

# Virtue Development Following Spiritual Transformation in Adolescents Attending Evangelistic Summer Camp

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Spiritual transformation in adolescents has been a topic of great interest to the psychology of religion since the inception of the field (Starbuck, 1897, 1901). Both psychological theory and Christian theology maintain that a spiritual transformation should lead to the subsequent development of virtues. The present study tested the hypothesis that spiritual transformation leads to increases in virtues in a sample of adolescents attending evangelistic summer camps run by the Young Life organization. Participants completed measures of spiritual transformation and virtues (Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth; Park & Peterson, 2006) directly before camp, immediately after camp, and one year following camp. Spiritual transformation was assessed as a change in spirituality, a self-reported commitment to God at camp, and a change in spiritual strivings. Adolescents who demonstrated an increase in spirituality also increased in intellectual, theological, other-focused, and temperance virtues from before camp to one year after camp, and a first time commitment to God at camp predicted an additional increase in intellectual and theological virtues.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22)

“Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.” (Matthew 7:16-17)

Christian theologians have broadly maintained that genuine spiritual change in a person should correspond to the development of “spiritual fruit,” or virtues, through the sanctifying work of Christ and the Holy Spirit (e.g., Augustine, 398/1961), and contemporary theologians have brought to the fore the importance of virtues in the formation of Christian community (e.g., Hauerwas, 1981; MacIntyre, 2007). Psychologists, too, have begun to acknowledge the moral formation functions of religion and spirituality (Leffel, 2011), though few studies have examined changes in character resulting from spiritual change. Moreover, very little research

has examined the effects of spiritual transformation in adolescents, even though adolescence is arguably the stage of life during which spiritual transformation is most likely to occur (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009). Thus, the aim of the present study is to examine the effects of spiritual transformation on the development of virtues in adolescents.

## The Psychological Study of Spiritual Transformation: Historical Roots

Psychologists have long been interested in the effects of spiritual transformation and conversion. In his classic text, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James (1902) discussed at length the means by which conversion may change a person. James supported the proposition that true conversion will be marked by a change in a person’s character:

Converted men as a class are indistinguishable from natural men...super-normal incidents such as voices and visions...may all come by way of nature, or worse still, be counterfeited by Satan. The real witness of the spirit to the second birth is to be found only in the disposition of the genuine child of God, the permanently patient heart, the love of self eradicated (p. 187).

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He also conceived conversion as process that moved a person from a disintegrated self to a state of self-concordance and unity, commenting that conversion results in “a firmness, stability, and equilibrium succeeding a period of storm and stress and inconsistency” (p. 239).

Edwin Starbuck (1897, 1901) more closely considered the conversion experiences of adolescents. Like James, he recognized the ability of spiritual transformation to bring about integration of the self. He observed correspondence between the conversions of evangelical adolescents and the typical identity formation processes taking place during the life stages, but he maintained that conversion was exceptional in its ability to shorten the typical period of brooding, or storm and stress, seen in adolescents. Contemporary researchers have corroborated Starbuck’s focus on adolescence in the study of spiritual transformation. Hood, Hill, and Spilka (2009) state that spiritual transformation peaks around 15-16 years of age, and a number of scholars have advocated the necessity of studying conversion in adolescence due to the unique developmental tasks of this period (e.g., Smith, Denton, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002).

### **What is Spiritual Transformation?**

Spiritual transformation is a complex phenomenon, and the variety of experiences that can be classified as spiritual transformations and conversions are considerable. Rambo (1993) maintains that there are five general types of conversions, including institutional transitions, tradition transitions, affiliations, intensifications, and apostasy. Similarly, Lofland and Skonovd (1981) describe six conversion motifs, which are defining experiences and features of conversion. The six motifs are intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalism, and coercive. Given the diversity of experiences that can fall under the umbrella of conversions, coupled with the idiosyncratic nature of transformations, definition of spiritual transformation is complicated.

Spiritual transformation is typically conceptualized as a super-ordinate category that includes incidents of both religious conversion and deconversion (Paloutzian, 2005) as well as spiritual “change or growth in the context of life stress, grief and bereavement, various identity or worldview life confrontations, and so forth, and may appear in both religious and non-religious forms” (Paloutzian, Murken, Streib, & Rößler-

Namini, 2013, p. 416). Although the archetypal conversion in U.S. Protestantism is often portrayed as a sudden and dramatic spiritual experience, neither the narrower category of conversion nor the broader category of spiritual transformation require that transformation be sudden or dramatic. Transformation may even take up to several years to occur. It is also important to recognize that spiritual transformation is not just an individual phenomenon (Paloutzian et al., 2013, p. 416). Instead, it is an unfolding process over time that is contextually rooted in a network of cultural, social, relational, religious, and spiritual influences (Rambo, 1993).

