others' perspectives from within their own lived frameworks, it provides little to balance the hegemony of mainstream psychology's usual dismissal of anything not fitting within prevailing liberal values, especially considering the liberal leanings of humanistic psychology.

Although there are scattered findings supporting that religious conservatives may not actually be lacking in moral maturity, such as that students at an Evangelical university were much less willing to be unethical than were students at other institutions (Kennedy & Lawton, 1998), the conclusion that religious conservatives are inferior in moral-decision making has been based on extensive research. The privileging of liberal perspectives within psychology is congruent with the poor performance on measures of moral reasoning by religious conservatives, and this has resulted in the denigrating of conservative religious groups, one of which is Evangelical Christians. This is reminiscent of how many other groups have been disparaged throughout the history of psychology (e.g., many non-White groups, such as the Kpelle, were widely judged as inferior based on biased cognitive tests). However, a few researchers (Al-Shehab, 2002; Lawrence, 1987; Richards & Davison, 1992; Walker, Pitts, Hennings, & Matsuba, 1995) have argued that religious conservatives are not lacking in moral development at all but, rather, adhere to a different set of moral values, an ethic of divinity (Shweder, 1990) rather than an ethic of humanity. In this alternate ethic,<sup>1</sup> religious conservatives appear to conceptualize the self as a spiritual entity striving to attain holiness and sanctity in the eyes of the divine, instead of emphasizing the prevailing ethic within psychology of secular utilitarianism, stressing individual autonomy in which the self, rather than God, is placed as the center of ultimate value. There have been other similar schemes delineating ethics, such as using the categories of autonomy, community, and divinity, which are seen as being universal throughout all cultures, but differentially situated both culturally and historically in terms of how the three ethics are prioritized by various religions, nations, or under other boundary conditions (Jensen, 2011). In addition, one version of relativism that denigrates traditional values that are seen as absolute is postmodernism (e.g., Gergen, 2000), which has been criticized for nihilistic undermining of all bases for ethics (e.g., Friedman, 2002).

## THE DEFINING ISSUES TEST—VERSION 2

Much of the research denigrating religious conservatives in terms of moral development has been based on using only one measurement approach, namely that of posing moral dilemmas to which there are no good choices, and the research participant is forced to make a moral choice. The trolley

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<sup>1</sup>Note, we use the term *alternate* to not privilege liberal approaches as being the standard from which conservative approaches are seen as alternative.

dilemma is a classic example of this type of conundrum, as this presents a trolley careening down a hill into a group of people who will all be killed unless the participant chooses to pull a switch to transfer it to another track where it would kill one person (Bleske-Rechek, Nelson, Baker, Remiker, & Brandt, 2010; Waldman & Dieterich, 2007). This dilemma can be modified in a variety of ways, such as differentially setting up the one person to be killed (e.g., as a baby versus a very old person) or varying the number who could be saved or killed. From a conservative religious perspective, to pull the switch would be an active commission of murder defying divine commandments to not kill, whereas to passively let the trolley take its course would be to allow the divine will to be expressed for higher purposes that can never be fully understood by mortal humans.

The most widely used measure in this approach to moral decision research, known as the Minnesota tradition (see Thoma, 2002), is the Defining Issues Test (DIT; Rest, 1979), which was later revised as the DIT–Version 2 (DIT 2; Rest & Narvaez, 1998). The DIT 2, like the earlier version, relies on self-reported choices to such moral dilemmas, which are evaluated based on solutions that purportedly represent different levels of moral reasoning. In response to such a dilemma within the DIT tradition, it would be scored as more moral to sacrifice the one for the many, a secular utilitarian response. This scoring represents a bias favoring individualistic ideals, such as autonomy and control, and makes conservative religious individuals appear less morally proficient than liberals. That one life is valued as more than five in such a utilitarian scheme of morality shows that this approach is based on an arbitrary value judgment in which many are valued over few lives. In contrast from an ethic of divinity, it can be argued that one life cannot be compared in value to any number of other lives, as each is on its own sacred from the divine perspective and beyond any utilitarian measure and compare. For a religious conservative to choose not to switch the trolley would be scored in the DIT 2 tradition as an inferior moral decision compared to sacrificing one life, despite that there is clearly no best solution to these types of dilemmas, which is what, in fact, makes them dilemmas. In other words, the DIT 2 may not be a culturally appropriate measure of moral-decision making for those who do not embrace more liberal assumptions about values and their behavioral expression.

Consequently, there is a poor fit between the higher moral stages as scored on the DIT 2 and conservative religiousness. The DIT 2 scoring implicitly values love of this life and not the next, which is highly valued by religious conservatives, and disvalues honoring traditional conservative religious teachings, such as from the Bible or Koran. Some have even argued that the DIT 2 approach constitutes a serious mistake in attempting to measure morality, as exemplified by finding that those with antisocial personality leanings, who evidence the antithesis of high morality, favor use of utilitarian answers to moral dilemmas (Bartels & Pizarro, 2011). Seen from this vantage, the DIT 2 not only fails to capture the full expression of moral reasoning for religious conservatives, but appears biased. Consequently, we pondered the question, if religious conservatives are not morally inferior to liberals, as the research seems to indicate, is there an alternate conceptualization to the dilemma tradition that is less biased for understanding their morality?

