

## Christian and Secular Ethics: A Distinct Relationship

Miltiadis Proios<sup>1</sup> & Ioannis M. Proios<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

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Ethics is a concept used by people in everyday life. Apart from ethics existing in the wider social environment (secular ethics), another form of ethics found in a specific environment has been supported, that of Christian Ethics. While secular ethics has been studied quite intensely through a variety of theories, the issue of Christian Ethics especially within the framework of Orthodox Church did not evoke strong interest. The aim of the present study was to investigate the existence of a distinct relationship among the two forms of ethics (secular and Christian). This relationship was studied through the theoretical framework of cognitive-developmental theory. The findings of the present study support the fact that the course of Christian ethics growth presents similar characteristics to that of secular ethics. Additionally, Christian ethics, via a proper preparation could constitute an evaluative measure for people.

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**Keywords:** Moral, Christian ethics, Cognitive growth, Moral perfection

### Introduction

Christian ethics, as part of the wider concept of ethics, is a new scientific field that studies proper human behavior. This results into a number of questions, such as what "Christian ethics" exactly is as a spiritual practice or whether it is identical or totally different from moral philosophy (Green, 1978; Gustafson, 1998; Lovin & Reynolds, 1985; Reeder, 1998; Schweiker, 2005; Stout, 1998).

Philosophy ethics is defined as a set of moral principles (Staub, 1978). Therefore, Christian ethics could also be a set of principles derived from Christian faith by which we act.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Physical Education and Sport Science Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Miltiadis Proios, Iatrou Zanna 17, 54643 Thessaloniki, Greece. E-mail: [mproios@phed.auth.gr](mailto:mproios@phed.auth.gr)

Considering the characteristics defining ethics in general, we could consider that both forms of ethics present similar elements, i.e. principles that regulate human behavior in relation to others. For example, the Bible tells us that we are to follow the authorities that God Himself has put into place (*Romans* 13: 1). By using the principles we find in Scripture, Christians can determine the ethical course for any given situation. Some scholars also supported a relationship among spirituality and moral development (e.g., Day, 2010; Holley, 1991; Young, Cashwell, & Woolington, 1998).

However, several scholars call upon the presence of differences between these two forms of ethics (Crittenden, 1990). For example, it is stated that Christian ethics is not a set of moral rules, but rather a proof of participation in the life of God (Mantzaridis, 2009); the philosophical/secular moral values are not based on the discovery of a transcendent deity, but they are rather the outcome of human experience (CVE, 2012). Such claim is further supported by Cox (1966):

“Secular man’s values have been deconsecrated, shorn of any claim to ultimate or final significance ... They are no longer the direct expression of the divine will. They have become what certain people at a particular time and place hold to be good. They have ceased to be values and have become valuations ...” (p. 27).

The ethics advocated by the Church is “beyond good and evil”, without any evaluative categories involved. Good and evil are conventional categories (Giannaras, 2011). Religious ethics is supported to be part of Divine commands and depend upon the will of God, that God commands what is good and prohibits what is evil (Heidt, 2010).

Ethics appears to have a dynamic character and moves along man within time and space (Kohlberg, 1976). Similar seems to be the character of Christian ethics (Fowler, 1981; Mantzaridis, 2009). Fowler (1986) and Gibson (2004) considered the fact that spiritual maturity is a result of development relating to chronological age. The Bible teaches that spiritual growth progresses in a gradual manner:

“we ... are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory (2 Corinthians 3: 18). “We instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more” (1 Thessalonians 4: 1, compare v. 10).

“Your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing” (2 Thessalonians 1: 3).

Growth is pictured in the Scriptures as a lifelong process (Richards, 1972). However, up to date, the study of the developmental course of Christian ethics has not attracted the interest of scholars. Keller and Streib (2013) supported that in religious developmental research there is almost none longitudinal study. Benson, Roehlkepartain and Rude (2003) documented this lack of attention to religious and spiritual development during childhood and adolescence by reviewing the frequency of publications on these topics.

The study of this psychological process regarding ethical development may add additional knowledge on the nature of Christian ethics and thus Christian faith. This happens because psychology as a science consists a basic element of the special scientific domain of "Psychology of Religion", aiming at the psychological investigation of the religious phenomenon as well as due to the relation of psychology to "pastoral psychology" (Begzos, 2011). This relationship is also supported since both sciences deal with the human soul and by the fact that psychology investigates human experience, the origin of this experience, the nature, feasibility and their effect on psychological human balance (Nisiotis, 2006). This form of studying Christian ethics through psychological processes may contribute to a better preparation of those undertaking the difficult task of pastoral care of the soul. The purpose of the present study is to investigate the process of development of Christian ethics towards the moral perfection of man. This study, at the same time, will investigate the development of Christian ethics along with the development of philosophical ethics ethics.