In his definition of conversion, Paloutzian (2005) maintains that conversion is change in religious or spiritual values, beliefs, practices, or commitments that is separable from general developmental processes and distinct in that the convert can identify a time before and after the conversion. Spiritual transformation, too, should be separable and distinct, though the distinctiveness of some spiritual transformations may be less apparent than that of religious conversion.

Spiritual transformation has commonly been conceptualized as a shift in a person’s meaning system, particularly in those aspects of a meaning system that build the basis for “self-definition, the interpretation of life, and overarching purposes and ultimate concerns” (Paloutzian, 2005, p. 334). Pargament (2006) points out that spiritual transformation is most often marked by a reprioritization of life goals. He states:

At its heart, spiritual transformation refers to a fundamental change in the place of the sacred or the character of the sacred in the life of the individual. Spiritual transformation can be understood in terms of new configurations of strivings. (p. 18)

In other words, spiritual transformation may be characterized as a shift in the importance and content of spiritual motives and life objectives.

By these accounts, then, spiritual transformation may be defined by three elements. It is (1) a change in spirituality that is (2) recognized as distinctive by the individual and whereby (3) there is a reprioritization of spiritual goals. Despite emerging clarity concerning the theoretical definition of spiritual transformation, a measure of the phenomenon that assesses all three aspects of spiritual transformation has yet to be developed.

### Effects of Spiritual Transformation

Researchers studying the psychology of spiritual transformation have often adopted James' (1902) and Starbuck's (1901) functionalist approach to transformation. Studies have examined the ways spiritual transformation moves a person from less than optimal functioning to increased levels of individual well-being and purpose. For example, one study found that people who had experienced a conversion (compared to those who did not) reported higher perceptions of pre-conversion stress, but then reported a higher sense of post-conversion adequacy, competency, and self-esteem (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). Similarly, Paloutzian (1981) found that people who reported previously experiencing a conversion had greater purpose in life than those who reported they had not experienced a conversion.

Kilbourne and Richardson (1984) found that converts to new religious movements resembled people participating in psychotherapy in that people in both groups had a positive new identity and an enhanced sense of life's meaning. Likewise, Robbins and Anthony (1982) documented a variety of positive outcomes experienced by those who converted to new religious groups including lower neurotic distress, increased actualization, renewed vocational interest, decreased psychosomatic symptoms, increased moral clarity, and termination of illicit drug use.

Spiritual transformation has even been shown to affect both mental and physical health outcomes. Ironson and Kremer (2009) found that HIV patients who experienced a spiritual transformation had higher meaning in life, increased optimism, and lower fear of death than those who did not experience a spiritual transformation. In addition, patients who experienced a transformation had higher medication adherence, better treatment success 3 to 5 years later (higher CD-4 count and lower viral loads), and were 5.35 times more likely to survive.

Although these studies have begun to document the various ways spiritual transformation increases psychological and physical well-being, they have several methodological limitations that seriously restrict their interpretation. Nearly all studies on the effects of transformation utilized cross-sectional research designs and relied upon retrospective accounts of pre-transformation well-being. This dependence on retrospective accounts is particularly disconcerting considering

the literature on memory reconstruction. It seems probable that those who have experienced a spiritual transformation may reconstruct their memories (albeit unconsciously) to fit with "conversion scripts" available to them in their religious context (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). For instance, a common cultural script for Christian spiritual transformation says that people who are immoral and unhappy experience a new or renewed relationship with God that leads them becomes joyful, kind, and generous. Rather than measuring actual change in well-being from before to after a spiritual transformation, studies utilizing retrospective accounts of pre-transformation functioning may actually be assessing the extent to which people reconstruct their memories to fit such cultural scripts.

### What about Virtues?

Notably absent from the literature on spiritual transformation are studies assessing the effects of transformation on the development of virtues and character strengths. Leffel (2011) writes extensively about this deficit and argues that a meaning system approach to understanding spiritual transformation permeates the psychological literature to such an extent that increasing epistemic well-being (e.g., increased purpose in life, decreased existential angst) and, perhaps, intrapsychic well-being (e.g., self-esteem, positive mood) are seen as the primary functions of transformation. Instead, he proposes that the primary function of spiritual transformation is to increase moral sociability, defined as "an emergent capacity for moral relatedness, whereby one person acts to facilitate the good of another, and where that good is understood as the other's unrealized potential" (p. 40). Virtues and character strengths, in this framework, are individual markers of a person's moral sociability; they are positive attributes and habits that enable a person to morally engage with others in a prosocial manner.