### Differing Liberal Psychological and Conservative Evangelical Conceptions of Morality

Although it is well established that conservatives and liberals think differently about the world (e.g., Haidt, 2012; Lakoff, 1996), the research tradition vested in the DIT 2 does not seem to

accommodate these differences. The DIT 2 is based on Kohlberg's (1969) cognitive-developmental model of morality, which is an extension of Piaget's earlier work (Piaget, 1932/1965). However other conceptualizations incorporate a broader spectrum, such as behavioral learning, personality, social constructivist interpretative, and integrative approaches (Kurtines & Gewirtz, 1995). Kohlberg's work undergirds the bulk of the research disparaging conservative religious traditions as being morally inferior, which is based on assuming a fixed sequence of development through which culturally universal moral stages unfold, leading to the conclusion that moral reasoning can be measured in a universal way. In contrast, however, theorists in the social constructivist camp typically place a greater emphasis on the social and cultural context of morality, rather than on individual psychological factors. For example, Laupa and Turiel (1995) underscored that effectively assessing moral judgments and actions of individuals from different cultures requires taking into account the underlying beliefs that shape these judgments. Earlier, Turiel (1978) came to the conclusion that Kohlberg was mistaken in his stage sequence and, instead, proposed that conventional morality does not necessarily precede postconventional morality, but rather may have a separate developmental pathway that continues in parallel, not in sequence, with postconventional morality. From this vantage, Kohlberg's conventional morality does not necessarily precede higher (i.e., postconventional) morality in any invariant way, but rather there may be separate developmental pathways to higher stages of conventional reasoning that parallel postconventional morality. Despite that Kohlberg's moral theory has been challenged by many (e.g., Flanagan, 1991; Quinn, Houts & Graesser, 1994), this shift does not seem to have percolated down to the judgments made alleging moral inferiority to religious conservatives based on the DIT 2 and its related literature.

One key to furthering this shift may relate to changing focus from moral reasoning to moral identity, as moral identity may provide a better methodological and conceptual avenue to resolve the potential problem of devaluing some moral stances as inferior. It might also be a better predictor than moral reasoning of actual moral behavior, particularly as applied to conservative religious individuals. Evangelical Christians are a conservative religious subculture within the fabric of the larger US culture, and there are certain absolutes to which Evangelicals adhere that differ from the secular morality of the larger culture. Shweder (1990, 1991) called this distinct moral code the ethics of divinity. Ostensibly, Evangelicals ground their ethic in their belief in God's immutable, unchanging nature. Accordingly, God's nature is supremely good, and what He wills is in accord with His nature. Even though everything else in the universe is relative and subject to change, Evangelical Christians believe that all moral imperatives given by God are in accord with His unchangeable moral character. They believe that what God wills is right in accordance with His own moral attributes, and that whatever action God specifies as good is absolutely good; if God specifies an action to be evil, then it is absolutely evil. This defines morality as both ultimate and specifiable: ultimate because it comes from God and specifiable because it is within His revelation to humankind. Although religious liberals may see this as rigidly black-and-white thinking, Evangelicals see the relativism of liberals as lacking in the ethic of divinity. Even Rest (Rest et al., 1999) acknowledged that the conservative perspective poses a problem to the approach he created in the DIT 2 tradition.

Moral identity may be a key to sorting this problem out, because it is tied into certain beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, and is particularly salient when that aspect of identity is central to the self-concept. This appears to be consistent with the predictions of cultural psychology that psychological processes, such as moral judgment, may work differently in different populations

(Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Discussing some of the failures to address this concern, Gilbert (1998) stated that psychologists tend to ignore other cultural frameworks to present a view of moral development based on the notion of the autonomous person.

The typical Evangelical Christian's conception of justice differs from Kohlberg's (1969) model on which the DIT 2, and the resulting research denigrating religious conservatives, stems. Although religious conservatives believe in justice, their interpretation of justice conflicts with Kohlberg's higher stages. Fowler (1996) stated that morality for religious conservatives is understood in Judeo-Christian terms, which means adherence to God's laws. Richards and Davison (1992) stated that religious conservatives see right and wrong in terms of "living in harmony with divine law" (p. 469) and not in terms of human notions of justice. Religious teachings emphasize that moral authority is transcendent and supernatural, so attempts at human understanding, questioning, critiquing, or scrutinizing its authority are often considered sinful. Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller (1987) pointed out that different cultures focus on different moral codes, concluding that religious conservatives are not using the same standards in approaching morality as do liberals. Berry (1980) emphasized that the unique culture of their religious communities influence moral decision-making in the conservative religious in ways contrary to prevailing relativistic perspectives. Even researchers within the Minnesota moral tradition have recognized that ideology plays a role in this issue (e.g., Narvaez, Getz, Rest, & Thoma, 1999).

## Our Research Questions and Hypotheses

The purpose of our research was to examine whether religious conservatives are really inferior in moral-decision making and, if not, explore alternate conceptions that could make better sense of this area without denigrating any one group. We decided to investigate whether moral identity could be a possible alternative to moral reasoning for better understanding the moral behavior of religious conservatives. We decided to study conservative religious individuals pursuing graduate-level religious education, whom we call Evangelical leaders. As one group of religious conservatives, we suspected they could not be successful in pursuing graduate studies if they were not relatively cognitively adept, so this would hold intellectual variables somewhat constant. In other words, these Evangelical leaders could not be easily dismissed as a group of being uneducated or unintelligent because of their academic accomplishments. We hypothesized that Evangelical leaders would score low on moral reasoning, as evidenced by prior research, despite their academic acumen, and high on fundamentalism, which defines them as religious conservatives, and high on moral identity, which could be an alternate way to evaluate their moral development. We also hypothesized that Evangelical leaders' self-reported moral behavior would relate to their moral identity, but not to their moral reasoning as measured by conventional means such as the DIT 2. If this were found, then low moral reasoning on the DIT 2 could be seen as an inadequate reason to conclude that these Evangelical leaders are morally inferior but, instead, would suggest that the method used in prior research might be biased as an evaluative tool and be unsuited for use with religious conservatives.

Last, we hypothesized that Evangelical leaders who scored low in moral reasoning as measured by the DIT 2, but high in moral behavior, could demonstrate that their moral reasoning simply reflects a different moral basis than the prevailing relativistic ethic used in most past research on moral development within psychology, but that their moral reasoning is no less

sophisticated. In addition, we were interested in identifying characteristics of Evangelical leaders who scored low on moral reasoning as measured by the DIT 2 but high in other moral indicators, as well as ways in which Evangelical leaders could be seen as engaging in highly developed moral decision-making despite scoring low on the DIT 2.