## **Development of Christian Ethics**

### Theoretical Framework of the Study

In order to study specific features of ethics, a whole a set of theories was developed over time. The theory which eventually prevailed is the cognitive-developmental theory (Kohlberg, 1969, 1976; Piaget, 1932/1965).

It is called *cognitive* because it perceives moral structures as internalization of enactive (or action) schemas containing information on social reality, which man is in constant interaction with; it is called *developmental* because the information man receives from the social environment, cognitive structures, are progressively transformed improving its quality (Pourkos, 1990).

Cognitive-developmental theory was preferred in the present study to highlight common features in the development of philosophical and Christian ethics.

This selection was initially based on the fact that spiritual growth could be perceived by knowing the way a man thinks, which differs by age (an element of cognitive-developmental theory). For example, ways of thinking based on conventional religious roles (e.g., servant of everyone else) or leading to a newer, more inclusive love. Also, psychological way of development of man as this is expressed through cognitive-developmental theory seems to have a strong influence on the psychology of religious development (Day, 2010). This could be perceived by the interest shown by scholars in the past for the study of the development of religious faith (e.g., Fowler, 1981, 1987; Fowler & Dell, 2005; Gibson, 2004; Oser & Grunder, 1991; Oser & Reich, 1996).

### Cognitive growth of Christian Ethics

In Christianity, cognitive growth is associated with the increase of spiritual knowledge. This is a process beginning the moment an individual accepts Jesus Christ as the Savior. Spiritual growth is the development or improvement toward perfection, while glory of God is considered to be a supreme principle for the achievement of spiritual development (Gibson, 2004). Many Scriptures describe the need for spiritual growth and maturity:

“Be no longer children, but grow up in Christ” (Ephesians 4: 14,15).

“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3: 18).

“The Thessalonians grew exceeding in faith” (2 Thessalonians 1: 3).

The Scriptures teaches that growth is always needed:

In *Philippians 3: 12-14* – Even Paul, as mature as he was, did not consider himself to have achieved perfection (maturity) such that he could cease striving to improve. He forgot past achievements (and failures) and pressed on to greater accomplishments.

In *Matthew 26: 31-35* – Peter thought he had reached a level where he would never deny Jesus. But that very night he denied Him three times.

The Bible also teaches that spiritual growth is multifaceted. Christian life is made up of many different but interrelated aspects. Paul talks about growing up “on all things” (*Ephesians 4: 15*). The process of spiritual growth is a process beginning the moment a person accepts Jesus Christ as a Savior. Spiritual growth is a result of Bible knowledge, through life, humility, honesty, witnessing, prayer, stewardship and patience (Leigh, 2002). In summary it could be stated that spiritual growth becomes more like Jesus Christ. In *1 Corinthians 11: 1*, Paul says, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ”. Jesus Christ is the ultimate example of what it truly means to be spiritual.

Cognitive improvement comes through the teaching of moral elements such as God’s Commandments. Christians, according to Paul did not just believe but follow sound teaching:

*“But as for you, teach what is consistent with sound doctrine” (Titus 2: 1).*

Christian ethics teaching is included in the Bible and the Holy Tradition (Mitsopoulos, 1989), that is the texts of the Bible, the Old and New Testaments. Specifically in the Old Testament attention is given to the compliance of the life of man according to the commandments of the law of God while sanctions are imposed to any violation. New Testament on the other hand focuses on the tendency for repentance and presence of the face of Christ. Nevertheless, elements of ethics do not constitute systematic studies of moral context, but include a rich moral teaching useful for the life of everyone faithful. Experiences resulting through Church are those to contribute to the better understanding of truth described in the Bible (Giannaras, 2011). The better learning of the Bible leads to the improvement of Christian ethics.

Spiritual growth consists of a *greater love for God*, because God is love:

*“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” (1 John 4:8)*, and is established by compliance with his commandments:

*“They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” (John 14: 21).*

Complying with the commandments of God is a constituent of Christian ethics.

The essence of Christian ethics is the acquisition of three basic virtues: faith, hope and love. According to the Christian religion, acquiring a (Christian) virtue is not only the result of human effort, but also the outcome of the cooperation between human will and God's grace, and the fruit of the Holy Spirit:

“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith” (Gal. 5: 22-23).