In their work on adolescent spirituality, King, Clardy, and Ramos (in press) find that spirituality in adolescents includes three integrated components: the experience of transcendence (i.e., relation to something or someone larger than the self), fidelity (i.e., resolute commitment to values and beliefs), and action (i.e., a lifestyle that lives out responsibility to the "other"). In many ways, the action component of their tripartite model overlaps considerably with the increase in moral sociability that Leffel (2011) maintains is at the

core of spiritual transformation. Adolescent spiritual exemplars describe embodying virtues, caring, compassion, acts of justice, and moral righteousness as a core component of their spirituality (King, Clardy, & Ramos, in press).

Although morality is an integral component of spirituality, no previously published work has examined spiritual transformation and changes in moral character and virtues. A host of studies do, however, substantiate the link between religion/spirituality and morality. Research on the moral functions of religion has been invigorated in the last decade. For example, studies have found that priming religion increases prosocial (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007) and honest (Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007) behavior in the lab.

A variety of virtues have been associated with religious practice and spirituality. Several teams of researchers have established a link between religion and increased self-control, a virtue vital to social functioning (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). Likewise, robust associations have been established between the virtue of gratitude, prosocial behavior, and religious/spiritual practice (e.g., McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003). Lambert, Fincham, Braithwaite, Graham, and Beach (2009) found that prayer increases gratitude in both longitudinal and experimental studies. Given the established relations between religiousness, spirituality, and virtues, the hypothesis that spiritual transformation will lead to an increase in virtues is tenable.

In addition, research examining the effects of spiritual transformation on virtue development in adolescence must also attend to the typical developmental trajectory of virtues during this life stage. Few studies have examined whether virtues increase or decrease across adolescence. Park and Peterson (2006) found that fifth graders scored higher than eighth graders in character strengths, but they attributed this difference to the failure of children to use social comparison information. Many studies have examined change in personality traits during this developmental stage, and a meta-analysis found there are mean-level increases in social dominance and openness, but no change in conscientiousness, during this time (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). In order to fully understand the effects of spiritual transformation on virtue development in adolescence, it is important to discriminate virtues that may characteristically

increase as a part of normal development from those that only increase as a result of spiritual transformation.

### **The Present Study: Spiritual Transformations at Young Life Camps**

To examine the effect of spiritual transformation on the development of virtues in adolescents, we collected longitudinal data with pre- and post-transformation measurement of virtues. We sought out a sample of adolescents who were likely to report a spiritual transformation in the near future but who had not yet had the transformation. Smith and Denton (2005) found that adolescents most likely to experience a spiritual transformation are those involved in a religious organization, so we approached Young Life with the possibility of collecting data from adolescents attending their camps.

Young Life, active in 50 U.S. states and 46 countries, is a Christian organization that aims to introduce teenagers to the Christian faith. One of Young Life's main outreach activities is summer camps, which are attended by more than 215,000 adolescents each year. Young Life camps include typical summer camp activities that are fun and promote group bonding (e.g., horseback riding, swimming, high ropes course), but they also include large group "club" events, which feature evangelistic messages focused on the life and teachings of Jesus in addition to skits, games, and singing. Camps also feature small group "cabin times," during which adolescents, guided by an adult leader, reflect on the religious teachings presented and make applications to their own lives. At the completion of camp, adolescents are invited to make a commitment or recommitment to God and the Christian faith.

Many adolescents attending Young Life camps regularly report experiencing spiritual transformations at camp. Young Life specifically targets non-religious and "unchurched" adolescents to attend their camps, but many attendees do have prior religious and spiritual experiences or commitments. Under Rambo's (1993) classification, many of the transformations reported by adolescents at camp would be classified as intensifications (i.e., increasing commitment to one's already held faith/beliefs), affiliative conversions (i.e., moving from no religious commitment to full involvement with a faith community), or institutional transitions (i.e., switching from one faith community to another within a major religious tradition, such as a switch from mainline Methodist to Baptist). In

terms of Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) conversion motifs, a large number of Young Life transformations would be categorized as affectional and revivalistic. Young Life's primary philosophy is that spiritual transformation should take place through the building of relationships, so we would expect transformations whereby a person comes to faith through the experience of being loved and affirmed by the members of a religious group. We would also expect revivalistic transformations, which are highly emotional with raised levels of social influence, to appear quite frequently given the nature of club events and "altar-call" talks at camp.

The transformation experiences that commonly occur in the Young Life camping context are diverse, but they are cohesive in that they involve change in the adolescent's spirituality that is distinctive and leads to a reprioritization of life goals. Thus, Young Life campers were an ideal population in which to study spiritual transformation. We assessed participants before they attended Young Life camp and then assessed them immediately after and one year following camp.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were originally 148 adolescents attending Young Life summer camp in the USA ( $M$  age = 14.66,  $SD$  age = 1.40, range = 11-18 years), but only 51 adolescents completed the entire study ( $M$  age = 14.74,  $SD$  age = 1.16, range = 13-18 years). The main study analyses are performed on the sample of 51 adolescents who completed the study.