## METHOD

We used a mixed-method design, combining both quantitative and qualitative research strategies. A sample of Evangelical leaders were administered a battery of questionnaires and measures. These consisted of the following administered to all participants: a demographic cover sheet, five measures (one of which is not analyzed in this article, as it was exploratory for use in another purpose), and a semistructured questionnaire asking questions about moral identity and behavior. Additionally, a subsample of the participants, who scored low on moral reasoning on the DIT 2 but high on other moral indicators, was selected for in-depth interviews.

### Participants

Our research participants were 104 graduate students at one of two conservative Evangelical Christian seminaries studying for various religious leadership positions. These Evangelical leaders were all studying for advanced religious degrees (i.e., the M.Div. or Ph.D.) in Theology, Biblical Studies, Christian Ethics, Christian Counseling, or related fields, and most had been in various church leadership roles and were studying to further advance their leadership. A purposeful subsample was also selected from this larger sample.

### Instruments

*The DIT 2 (Rest & Narvaez, 1998).* This is a paper-and pencil measure of moral judgment derived from Kohlberg's moral development theory. The DIT 2 presents five moral dilemmas with three possible solutions. After selecting the desired solution, examinees rank on a 5-point scale the relative importance of 12 issues in deriving their solution. The DIT 2 is an updated version of the original DIT devised in 1972. Compared to the original DIT (Rest, 1979), DIT 2 has updated stories and is shorter, and its authors claimed it has clearer instructions and improved validity over the original. The correlation of the DIT with the DIT 2 is .79, nearly equal to the test-retest reliability of the DIT with itself. Validity for the DIT has been extensively assessed with over 400 published articles cited (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999), including reliability using Cronbach alphas found in the upper .70s to low .80s, similar levels of test-retest reliability, and equal validity and reliability for men and women. The newer DIT 2 reports differences in moral development in the form of N2 index scores, quantitative measures of how a participant ranks prototypic items that have been written to represent Kohlberg's highest stages (namely stages 5 and 6). It is important to mention that Rest et al. make a careful differentiation between (a) describing qualitative difference in moral understanding and (b) the actual scoring of these differences using schemas as opposed to stages. Stages depict distinct types of reasoning,

but a person may not be confined to one stage or be a consistently pure type. Therefore, assessment is concerned not with finding a particular fixed stage of a person, but rather to what extent a person uses that stage in making moral decisions. Scoring for the DIT 2 in our study was provided by the Center for the Study of Ethical Development at the University of Minnesota. Each participant received two index scores based on responses to the six dilemmas. The P score is the traditional measure employed by the DIT since it was first developed, and the one most reported in the literature. It represents the percentage of the subject's reasoning which is at the highest (principled) level in Kohlberg's theory of moral development. The N2 index is a new index for moral development and has the same mean and SD as the more familiar P-scores. The two indexes (P and N2) are highly correlated, but the N2 is preferred now because the DIT 2 authors consider it to be the most valid single score for measuring moral development, so this was used in our study and deemed equivalent to the P-scores for comparisons. The Center's scoring service also checked for reliability by filtering out data through five different reliability checks.

*The Christian Fundamentalist Belief Scale (CFBS; Gibson & Francis, 1996).* This measure was designed to provide a unidimensional scale to measure Christian religious fundamentalism, viewed as belief in the authority and inerrancy of the Bible. The CFBS consists of 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). In previous research, it demonstrated reliability via a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92 and was correlated with various indices of Christian practice, such as frequency of church attendance and personal Bible reading, supporting its validity.

*The Moral Identity Measure (MIM; Aquino & Reed, 2002).* The MIM measures two aspects of identity defined by Erikson (1964): identity rooted in the very core of one's being and as related to being true to one's self in action. It uses trait stimuli to make a moral identity schema salient, and uses questions to measure the unique moral identities along these two dimensions. Aquino and Reed (2002) labeled these dimensions internalization (I) and symbolization (S), respectively; the former (I) reflects the degree to which a set of moral traits is central to the self-concept, whereas the latter (S) reflects the degree to which these traits are expressed publicly through the person's actions in the world. Aquino and Reed found that the MIM had a stable factor structure, internal consistency reliabilities of .77 and .71 for the S and I scales respectively, and showed various types of validity. We used both the MIM I and MIM S scales in our study.

*The Christian Inventory of Moral Behavior-R (CIMB-R; Needham & Friedman, 2004).* We developed the CIMB as a 16-item exploratory self-report measure of moral behavior in accord with traditional Christian values, using a 5-point Likert-type rating scale. It was utilized in this study, despite not being previously validated, because an extant measure of moral behavior from a Christian vantage could not be located. This measure asks questions about the extent respondents behave under morally challenging circumstances in harmony with Christian ideals. It contains four independently scored subscales: Christian morality (CM), secular-universal morality (SUM), concern for other-community (CCM), and prayer-mindedness (PM), as well as a total scale (TS). However, the SUM was designed to be reverse-scored and to provide data opposite to the CIMB's other scales, but instead appeared independent, not opposite, from the CIMB's other scales. Consequently, the SUM was deleted from the CIMB to create a new



measure called the CIMB-R composed of only the 12-items in the CIMB's three other scales (i.e., additively combining the CM, CCM, and PM scales).

*The Self-Expansive Level Form.* An exploratory version of the Self-Expansive Level Form (Friedman, 1983) was administered in our study. Results from its use are not included in this paper.

*Semistructured questionnaire.* This questionnaire was designed to elicit the thoughts and feelings of participants in response to the moral dilemmas presented in the DIT 2, as well as to explore possible alternative bases for high morality despite the expectation of low scores on principled reasoning using the DIT 2. It was designed to elicit information about moral identity, adherence to fundamentalist beliefs under morally challenging circumstances, behavior in correspondence to certain Christian ideals, and related factors.

