Morality, Spirituality, and Residual Religion

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Introduction

- Do **religious**, **formerly religious** (Dones), and **never religious** (Nones) people differ in their moral values and spiritual well-being?
- The **Residual Religion Hypothesis (RRH)** (Van Tongeren et al., 2021) suggests that religious influence fades over time after disaffiliation—affecting moral, cultural, and spiritual outlooks.

This study tests RRH by examining U.S. participants'
A. Endorsement of cooperative moral values (via MAC-Q)
B. Perceptions of moral decline (based on Gallup trend items)
C. Spiritual well-being (measured with the SHALOM 2G scale)

A. Morality-As-Cooperation theory (MAC)

Morality evolved as a set of **biological and cultural solutions** to the challenges of human social life (Curry, 2019).

Seven core cooperative problems give rise to distinct moral domains:
- **Family** – Favoring kin in resource allocation
- **Loyalty** – Supporting one's group and community
- **Reciprocity** – Valuing fairness, trust, and forgiveness
- **Heroism (Hawkish)** – Admiring dominance in conflict
- **Deference (Dovish)** – Respecting rank to maintain peace
- **Fairness** – Dividing resources to prevent infighting
- **Property** – Respecting possession to avoid theft

MAC hypotheses:
- **H1:** *Group-preserving values* (Family, Heroism, Deference) will be strongest among the **Religious**, moderate among the **Dones**, and weakest among the **Nones**.
- **H2:** For **Dones**, the longer it's been since leaving religion, the lower their endorsement of these values—suggesting moral "residue" fades over time (per RRH).
- **H3:** *Transactional values* (Reciprocity, Fairness, Property) will show **no significant differences** across groups—these are expected to be more universal.
- **H4:** *Group loyalty* (coalitional morality) will also remain **consistent** across groups, reflecting its importance in both religious and secular communities.

B. Perceptions of moral decline

Participants answered two Gallup questions about U.S. moral values: their current state and whether they're improving or worsening (Gallup, 2023).

- **H5:** Religious participants will show the greatest concern about moral decline, Dones will fall in between, and Nones will show the least concern—consistent with residual effects of prior belief.

C. Spiritual well-being

The SHALOM 2G (Spiritual Health And Life-Orientation Measure, second generation) assesses spiritual well-being across four domains:

- **Personal** – Meaning, purpose, and inner peace
- **Communal** – Love, trust, and connection with others
- **Environmental** – Harmony with nature and the world
- **Transcendental** – Relationship with a higher power or spiritual reality

Participants rate their ideals and actual experiences, allowing insight into both aspirations and lived spiritual alignment (Fisher, 2021).

- **H6:** *Nones* will report lower **communal spiritual well-being** than *religious* participants. *Dones* are expected to fall in between, reflecting residual effects of past belief (Residual Religion Hypothesis).

Key sources

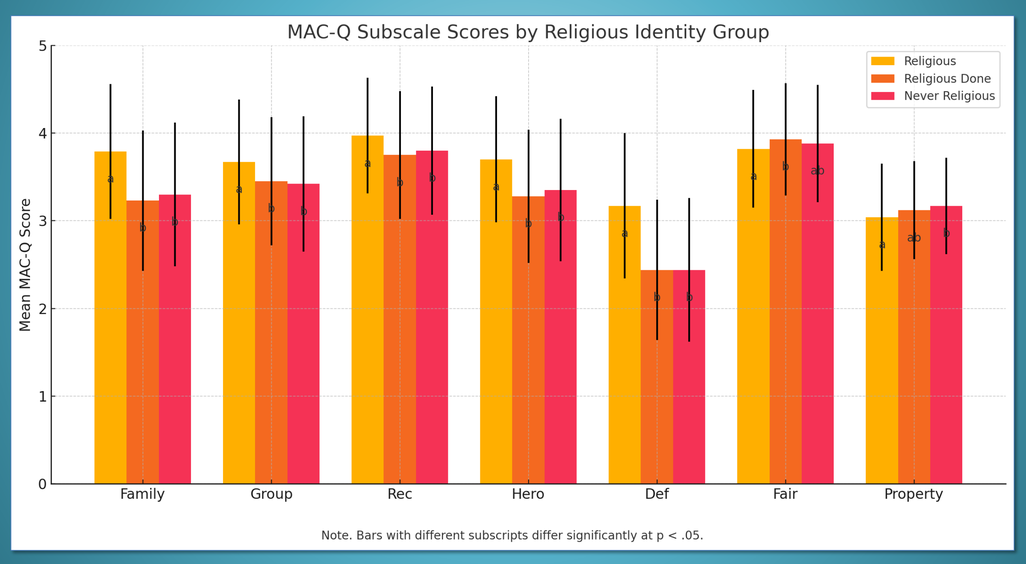
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Method