Of the participants who began the study, there were 51 (34.46%) males and 96 (64.86%) females. One hundred eight (72.97%) were Caucasian, 17 (11.49%) were Latino/Hispanic, 7 (4.73%) were African American, 5 (3.38%) were Asian American, and 5 (3.38%) marked Other.

Of the 51 participants who completed the study, there were 14 (27.45%) males and 37 (72.55%) females. Thirty-nine (76.47%) were Caucasian, 6 (11.76%) were Latino/Hispanic, 2 (3.92%) were African American, 1 (1.96%) was Asian American, and 2 (3.92%) marked Other.

Given the high rate of participant attrition, we tested for differences between participants who completed the entire the study and participants who dropped out. There were no significant differences in scores ( $p < .01$ ) on the four virtues,

spirituality, spiritual strivings, or the demographic variables at Time 1.

### Procedure

Several Young Life groups in the USA were contacted and researchers invited all teenagers planning to attend camp that summer to participate. After obtaining child assent and parental consent, researchers asked participants to complete the full set of paper questionnaires 1 to 2 weeks before camp (Time 1), a shorter paper questionnaire immediately following camp (primarily to assess if participants experienced a transformation at camp; Time 2), and the full set of questionnaires online one year after summer camp (Time 3). Participants were remunerated the equivalent of \$50 (US) for their participation across all three time points (\$20 for Time 1, \$10 for Time 2, and \$20 for Time 3).

### Measures

**Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth.** Virtues were assessed with the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-YS; Park and Peterson, 2006), a 198-item measure of character strengths and virtues specifically designed for older children and adolescents. Participants were asked to rate how well statements such as, "I am very concerned about others when they have problems" (Kindness), described them on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Not Like Me at All*; 5 = *Very Much Like Me*). The inventory was scored for 24 character strengths, which are conceptualized as the characteristic adaptations people employ to enact higher-order virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Cronbach's alphas for each of the character strengths ranged from .47 to .84 at Time 1 and from .68 to .92 at Time 3 ( $N = 51$ ). The mean alphas for the strengths at Time 1 and Time 3 were .71 and .83, respectively ( $N = 51$ ). A list of the 23 strengths and their alphas are displayed in Table 1. The character strength of Spirituality is not listed in the table as it was separated from the character strengths and used as a measure of spiritual transformation. As a general pattern, alphas were lower at Time 1 than Time 3. It may be that the measures were more reliable when adolescents were slightly older.

To avoid alpha inflation in our analyses, we created scores for higher-order virtue factors from the 23 character strengths. Although Peterson and Seligman (2004) propose six theoretical virtues encompassing their 24 strengths, Park and Peterson (2006) maintain that a 4-factor structure better represents character strengths

**Table 1***Park and Peterson's (2006) Four Virtues and Their Underlying Strengths (N = 51)*

Character Strengths	# items	<i>a</i> T1	<i>a</i> T3	Example Item
<b>Intellectual Virtues</b>		<b>.84</b>	<b>.86</b>	
Appreciation of Beauty	8	.84	.79	"I really appreciate beautiful things."
Creativity	8	.78	.89	"I often come up with different ways of doing things."
Curiosity	8	.71	.77	"I always want to know more."
Fairness	9	.75	.84	"Even when I don't like someone, I treat them fairly."
Love of Learning	8	.78	.86	"I love to learn new things"
Open-Mindedness	8	.63	.82	"I always keep an open mind."
<b>Theological Virtues</b>		<b>.89</b>	<b>.93</b>	
Forgiveness	7	.70	.85	"I easily forgive people."
Gratitude	8	.62	.85	"I don't feel grateful that often." (Reverse)
Hope	8	.66	.90	"I am confident that I can overcome difficulties."
Humor	9	.76	.92	"I often make jokes to get others out of a bad mood."
Leadership	8	.77	.84	"I am not good at taking charge of a group." (Reverse)
Love	9	.81	.87	"I share my feelings with my friends or family."
Social Intelligence	8	.68	.75	"I know what to do to avoid trouble with others."
Wisdom	8	.75	.80	"People often say that I give good advice."
Zest	8	.47	.74	"I am always excited about whatever I do."
<b>Other-Focused Virtues</b>		<b>.79</b>	<b>.86</b>	
Bravery	8	.79	.87	"I stand up to kids who are acting mean or unfair."
Kindness	9	.79	.79	"I often do nice things for others without being asked."
Modesty	9	.65	.84	"I think that I am always right." (Reverse)
Teamwork	8	.67	.85	"When I work with a group, I am very cooperative."
<b>Temperance Virtues</b>		<b>.78</b>	<b>.85</b>	
Honesty	8	.80	.82	"I tell the truth, even if it gets me in trouble."
Perseverance	9	.74	.85	"I keep at my homework until I am done with it."
Prudence	8	.54	.81	"Before I do things, I always think about consequences."
Self-Regulation	9	.60	.68	"If I have money, I usually spend it all at once without planning." (Reverse)