*Interviews.* In-depth guided interviews were administered to a selected subsample scoring low on DIT 2 but high on other moral indicators. This method approached the Evangelical Christian subculture from a flexible frame of reference, because it may be useful when studying people to know how they define themselves and the situations in which they find themselves in an emic way, as well as how they might be defined by others in an etic way.

## Procedure

Evangelical leaders were recruited during their seminary classes, and were given an examination packet to complete. They were also told that, once the results were available, some would be contacted for a follow-up interview, which occurred for those selected as part of the subsample. The CIMB-R served to distinguish moral behavior based on meanings that may be different from the prevailing secular utilitarian ethic assumed in most research on moral psychology. Interview data, critiquing the DIT 2's five moral dilemmas, were analyzed to explore how Christian morality, as compared to moral reasoning from the perspective of the DIT 2, was conceptualized differently by the subsample respondents. For example, the follow-up interviewer, who was not previously known to the interviewees, asked participants to describe their thoughts and feelings in responding to the DIT 2 dilemmas, as well as to describe current moral dilemmas in their own lives. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) pointed out, "The initial task in analyzing qualitative data is to find some concepts that help us to make sense of what is going on in the scenes documented by the data" (p. 209), a process often called *conceptualization*. In analyzing the data from the interviews, we listed concepts and related them to produce themes. For example, participants would often relate dilemmas to a specific Biblical imperative. Through questioning Evangelical leaders in the subsample, categories of meaning began to emerge, which were scanned for those that had internal convergence and external divergence. In other words, the categories needed to be internally consistent but distinct from one another, and were identified as salient categories of meaning held by the participants. The most often quoted approach in dealing with issues of establishing validity and reliability in qualitative research is to substitute these with the notion of trustworthiness (Kirk & Miller, 1986). One way to establish trustworthiness is "allowing a peer

who is a professional outside of the context and who has some general understanding of the study to analyze materials, test working hypotheses and emerging designs, and listen to the researcher's ideas and concerns" (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 140). Thus, we followed this suggestion in the process of design by using an additional, and independent, rater to audit our results. The rater and the first author (Needham), who were both involved in this process, were especially sensitive to data that ran contrary to initial expectations or that appeared not to fit comfortably into emerging categories used for analysis.

## Hypotheses

All quantitative hypotheses were set to be tested using the value of  $p < .05$  (2-tailed) by either t-tests or Pearson correlations. The size of samples tested varied due to data fluctuations (i.e., missing data) from the entire sample of 104 Christian leaders, except for the purposeful subsample. All tests using the DIT 2 employed its N2 index.

*Hypothesis 1.* It was hypothesized that Evangelical leaders would score higher on fundamentalism on the CFBS than a comparable sample of 866 students previously obtained from Gibson and Francis (1996) on this measure.

*Hypothesis 2.* It was hypothesized that Evangelical leaders would score lower on moral (principled) reasoning than a comparable college-educated sample, using the DIT 2 compared with a sample previously obtained from Rest et al. (1999).

*Hypothesis 3.* It was hypothesized that Evangelical leaders would score higher on two forms of moral identity, as measured by the MIM I and S scales, than a previously collected comparable college-educated sample from Aquino and Reed's (2002) study.

*Hypothesis 4.* It was hypothesized that Evangelical leaders scores on the CIMB-R would correlate significantly with both the I and S scales on the MIM, but would not correlate significantly with principled reasoning on the DIT 2.

*Hypothesis 5.* It was hypothesized that the semistructured questions could be reliably scored in terms of extracting indicators of both strong moral identity and adherence to fundamentalist beliefs, as well as in terms of behavior under morally challenging circumstances in harmony with certain Christian ideals (i.e. Biblical authority, prayer mindedness and concern for others). This was to be tested using 2 independent raters and a criterion of inter-rater reliability set as a statistically significance correlation.

*Hypothesis 6.* It was hypothesized that semistructured questions' scores (if deemed adequately reliable in testing hypothesis #5) would correlate significantly with the MIM I and S, as well as CIMB-R scores, but would not correlate significantly with DIT 2. These hypotheses were made to test that the questionnaire ratings of the sampled Evangelical leaders' responses in this study would show a pattern of convergence with other moral indicators, but not with principled

reasoning. This hypothesis was broken down into four subhypotheses, as follows: (H6a) that semistructured questions' scores on #4 would correlate significantly with MIM I; (H6b) that semistructured questions' scores on #4 would correlate significantly with MIM S; (H6c) that semistructured questions' scores in #4 would correlate significantly with CIMB-R scores; and (H6d) that semistructured questions' scores would not correlate significantly with DIT 2.

*Hypothesis 7* It was hypothesized that a different moral basis (e.g., orthodox, relational, and Biblical, rather than progressive or relativistic using secular utilitarianism) could be identified using thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with a subsample of participants selected out of those who scored low in moral reasoning but high on two other moral indicators. Scoring low in moral reasoning was defined as being in the bottom half of the DIT 2 norms for graduate level students in Rest's (1979) sample; scoring high on two other moral indicators was defined as being in the top half of this study's sample on both the MIM scales and on the CIMB-R. These qualitative data would be collected through interviewing participants about the bases of their answers to the DIT 2 dilemmas, as well as about their ways of handling their own current moral dilemmas. As part of this hypothesis, it was expected that interviewees' conceptualization of morality would form meaningful categories when analyzed by the first author, aided by two theologians used as external raters. The first step for this analysis would be to choose key terms, including finding meaningful terms and their synonyms. The terms would be selected from the list of all words from the interview responses and their frequencies. This procedure was thought to provide a way for identification and location of themes to be examined in further detail. This procedure was based on the assumption that a word is indicative of the theme or topic to the degree when it has a relatively high frequency of use. For example, stories about morality for the Evangelical sample were expected to contain terms such as Bible, prayer, and church at a high frequency. The follow-up questionnaire and interview questions were designed to elicit identifiable themes and patterns of behavior, explored using non-statistical methods suited to interpreting this type of data qualitatively.