This leads us to the assumption that Christian virtue is not a psychological feature but rather an ontological relationship in conformity with the will of God.

A significant role in learning the features of Christian ethics is played by worldly experiences, which is the framework for human information and development (Mantzaridis, 2010). J. Dewey (1859-1952) supported intensely the importance and value of experience within the framework of learning by adopting the term “empirical knowledge”. In the area of religious faith, personal experience is considered rather valuable (*John 20: 24-29*). A rather feature event showing the close relation among experience and faith is the meeting of Christ with the Samaritan in the Well of Jacob. Samaritans who went to meet Christ, said to the Samaritan upon their return:

They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world’ (John 4: 42).

Social relations, are indeed considered as fundamental elements in the development of religious faith (Dell, 2000; Fowler, 1980, 1981). This effect is better understood by the reference of Gregorius Palamas, that if a sinner avoids socializing with the unrighteous and befriends the righteous, will be able to become righteous and save his soul (Gregorius Palamas, *Homilia 17*, PG 151: 236A).

The role of social environment in the development of ethics has been maintained by well-known developmentalists (Piaget, 1932/1965, Kohlberg, 1976). In such environment, man acquires the knowledge of what is right or wrong so as to make the right decision and such a knowledge is the result of experience gained in the course of development. Specifically, experience rising within the Church contributes to the consolidation of the truths of the Holy Bible (Giannaras, 2011). Better learning of the Holy Bible leads to the growth of Christian ethics.

Contrary to Christian ethics, ethical development for man comes through the understanding of the ethical virtue of justice. This is also supported by the fields of moral philosophy (see Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*; Rawls, 1971) and moral psychology (Piaget, 1932/1965; Kohlberg, 1969, 1976). However, it should be underlined that the virtue of justice has a similar place in Christian ethics, thus exhibiting the same interest ethics exhibit on moral development. More specifically, in Christianity justice is not just any virtue, but the whole virtue

“Justice is here not part of virtue is thought, but severally and catholic” (John Chrysostom, Interpretation of Psalm 4: 1 PG 55, 40).

It is also claimed that God loves justice and abhors injustice (*Psalm 10: 7 91: 16*). Christian theorists have supported the fact that the highest stage of moral development is rooted in agape, or godly love (Gibson, 2004). The rationale for presenting agape as the supreme principle in moral development stems, in part, from Christ’s summary of the law as loving God with all one’s heart, and one’s neighbor as one’s self (Clouse, 1993).

### Transformation Process of Christian Ethics Cognitive Structures

Christian ethics is the application of the principles of Christian faith, i.e. the man’s approach to Christ.

Such approach, however, is not automatic, but rather passes through several stages / levels depending on the degree of man’s spiritual maturity (see Basil of Caesarea, *Regulae fusius tractatae, Preamble 3*, PG 31: 896B, Abba Dorotheus, *Inspirational Teaching 4,2*, PG 88: 1160AC, Maximus Confessor, *Mystagogue*, PG 91: 709D-712A).

Pink (2005) stated the ability to classify Christians into three classes according to their “stature” in Christ or their spiritual development and progress. As proof he cites passages of the New Testament:

“The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.” (Mark. 4: 28)

“I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young people, because you have conquered the evil one.” (1 John 2: 13)

On the first level, man is a spiritual "*slave*". On this level, man tries to approach Christ obeying His commandments in fear of punishment. Fear, and especially the fear of death turns man into a self-loving and self-centered creature, condemning him to self-confinement (Mantzaridis, 2010). The next level of spiritual maturity is reached through the growth of one's cognitive level and becoming a "*worker*". On this level, man acts with some expectation of reward for what he does, i.e. a "payment" from Christ. Here, legalism and the statute law prevail (Tsitsigos, 2011). At the first two stages believers move within the frame of law and do not feel the freedom of Grace. Their virtue is not selfish and the love of God does not prevail in their life. The consummation of the spiritual fulfillment of man comes on the next level of the "*son or free man*". On this level, man complies with the commandments of God out of love for Him and not for fear or any selfish pursuits.

The above statements regarding the distinction of Christians depending of their moral development have also been theoretically supported. For example, Fowler, considering the views of Piaget, Kohlberg and Erikson on moral growth, supported that religious-moral growth of man is a continuous process including a number of stages (six-stage model) (Fowler, 1981). However, empirical research questions whether Fowler's construct of "faith" is sufficiently specific to distinguish it from broader conceptions of meaning-making, and cause researchers to wonder whether the model of faith development can be viewed as a "hard stage" model (see, e.g., Boyatzis, 2005; Day, 2010; Streib, 2001, 2010).