*Note:* The character strength of spirituality is typically grouped under the theological Virtues factor. However, it was considered separately as a measure of spiritual transformation in the present study.

and virtues in adolescents based on their analyses. In particular, they proposed that the four overarching virtues of intellectual, theological, other-focused, and temperance virtues should be used to group character strengths in adolescents. Thus, we computed scores on the four virtues for each participant by averaging the proposed underlying strengths, which are listed in Table 1 along with alphas for the four factors.

**Religious and spiritual transformation measures.** Our definition of spiritual transformation involves three facets: (1) a change in spirituality that is (2) recognized as distinctive by the individual, and which (3) involves a reprioritization of spiritual goals. We see these three elements as incremental such that change in spirituality is the first and most important marker of transformation, followed by distinctiveness and, lastly, reprioritization of spiritual goals. Previous studies have typically focused on the second component of this definition and assessed spiritual transformation by simply asking participants if they have experienced one, but they have not actually assessed if there was a change in spirituality. In our study, we sought to avoid retrospective biases, and we adopted a more holistic measurement approach whereby we assessed if there was actually change in spirituality and spiritual goals in addition to asking participants if they experienced a distinctive transformation event. At present, no measure of spiritual transformation exists that simultaneously measures all three components of transformation, so we sought to measure them individually.

**Change in VIA spirituality.** To assess change in spirituality, participants completed the spirituality sub-scale from the VIA-YS (Park & Peterson, 2006) before camp (Time 1) and at the one-year follow-up (Time 3). The eight items assessing spirituality had a Cronbach's alpha of .82 at Time 1 and .84 at Time 3. A spirituality change score was computed by subtracting participants' pre-camp scores (Time 1) from their one-year follow-up scores (Time 3). The benefit of this approach to quantifying transformation was that it directly measured whether adolescents changed in their spirituality. Conversely, it did not assess if the change was seen as distinctive by the individual.

**Participant self-report of transformation.** The distinctiveness of spiritual transformation at camp was measured by asking participants if they made "a decision to commit your life to God for the first time at camp?" or if they made "a decision to recommit your life to God at

camp?" directly following camp (Time 2). These items reflect the language Young Life uses to denote transformation. The advantages of this method to assessing transformation were that it was free from retrospective bias, captured a distinctive transformation event, and relied upon the religious cultural expertise of the participants. The limitations of this method were that it did not gauge actual spiritual change and was susceptible to emotional contagion.

**Change in spiritual strivings.** The third element of spiritual transformation—reprioritization of spiritual goals—was assessed by change in spiritual strivings. The Short Strivings Questionnaire (SSQ) was administered to participants as a measure their strivings at Time 1 and Time 3. The 17-item questionnaire (Schnitker, Fernandez, Thomas, & Emmons, 2013) asked participants to indicate the extent to which they endorse statements beginning with the stem "*I see myself as someone who is typically trying to...*" and followed by strivings (e.g., "Live my religion and grow closer to God") on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Disagree Strongly*; 5 = *Strongly Agree*). The scale has three factors measuring intrinsic, extrinsic, and spiritual strivings. In the present study, the 5-item spiritual strivings factor ( $\alpha = .74$  and  $.86$  at Time 1 and Time 3, respectively) from the SSQ was used to assess the extent to which participants were pursuing spiritual goals. A spiritual strivings change score was computed by subtracting participants' pre-camp spiritual strivings scores (Time 1) from their one-year follow-up scores (Time 3).

**Young Life participation.** Participants were asked how often they attended Young Life events, the frequency of meeting with a Young Life leader, and how many of their close friends attended Young Life with them. Responses to these categorical items were dichotomized as low versus high, and a Young Life participation score was created by summing the three indices assessed at the one-year follow-up. Thus, participation scores ranged from 0 to 3, with higher scores indicating greater participation in Young Life activities.

## Results

**Incidence of religious and spiritual transformation.** Of the 110 participants who completed the post-camp survey at Time 2, 45 (41%) reported a new commitment to God and 47 (43%) reported recommitting their lives to God. Of the 51 participants who completed the study

at Time 3, 14 (27%) reported a new commitment to God at Time 2 and 22 (43%) reported a recommitment to God at Time 2.