## RESULTS

### Demographics

Of the 104 participants, 65 were women and 39 were men. Their ages ranged from 22 to 69 years, with a mean of 37.17 and a standard deviation of 11.67. Pastors made up the largest percentage (38%) of the sample, followed by teachers (34%) and counselors (23%), and lay ministers (5%), justifying the use of the term *Evangelical leaders* to this group. The majority of the participants identified themselves as *completely* (78%) or *somewhat* (18%) Evangelical. The majority (77%) was raised in America, but eight participants were raised in Hong Kong, 3 in Korea, and 2 in Taiwan, and one participant each came from the following other countries: Canada, China, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Nicaragua, and the Philippines.

In addition, we employed purposeful sampling to select a subsample that scored low on the DIT 2 but high on the other moral indicators. Most of the participants would have qualified, as most scored low on DIT 2 and high on MIM and CIMB. However we selected the more extreme cases to give the best chance to observe the hypothesized dynamics, namely to find Evangelical

leaders who appeared to be inferior moral-decision makers according to their DIT 2 scores, but who would actually be seen as quite competent in their morally decision-making using other criteria. We started with a mean split on all three variables, then adjusted the cut points downward on the DIT 2 and upward on the MIM and CIMB until we could get a subsample of 27 cases from which we hoped to get approximately 16 qualified Evangelical leaders to consent to be interviewed in-depth.

Of the 27 selected for this subsample, 18 were women (67%) and 9 were men (33%). Their ages ranged from 23 to 69 years with a mean of 39.63 and a standard deviation of 12.56 years. Pastors made up the largest percentage (37%) of the subsample, followed by teachers (33%) and counselors (22%), and lay ministers (4%). The majority of these participants identified themselves as *completely* (78%) or *somewhat* (22%) Evangelical. The majority (78%) was raised in America, but 22% were raised in another country.

Out of the 27 selected, however, only 10 volunteered for the in-depth interview. Of these 10 volunteers, their gender was evenly split and their ages ranged from 26 to 69 years, with a mean of 46.20 and a standard deviation of 11.91. There were 5 teachers, 3 counselors, and 2 pastors. Of the 10 participants, 8 identified themselves as *completely* Evangelical, with the other 2 as *somewhat*. Interestingly, half were raised in Hong Kong, while the other half were raised in America.

### Tests of the Hypotheses

*Hypothesis 1.* It was hypothesized that Evangelical leaders would score higher on fundamentalism, compared with a sample of 866 students obtained from Gibson and Francis (1996). Using the CFBS norms for men and women, two *t*-tests were run, one for men and one for women, because there were separate norms by gender. The mean score for men on the CFBS in our sample was 56.60 ( $SD = 3.61$ ) as compared to the comparison mean of 29.4 ( $SD = 10.5$ ), and this difference is significant,  $t(59) = 58.38$  ( $p < .001$ ), one-tailed,  $d = 3.46$ . The mean score for women in our sample was 57.13 ( $SD = 2.78$ ) as compared to the comparison mean of 34.1 ( $SD = 10.0$ ), and this difference is also significant,  $t(37) = 51.04$  ( $p < .001$ ), one-tailed,  $d = 3.14$ . Therefore, hypothesis 1 was supported.

*Hypothesis 2.* It was hypothesized that Evangelical leaders would score lower on moral (principled) reasoning using the DIT 2 than a comparable college-educated sample obtained from Rest et al. (1999). The mean score of the Evangelical sample was 35.19 ( $SD = 15.76$ ), as compared to the college sample mean of 44.95 ( $SD = 14.87$ ), and this difference is significant,  $t(92) = -5.99$  ( $p < .001$ ), one-tailed,  $d = .64$ . Therefore, hypothesis 2 was supported.

*Hypothesis 3.* It was hypothesized that Evangelical leaders would score higher on I and S scales on the MIM than a comparable college-educated sample obtained from Aquino and Reed's (2002) study. Four *t*-tests were conducted because there were separate norms reported by gender in the control group. The mean for our Evangelical male sample on MIM I is 6.22 ( $SD = 1.50$ ), which was compared to the control group's mean of 4.49 ( $SD = 0.60$ ), and found significant,  $t(59) = 8.91$  ( $p < .001$ ), one-tailed,  $d = 1.51$ . The mean for our Evangelical male sample on MIM S is 4.54 ( $SD = 1.25$ ), which was compared to the control group's mean of 3.27 ( $SD = 0.82$ ), and found significant,  $t(59) = 7.87$  ( $p < .001$ ), one-tailed,  $d = 1.20$ . The mean for our Evangelical

female sample on MIM I is 6.64 ( $SD = 1.01$ ), which was compared to the control group's mean of 4.45 ( $SD = 0.49$ ), and found significant,  $t(37) = 8.83$  ( $p < .001$ ), one-tailed,  $d = 2.76$ . The mean for our Evangelical female sample on MIM S is 5.01 ( $SD = 1.47$ ), which was compared to the control group's mean of 2.90 ( $SD = 0.68$ ), and found significant,  $t(37) = 8.83$  ( $p < .001$ ), one-tailed,  $d = 1.84$ . Therefore, hypothesis 3 was supported in all tests.