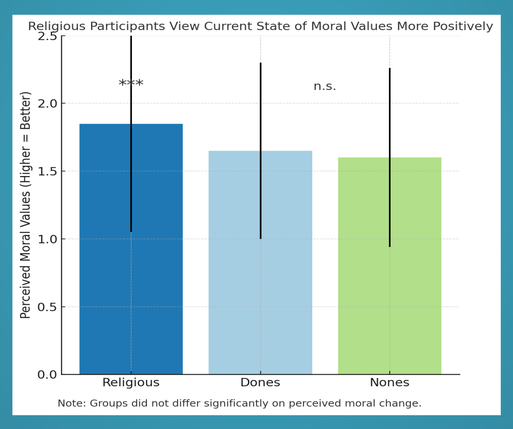
On March 11, 2025, 1,500 U.S. adults were surveyed via Prolific. After quality checks, 1,304 valid responses remained.

Participants were grouped by religious identity:
Religious (n = 656)
Dones – formerly religious (n = 393)
Nones – never religious (n = 254)
Dones also reported how long ago they left religion and whether their past adherence was Extrinsic or Intrinsic in nature.

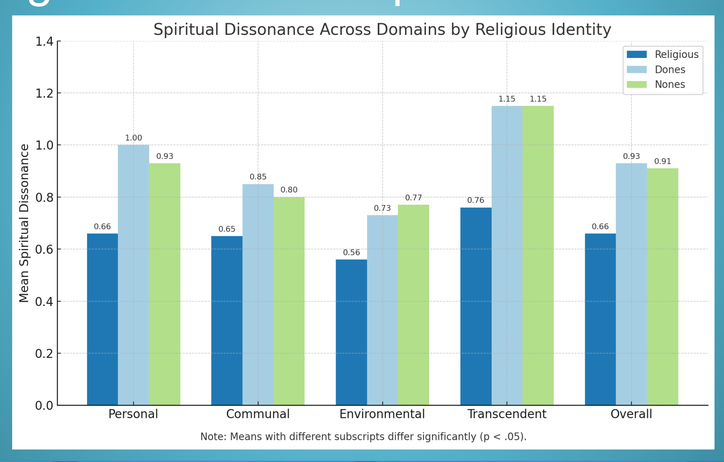
A. MAC-Q results: Religious residue *not* found



B. Morality results: Religious *less* pessimistic



C. SHALOM 2G Results: Religious have *less* spiritual dissonance



Takeaways:

1. This study **failed to support the Residual Religion Hypothesis (RRH)** using MAC-Q. Is **MAC-Q less well-suited for lived values differentiation** than Moral Foundation Theory?
2. Bucking historical trends, Religious (likely conservative) people were slightly less pessimistic about the state of moral values. **However: this sample was taken in early 2025, and moral moods among partisans can swing widely** after presidential elections.
3. Religious people report **less spiritual dissonance** in general, and the Dones do not differ significantly from the Nones. Again, no evidence for RRH.

Exploratory findings:

1. When **Done** respondents were asked whether their previous religion was held Intrinsically or Extrinsically, **only 20% said they had been "Deeply committed to religious practices and beliefs."**
2. This suggests that a more fine-grained approach is needed for researching the Done population, and it may help explain why in most of our results there was no significant difference between Dones and Nones.