Looking at change in the character strength of Spirituality over the course of the study, 15 (29%) of the 51 participants who completed both pre-camp and one-year follow-up surveys increased at least half a standard deviation from pre-camp to the one-year follow-up, and 18 participants (35%) decreased at least half a standard deviation over the same period of time. Eighteen (35%) did not shift half a standard deviation above or below their pre-camp VIA-YS spirituality at the one-year follow-up. For spiritual strivings, five (12%) out of 42 participants who completed the spiritual strivings measures at both times increased at least half a standard deviation from pre-camp to the one-year follow-up, and 28 participants (67%) decreased half a standard deviation. Nine participants (21%) did not move above or below their pre-camp scores by half a standard deviation on spiritual strivings. These descriptive statistics are provided to portray the intra-individual changes in the sample; they do not reflect calculations of statistical significance.

**Descriptive statistics and general longitudinal trends.** Table 2 displays means and standard deviations for spirituality, spiritual strivings, and the four virtues at Time 1 for all participants who began the study, and at Time 1 and Time 3 for the 51 participants who completed the study. Repeated-measures ANOVAs were employed to test for typical increases or decreases in virtues and spirituality over the course of the study. On average, participants decreased in spiritual strivings from before camp to the one-year follow-up, and they increased in intellectual and other-focused virtues during the study.

Correlations amongst virtues at Time 1, virtues at Time 3, and measures of spiritual transformation are displayed in Table 3. Notably, changes in spirituality and changes in spiritual strivings were correlated, but neither of these variables was significantly correlated with self-reported commitment or recommitment to God at Time 2.

**Change in virtues as a function of spiritual transformation.** We tested whether transformation predicted an increase in virtues from before camp (Time 1) to one year after camp (Time 3). Our analytic approach was to run four hierarchical regressions predicting each of the virtues (i.e., intellectual, theological, other-focused, and temperance virtues). In Step 1 of each regression, Time 1 scores of the virtue were entered.

Initially, Young Life participation and demographic variables (i.e., age, gender) were tested as predictors in the regressions before adding in indices of spiritual transformation. Young Life participation, age, and gender were not significant predictors of change for any of the four virtues, so they were not included as control variables in the analyses. In Step 2 of each regression, our first element of spiritual transformation, change in VIA Spirituality, was entered into the equation. In Step 3 of each regression, the second component of spiritual transformation, self-reported transformation (dummy coded first commitment and dummy coded recommitment), was entered. In Step 4, the last marker of spiritual transformation, change in spiritual strivings, was entered. The three elements were entered in order of their primacy for demarking spiritual transformation. Pairwise deletion was used for missing data.

Results of the four hierarchical regressions are displayed in Table 4. All four virtues at Time 3 were significantly predicted by the corresponding virtue at Time 1. In addition, all four virtues were significantly predicted by change in spirituality in Step 2 of the regressions, so we can conclude that increased spirituality corresponds to increased virtues. Effect sizes for change in spirituality were large for theological and other-focused virtues (explaining 49% and 34% of the variance in virtues at Time 3, respectively), and effects were moderate for intellectual and temperance virtues (explaining 18% and 16% of the variance in virtues at Time 3, respectively).

Results for the four virtues diverged in Step 3 of the regressions. A first time commitment to God immediately following camp (Time 2) predicted a moderate increase in intellectual virtues, but recommitment following camp was not a significant predictor of an increase in intellectual virtues. A first-time commitment at camp predicted a moderate increase in theological virtues, but recommitment to God was not a significant predictor of a change in theological virtues. Neither first-time commitment nor recommitment predicted change in other-focused or temperance virtues.

When change in spiritual strivings was entered in Step 4 of the regressions, it was not a significant predictor of change for any of the four virtues. Thus, change in spiritual strivings does not explain unique variance in virtues development after accounting for the effects of change in spirituality and a commitment/recommitment to God at camp.

**Table 2**  
*Descriptives of Study Variables and Testing for Mean Differences Between Time 1 and Time 3*

Study Variable	All Participants at Time 1		Participants Who Completed Both Time 1 and Time 3 Surveys		Repeated Measures ANOVA for Time 1 and Time 3 Scores				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> (50)	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$		
	Time 1 <i>N</i> = 148		Time 1 <i>N</i> = 51	Time 3 <i>N</i> = 51					
Religion and Spirituality Measures									
VIA Spirituality <sup>a</sup>	3.95	0.70	4.05	0.71	4.11	0.76	0.23	0.63	0.01
Spiritual Strivings <sup>b</sup>	3.73	0.81	3.82	0.78	3.44	0.80	6.74 <sup>c</sup>	0.01	0.14
Virtues									
Intellectual	3.42	0.46	3.43	0.49	3.69	0.58	10.32	<.01	0.17
Theological	3.61	0.46	3.67	0.44	3.80	0.60	2.63	0.11	0.05
Other-Focused	3.55	0.42	3.57	0.47	3.79	0.56	7.93	<.01	0.14
Temperance	3.20	0.45	3.23	0.47	3.33	0.59	1.87	0.18	0.04

a. *M* = -0.06, *SD* = .93 for VIA Spirituality Change scores.