**Hypothesis 4.** It was hypothesized that Evangelical leaders scores on the CIMB-R would correlate significantly with both the I and S scales on the MIM, but would not correlate significantly with principled reasoning on the DIT 2. This was broken down into three subhypotheses. It was hypothesized that Evangelical leader's scores on the CIMB-R would, first, correlate significantly with MIM I and, second, correlate significantly with MIM S. The CIMB-R did not correlate significantly with MIM I,  $r = .00$  ( $n = 95$ ;  $p > .01$ ). However, as hypothesized, the CIMB-R correlated significantly with MIM S,  $r = .38$  ( $n = 95$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Third, it was hypothesized the CIMB-R would not correlate significantly with moral reasoning, and the CIMB-R correlated non-significantly with DIT 2,  $r = -.15$  ( $n = 90$ ;  $p > .05$ ). Therefore, hypothesis 4 was supported in two out of three tests.

**Hypothesis 5.** It was hypothesized that the semistructured questions could be reliably scored in terms of both strong moral identity and adherence to fundamental beliefs, as well as in terms of the behavior under morally challenging circumstances in harmony with certain Christian ideals (i.e., Biblical authority, prayer mindedness, and concern for others). This was to be tested by using 2 independent raters and a criterion of interrater reliability set as a statistically significance correlation ( $p < .05$ , 2-tailed). This hypothesis was made simply to test whether the semistructured questions could be scored with adequate reliability to warrant further use in this research. However, participants, in general, provided only relatively brief answers (and a good number provided no answers) to many of the semistructured questions that were to have been later rated by two experts. Consequently, testing this hypothesis was abandoned due to the paucity of data.

**Hypothesis 6.** Hypothesis 6 was to have tested that the questionnaire ratings of the sampled Evangelical leaders' responses in this study would show a pattern of convergence with other moral indicators, but not with moral reasoning as measured by the DIT 2. The overall semistructured questionnaire was neither scored nor used further, due to the reasons previously discussed, so this hypothesis was not tested. However, one question on the semistructured questionnaire was used post hoc as a proxy to test this hypothesis. That specific question posed to the Evangelical leaders was: "As compared to most people, how would you rate yourself as a moral exemplar?" The following data do not address the original hypothesis, but only as it was modified based on this proxy question ( $n = 96$  for all tests).

H6a: It was hypothesized that the semistructured question scores would correlate significantly with MIM I, but the one question used as a proxy correlated nonsignificantly at  $r = -.02$  ( $p > .05$ ). Therefore, the post hoc modified version of hypothesis 6a was not supported.

H6b: It was hypothesized that semistructured question scores would correlate significantly with MIM S, and the one question used as a proxy had a significant correlation with MIM S at  $r = .27$  ( $p < .05$ ). Therefore, post hoc modified version of hypothesis 6b was supported.

H6c: It was hypothesized that semistructured question scores would correlate significantly with CIMB-R scores, and the one question used as a proxy had a significant correlation with CIMB-R at  $r = .39$  ( $p < .001$ ). Therefore, post hoc modified version of hypothesis 6c was supported.

H6d: It was hypothesized that semistructured question scores would not correlate significantly with DIT 2, and the one question used as a proxy did not correlate significantly with DIT 2 at  $r = .14$  ( $p > .05$ ). Therefore, post hoc modified version of hypothesis 6d was supported.

*Hypotheses 7.* The results of the subsample of 10 participants' conceptualization of morality were explored using thematic analysis to test the hypothesis that lower moral reasoning scores of the DIT 2 reflect a different moral basis (namely orthodox, relational, and Biblical, rather than progressive or relativistic as reflected in a secular utilitarian approach). The follow-up interviews were designed to elicit identifiable themes and patterns of behavior. The interviewer asked the participants to describe their thoughts and feelings in responding to the DIT 2 dilemmas, as well as any related current moral dilemmas in their own lives. As an example of one DIT 2 dilemma, the Evangelical leaders were told about a small village in northern India that had experienced severe food shortages. One village family was near starvation when that family's father heard that a rich man in his village had extra supplies of food hoarded, so that it could be sold later for a huge profit. The participants were asked to reflect whether or not the father should steal food from the rich man's warehouse. Evangelical leaders' typical response to this moral dilemma was not to endorse stealing for the utilitarian purpose of saving the family, but rather to relate this dilemma to specific Biblical imperatives. One example of an approach attempting to reconcile this dilemma was, "The Bible says to take care of widows and hungry children, so the community shares some guilt for not taking care of this family. I would get a group of people and talk to the man with the rice." Although this would be scored as a poor answer on the DIT 2, which would support stealing the food as the favored secular utilitarian response, it cannot be easily dismissed as an inferior answer. Overall, the gist of these interviews revealed a focus on a divine ethic, as opposed to what would be expedient for meeting human needs in the short-term.

Through examining these interview data, categories of meaning began to emerge, which we scanned for internal convergence and external divergence. In other words, the categories needed to be internally consistent but distinct from one another. This means that we not only searched for the categories we had predefined (i.e., in constructing the CIMB subscales), but also we attempted to identify the salient categories of meaning as held by our participants. This was done using the following steps. First, we had the transcripts read by two theologians, each of whom rated the transcript according to the CIMB-R subscales. Then a third outside rater, along with the first author (Needham) read the transcripts and wrote down words that were used with a high frequency. We then placed these words into new categories. Two distinct categories first began to emerge, which we called community-caring (e.g., taking care of the hungry and the poor) and obedience through following Biblical instruction (e.g., "The more I read the Bible and meditate, and take it seriously, what God is saying, and not just selectively choose what I want to do"). Moral decisions were apparently being filtered through Biblical authority, and moral reasoning was rising from the ethic of divinity, as understood by Shweder (1990), not out of the secular ethic on which the DIT 2 was based. The participants appeared not to focus on the expedient or utilitarian outcome, but instead appeared to actively think in nuanced and sophisticated ways about how they would obey both divine and human imperatives. A third theme of prayer

mindedness, which we called trust, also began to emerge from the data. Not only did this third theme emerge from the DIT 2 dilemmas, but also when asked about their own moral dilemmas, a heavy reliance on a prayer relationship with God became apparent. One quote that indicates this theme is, “I really want to put myself in God’s hands, and so I keep praying.”

### Ancillary Findings

Although not proposed as formal hypotheses, the DIT 2 had a significant negative correlation with CFBS at  $r = -.22$  ( $n = 91$ ;  $p < .05$ ), which provides further support that Christian fundamentalism and moral reasoning defined in secular utilitarian ways are inversely related. Also, the MIM I and DIT 2 and the MIM S and DIT 2 did not correlate significantly,  $r = -.05$  ( $n = 91$ ;  $p > .05$ ) and  $r = -.10$  ( $n = 91$ ;  $p > .05$ ), respectively. Although these ancillary findings are not part of the original hypotheses, they are presented as relevant *post hoc* findings.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We questioned whether psychological research findings that have consistently shown religious conservatives to be poor moral decision makers and thereby to be lacking in moral development may have been subject to biases. We explored this in a variety of ways with a sample of Evangelical leaders, because we thought it unlikely that such leaders, all pursuing graduate education, would be as limited in their moral development as the previous research implied based on one approach to moral decision-making. Instead, we suspected that these leaders might show a pattern of moral development that, although variant from that expected on the DIT 2 for highly moral individuals, would have its own coherence and logic, and that could be seen as an alternate moral paradigm to the prevailing view that seems to privilege liberal, and denigrate conservative, religious individuals.

We used our first hypothesis to confirm that the Evangelical leaders we studied were, in fact, a highly fundamentalist group, which they were. We used our second hypothesis to replicate past research by exploring whether Evangelical leaders, who cannot likely be dismissed as simply poor in reasoning, because they are in graduate programs requiring good reasoning skills, would score lower than a comparable college-educated sample using the DIT 2, which we also found. We used our third hypothesis to determine if these Evangelical leaders, although low on moral reasoning as measured by the DIT 2, would, in fact, score high on I and S on the MIM, identifying themselves as highly moral individuals on both dimensions. These Evangelical leaders did, indeed, score higher on moral identity in both dimensions when compared to a college-educated sample, supporting that moral identity could be a possible alternate, and less biased, basis for understanding their moral development, rather than relying on the DIT 2 as a criterion. Having established that moral identity could provide a possible alternate approach to the prevailing paradigm that provides a basis for high morality in the Evangelical leaders that is not from a secular utilitarian vantage, we looked at their own self-appraisals as being moral. We tested the fourth hypothesis as to whether the Evangelical leaders’ moral identity related to their moral behavior using the CIMB-R. Our results indicate partial support for this, as our participants’ self-reported moral behavior did not correlate significantly with MIM I, the inner characteristics of moral identity, but it did correlate

significantly with MIM S, the outward manifestation. We can only speculate that, perhaps, the inner aspects of moral identity somehow operate differently than its outer aspects in this group, including possibly in response to our research method. Specifically, Aquino and Reed (2002) pointed out that MIM S was related to outcomes involving impression management, so perhaps this discrepant finding might be related to demand characteristics in our study. We also predicted in our fourth hypothesis self-reported moral behavior through the CIMB-R would not correlate significantly with moral reasoning on the DIT 2, which was supported. This implies that moral reasoning using the DIT 2 may not have much validity for appraising morality in our sample and, by extension, when applied to religious conservatives in general. Overall, we interpret the findings on hypothesis four to support that at least one aspect of moral identity in our sample is linked with moral behavior, while moral decision-making as measured by the DIT 2 is not.

We abandoned hypothesis five, due to lack of sufficient data in our semistructured questionnaire. However, we did use one proxy question from these semistructured questions, albeit in a post hoc manner, to attempt to address hypothesis six. Specifically, we used the question (i.e., "As compared to most people, how would you rate yourself as a moral exemplar?") to explore whether the sampled Evangelical leaders' responses would show a pattern of convergence with other moral indicators, but not with moral reasoning, as originally hypothesized (but tested with a proxy indicator). The results, although *post hoc* and not as strong as would have been obtained from the full semistructured questionnaire, add to the support of our guiding question that religious conservatives are not necessarily inferior in their moral development, and that other bases for their exhibiting high moral development might be found.

On hypothesis seven, we qualitatively assessed whether we could find a different basis (e.g., orthodox, relational, Biblical), as opposed to the secular utilitarian view measured by the DIT 2, for understanding morality. Through in-depth interviews with a subsample of our participants who scored low on the DIT 2 and thus from the mainstream understanding were lacking in moral development, yet who scored high on other indicators of morality, we identified common themes. Our thematic analysis indicated that the Evangelical leaders' moral decision making process is specifically related to three characteristics. First is an identity as a child of God to whom the child has willingly chosen to be obedient. Second is prayer mindedness, which involves developing a trusting relationship with God. And third is concern for others, which involves reaching out to the downtrodden and holding a sense of community with other children of God. Secular utilitarian morality was simply not a major part of the Evangelical leaders' understanding of their own moral processes, but in no way were their moral decisions simplistic or childlike. Instead, they used sophisticated reasoning and nuanced interpretations of the DIT 2 and other moral dilemmas, but unfortunately the scoring mechanism of the DIT 2 found them lacking in moral decision-making ability. The subsample's religious identity and their Christian beliefs about moral behavior led them to an alternate moral reasoning, one they believe is consistent with the will of God. They appear to have a heightened, not diminished, sense of moral awareness. This causes them to see the circumstances involved in moral dilemmas in light of their human relationship with God, whom they see as the source of all truth and goodness, and they rejected a simply additive model of human worth, such as appraising five lives as worth five times more than one life, as assumed in the trolley dilemma mentioned. It seems clear from this qualitative data that the subsample of Evangelical leaders we studied did not have a primitive or undeveloped sense of morality but, rather, one that simply differs from the basis of the DIT 2, as for them morality means adherence of God's laws (Fowler, 1996).