b. *M* = -0.79, *SD* = .96 for Spiritual Transcendence Change scores.

c. *N* = 110 at Time 1 and *N* = 41 at Time 3 for Spiritual Strivings. Thus, *F*(40) for Spiritual Strivings.

**Table 3**  
*Correlation Matrix of Time 1 & Time 3 Virtues and Measures of Spiritual Transformation (N = 51)*

Scale	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
<b>Time 1 Virtues</b>											
1. Intellectual Virtues	1.00										
2. Theological Virtues	.70**	1.00									
3. Other-Focused Virtues	.71**	.66**	1.00								
4. Temperance Virtues	.55**	.49**	.60**	1.00							
<b>Time 3 Virtues</b>											
5. Intellectual Virtues	.59**	.42**	.40**	.34*	1.00						
6. Theological Virtues	.32*	.38**	.12	.23	.80**	1.00					
7. Other-Focus Virtues	.44**	.32*	.43**	.36**	.80**	.70*	1.00				
8. Temperance Virtues	.21	.27	.19	.49**	.61**	.71*	.62**	1.00			
<b>Predictors of Functioning</b>											
9. Spirituality Change	-.03	-.30*	-.35*	-.05	.41**	.55*	.39**	.37**	1.00		
10. Spiritual Strivings Change	-.09	-.27	-.24	-.18	.09	.20	.05	.04	.45**	1.00	
11. Recommitment at T2	-.23	-.04	-.12	-.01	-.07	.05	.10	-.07	.15	-.15	1.00
12. Commitment at T2	.08	.01	.14	-.07	.02	-.05	-.10	-.02	-.32	.19	-.65**

\*p < .05. \*\*p < .01

**Table 4**

*Results from Four Hierarchical Linear Regressions of Time 3 Virtue (Intellectual, Theological, Other-Focused, or Temperance) on Virtue at Time 1 (Step 1), Spirituality Change (Step 2), 1st Time Commitment and Recommitment (Step 3), and Spiritual Strivings Change (Step 4)*

Predictor	Dependent Variable: Virtue at Time 3 ( $\beta$ )			
	Time 3 Intellectual Virtues	Time 3 Theological Virtues	Time 3 Other-Focused Virtues	Time 3 Temperance Virtues
Step 1				
Virtue at Time 1	.59**	.38*	.43**	.49**
$\Delta R^2$	.35	.14	.19	.24
Step 2				
VIA Spirituality Change	.43**	.73**	.65**	.39**
$\Delta R^2$	.18	.49	.34	.16
Step 3				
1 <sup>st</sup> Commitment to God	.54**	.38*	.33	-.05
Recommitment to God	.27	.16	.24	-.26
$\Delta R^2$	.13	.07	.05	.05
Step 4				
Spiritual Strivings Change	-.21	-.05	-.17	-.08
$\Delta R^2$	.03	.00	.02	.00

\* $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

### Discussion

The main study hypothesis that spiritual transformation would lead to an increase in virtues was supported, though not all aspects of spiritual transformation were predictive of virtue development. Our tripartite definition of spirituality held that spiritual transformation involves (1) a change in spirituality, (2) an experienced distinctiveness of the change, and (3) a reprioritization of spiritual goals. Analyses showed that change in spirituality predicted increases in all four virtues assessed in the study such that adolescents who demonstrated an increase in spirituality also grew in intellectual, theological, other-focused, and temperance virtues. The second element of spiritual transformation, participant reports of experiencing a distinctive change, was predictive of increases in intellectual and theological virtues, but only the experience of a first time commitment to God at camp—not a recommitment to God—predicted increases. The third factor of our definition of

spiritual transformation, change in spiritual strivings, did not predict change in virtues. Future studies are needed determine if these null results for spiritual strivings indicate a null effect or if these null results are the result of variance shared between change in spiritual strivings and change in spirituality.

Spiritual transformation was not a necessary condition for increases in two of the four virtues. As a group, the study participants increased in intellectual and other-focused virtues over the year-long course of participation. This is unsurprising, as many intellectual virtues (e.g., curiosity, fairness, appreciation of beauty) and other-focused virtues (e.g., teamwork, kindness, and bravery) are explicitly taught or encouraged in school and extracurricular activities. Thus, there are normative increases in intellectual and other-focused virtues during adolescence, and spiritual transformation can accelerate this development.