Last, the ancillary data in our study, although not part of our original hypotheses, provides support that the DIT 2 is related inversely to Christian fundamentalism and, therefore, may be biased against religious conservatives. In addition, that the DIT 2 did not correlate with either of the moral identity scales (MIM I and S) supports the possibility that moral identity may serve as an alternate approach to understanding morality in religious conservatives, whose moral identity is central to their self-concept.

### Limitations

As an exploratory study, there are a number of limitations worth mentioning. First, by studying Evangelical leaders, we purposefully selected a sample of religious conservatives who were likely to have good reasoning skills, and it is important to not generalize this to all religious conservatives. However, the fact that they demonstrated poor performance on the DIT 2 does make our point. Also, it is always difficult to do research with populations that feel marginalized. Our study could not likely have been conducted without having the first author (Needham) as a cultural informant, but this may have been a mixed blessing. We speculate that our lack of sufficient responses on the semistructured questionnaire may have involved problems around confidentiality concerns. The schools where we obtained our sample are tight-knit communities and, although participant anonymity was assured (and confidentiality well protected), we needed to obtain identifying information to conduct follow-up interviewing with our subsample. This may have limited expressions on the semistructured questionnaire, as well as agreement for participating in follow-up interviews, due to possible fears of recognition by the first author, an instructor at one of the participating seminaries. A related limitation is that a disproportionate number of our subsample participants were raised outside of the United States, which could have skewed our results in various ways. In addition, our exploratory use of the CIMB-R, a measure of questionable validity, was justified by the lack of finding a similar extant measure, but leads to many uncertainties. As with all self-report methods, there could also have been response bias problems, such as due to social desirability, but in this case it could have been exacerbated due to a special form of social desirability, namely spiritual desirability, as this area of study may be especially prone to distortions in self-reporting (see MacDonald, LeClair, Holland, Alter, & Friedman, 1995). In fact, this potential source of bias may account for the difference in the MIM S and I scores in our sample. Finally, in the qualitative part of our study there is always the possibility of our having inadvertently influenced the direction and responses of the unstructured interviews, as well as the possibility of having introduced interpretive biases despite many cautions we took, such as using an outside interviewer and additional raters to audit the process.

### FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

There are many future research directions that would further our study. Basic psychometric studies could establish the reliability and validity of the CIMB-R. Presenting religious conservative participants with dilemmas closely tailored to current religious controversies, such as dealing with abortion, could help fine-tune how these dilemmas are reconciled. Looking at religious conservatives from other traditions would broaden our approach, and adding other variables,

such as personality traits, could give more specificity to our findings. Other measure of critical thinking could also be used to look more closely at the relationship between moral reasoning and other approaches to critical reasoning. What probably is the most important focus for future research is to explore how subtle biases can be discovered that may have crept into psychology. One example is how positive psychology presents itself as value neutral when, in fact, much of its approach is quite value-laden, such as the inclusion of spirituality training aimed to make warfighters more resilient, which is actually embedded with parochial religious assumptions that have not been recognized as such (Friedman & Robbins, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

Within various cultures, there are diverse interpretations of what is moral and it is important for psychology, as a scientific effort that attempts, but never full achieves, value neutrality to be very cognizant of its potential for abuse. The area of studying morality is particularly susceptible to such abuses because, unavoidably, morality is culturally defined. The results of our study indicate that our sample of Evangelical leader's moral decision-making is tied more closely to their moral identity, rather than to their moral reasoning as measured in the DIT 2 tradition. In this regard, the moral decision-making research, based on the DIT 2 and similar dilemma traditions, appears to show a cultural bias against religious conservatives that may be no less damaging than similar past biases revealed within psychology, such as those based on mistaken beliefs about race. There is even recent research that purports that there is brain atrophy in religious conservatives (Owen, Hayward, Koenig, Steffens, & Payne, 2011), which is reminiscent of past research, now debunked, mistakenly claiming that certain racial groups had smaller cranial capacities, which was used to justify racism.

We think the better approach is to conclude that religious conservatives adhere to a different basis for their morality, namely the ethic of divinity where one conceptualizes the self as a spiritual entity striving to attain purity and sanctity. This differs from the secular utilitarian ethic placing the self at the center of the universe, rather than placing a divine force at the center. We see no basis to privilege either of these ethics as intrinsically better or worse in scientific terms. In this regard, the reliance on only one way to measure something as controversial as moral development, which stems from a singular ethic being privileged as in the various moral dilemma measures, constitutes a form of "methodolotry" or the worship of a method (Friedman, 2003, p. 187). There is nothing wrong with using dilemma approaches per se, as they provide a fascinating avenue into understanding morality, but it is wrong to score them in a parochial way that privileges some religious traditions while denigrating others. This is particularly important as religious groups have polarized into divisive moral stances that reveal deep and seemingly irreconcilable differences, both in the United States and globally. Our study provides a basis for arguing that these differences are not simply vertically hierarchical, as usually construed in psychological thought that denigrates conservatives and elevates liberals, but perhaps these are merely horizontal differences that should be recognized, and honored, as equal despite their diversity. This parallels one of the major controversies currently in transpersonal psychology, namely the struggle between developmental theorists who argue that spirituality is invariant from lower to higher stages (e.g., Wilber, 2000) and participatory theorists who argue that spiritual development is variable and cannot be compared across cultures and traditions in any singular

evaluative way (Ferrer, 2009). This has been the topic of considerable recent work by the second author, such as through exploring how psychological evaluations can be biased in relationship to religious and spiritual variables (Johnson & Friedman, 2008), as well as comparing and contrasting various models within spiritual traditions (Friedman, Krippner, Riebel, & Johnson, 2010). Open dialogue around these types of issues could, hopefully, lead to a basis for reconciliation among various traditions, as opposed to continued polarization based on mutual misunderstandings and implicit lack of respect on all sides.

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