In contrast, there were no average increases in theological and temperance virtues, which suggests that the development of these virtues during adolescence may be dependent upon the occurrence of spiritual transformation. This makes sense conceptually, particularly in regard to theological virtues. Arguably, many of the theological virtues (e.g., love, hope, forgiveness, gratitude) are only developed in relational contexts where a person interacts with something or someone that transcends the self. Adolescents are not regularly placed in such contexts by society at large in the U.S.A., so a spiritual transformation that provides transcendent relationships with God and/or other believers may be necessary for the development of these virtues. However, more widespread research is needed before such claims are substantiated.

### **The Definition and Measurement of Spiritual Transformation Revisited**

Some of the most prevalent challenges in the endeavor to study spiritual transformation are the formation of good operational definitions and the acquisition of measures that are able to capture the multifaceted nature of transformation without bias. Our approach to these challenges was to use three separate measures to assess the different theoretical components of spiritual transformation: change in spirituality, self-reported commitment/recommitment to God, and change in spiritual strivings. However, there were limitations to this approach.

Two of our measures used change scores to predict change, which means their findings are essentially describing correlations of changes over time and cannot establish the directionality of effects. Future studies could disentangle the directionality of effects with structural equation modeling of data from a larger sample with additional measurement occasions. Despite the difficulties incurred when directly measuring change, including indicators of actual change is important, to ensure that spiritual transformation involves bona fide alteration in a person's spirituality and spiritual strivings.

Further theoretical work is needed to determine the defining feature of spiritual transformation. In our study, we conceptualized spiritual change as the key component of transformation, followed by the occurrence of a distinct event initiating the change and then by a change in spiritual strivings. However, other researchers might argue that the most essential feature of

spiritual transformation is a shift in spiritual strivings or the experience of a distinct transformation event. Scholars inclined to mark an actual "conversion event" as the key component of spiritual transformation (rather than change in spirituality), could re-interpret our findings to say that after controlling for change in spirituality, a first time, "altar-call" spiritual transformation at camp predicts an increase in theological and intellectual virtues.

Somewhat unexpectedly, change in spirituality and spiritual strivings was unrelated to reports of commitment or recommitment to God at camp in our sample. We had originally anticipated that all our markers of transformation would have small to moderate correlations (as was found between change in spirituality and change in spiritual strivings). These non-significant relationships highlight the fact that our measures are capturing unique psychological phenomena. Perhaps they are capturing different motifs (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981) of spiritual transformations; first-time commitment to God may signal a revivalistic transformation whereas change in spirituality may signal an affectional transformation. Whether or not this is the case, these findings point to the need for researchers to further explore the multifaceted nature of spiritual transformation.

Finally, the inability of change in spiritual strivings to predict unique variance in virtue development raises the question of the necessity of measuring spiritual strivings to assess transformation. Is an increase in spiritual strivings really a unique aspect of spiritual transformation, or is it commensurate with a general increase in spirituality? Spirituality and spiritual strivings do not appear redundant. They are only moderately correlated ( $r = .45$ ), and average spiritual strivings, but not spirituality, decreased for all the participants in the study<sup>1</sup>. If spiritual strivings are a unique aspect of transformation, our findings indicate that apart from their connection to spirituality more broadly, they do not affect the development of virtue.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Interpretation of our results should be tempered in light of several limitations. First, participant attrition was a problem. Only 51 of the original 148 participants completed the entire study, but attrition did not appear systematic as none of the study variables differed at the initial measurement occasion between participants who did and did not complete the study. The high attrition rate led

to a lower sample size than we had anticipated. However, given the nearly complete dearth of research on spiritual transformation with pre-post designs, the lower N is acceptable. This means, though, that findings should be viewed as laying the groundwork for future studies on the effects of spiritual transformation rather than providing definitive conclusions on the topic. Future researchers seeking to track the effects of spiritual transformation across time in adolescents should be prepared for high attrition rates and plan accordingly.

This study has documented the changes occurring after a spiritual transformation in adolescents attending conservative protestant summer camps. However, we do not know if similar changes would be found after spiritual transformations occurring in other Christian contexts (e.g., in a church rather than a parachurch organization), other Christian traditions (e.g., Catholicism, Liberal Protestantism), or other religions (e.g., Islam, Buddhism). Future research is needed before we can ascertain which effects of a transformation can be generalized across diverse environments and which effects are specific to particular contexts and traditions.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Previous data (e.g., Denton, Pearce, and Smith, 2008) have shown that spirituality decreases over time during adolescence, so the decrease in spiritual strivings is typical.

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