Streib (2001) considering the questions raised on hard stage theory, moved to the revision of Fowler's faith development theory. He suggested religious schemata, which are the distinguishing marks for religious styles.

The religious styles resemble-and relate to-lifestyles and to habitus (Bourdieu, 1979). The schemata of central importance in religious or faith development were: truth of text and teachings (tt), fairness, tolerance and rational choice (ftr) and xenosophia, inter-religious dialog (xenos) (Streib, Hood, & Klein, 2010).

The course of transformation process of cognitive structures, that is religious development, follows a similar course with moral development, as stated at the theory of Kohlberg (CliffsNotes, 2013). More specifically, cognitive-developmental theory supports that moral development is completed through three main sequential levels, each of which comprises of two stages (Kohlberg, 1976).

These levels are “pre-conventional”, “conventional” and “post-conventional”. These moral levels and stages depend on the development of cognitive abilities. Stating that moral development parallels cognitive development, Kohlberg concluded that an individual could advance intellectually without reaching higher stages of moral reasoning, but not vice versa. Although Kohlberg’s theory provides compelling insight in the field of moral development, it was strongly contested.

Thus, in the context of cognitive-developmental theory, the reformulation of Kohlberg’s six stages into three basic schemas was suggested (Narvaez, 1998, 2001; Rest et al., 1999, 2000). These schemas, which constitute general cognitive structures in that they provide a skeletal conception that is exemplified (or instantiated) by particular cases or experiences (Rest et al., 1999), is the *Personal Interest* schema (which derives from Kohlberg’s Stages 2 and 3), in which man is interested in the satisfaction of his personal needs and interests and considers an action morally right depending on the impact this very has on him/ her; the *Maintaining Norms* schema (deriving from Kohlberg’s Stage 4), in which the individual’s moral thinking focuses on the domination of the system, the roles and rules determined by the system as well as the maintenance of social order; and the *Post-conventional* schema (deriving from Kohlberg’s Stages 5 and 6), in which man’s moral thinking should comprise of four elements: primary moral criteria, appeal to an ideal, shared ideals and full reciprocity.

## **Types of Ethics**

Each moral level represents a different way of thinking, which also characterizes the type of ethics expressed by each individual. The different ways of thinking that determine the origin of moral judgment and are better understood by investigating the content of moral judgment rather than the structure of moral thinking, are defined by the concepts of “heteronomy” and “autonomy”. Both of these types occur in both forms of ethics – philosophical and Christian.

The concept of “heteronomy” reveals that moral judgment is imposed on man by some external religious or other authority. Characteristics of heteronomous ethics are exhibited by individuals belonging to the first two levels of ethics. Specifically, heteronomous ethics characterizes the first two levels of spiritual and moral maturity.

In addition, Christian ethics is characterized as heteronomous because it is based on religious law or religious authority, God. Contrary, the concept of "autonomy" suggests that man's moral judgment is based on himself, without the intervention of any external authority. Furthermore, the function of man within the context of autonomous ethics is directed by the concepts of equality and mutual respect (Lapsley, 2006). The third level of spiritual or moral maturity belongs to autonomous ethics, where man is free to act in freedom and fairness. At this point, the claim for the existence of a third type of ethics within Christian ethics that goes beyond the distinction between heteronomous and autonomous ethics and starts with heteronomy and ends to autonomy (Mantzaridis, 2009) should be underlined.

### **Moral Consummation**

The transformation process of cognitive structures, after successively passing through the three above mentioned levels, is brought to completion with the moral perfection of man on the third level. The concept of "perfection" means completeness, wholeness, integrity and achievement of an end or a goal. Moral perfection is the goal of the Christian life.

Moral consummation coincides with perfection within freedom. In worldly everyday life, freedom is expressed through the choice between good and evil. On the contrary, for Christian faith freedom lies beyond the need of any choice.

More specifically, perfection within freedom is achieved through the perfection of love to God. The Divine love is revealed in Christ and is made available to believers through Spirit. Thus, St. Paul states:

"Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." (Col. 3: 14).

Love is the ever pursued end, the "infinite perfection" of the moral growth of man (Giannaras, 2011; Conn & Conn, 1990).

Moral perfection, also, is corporate. St. Paul στην προς Ephesians επιστολή αναφέρει:

"until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." (Eph. 4: 13).

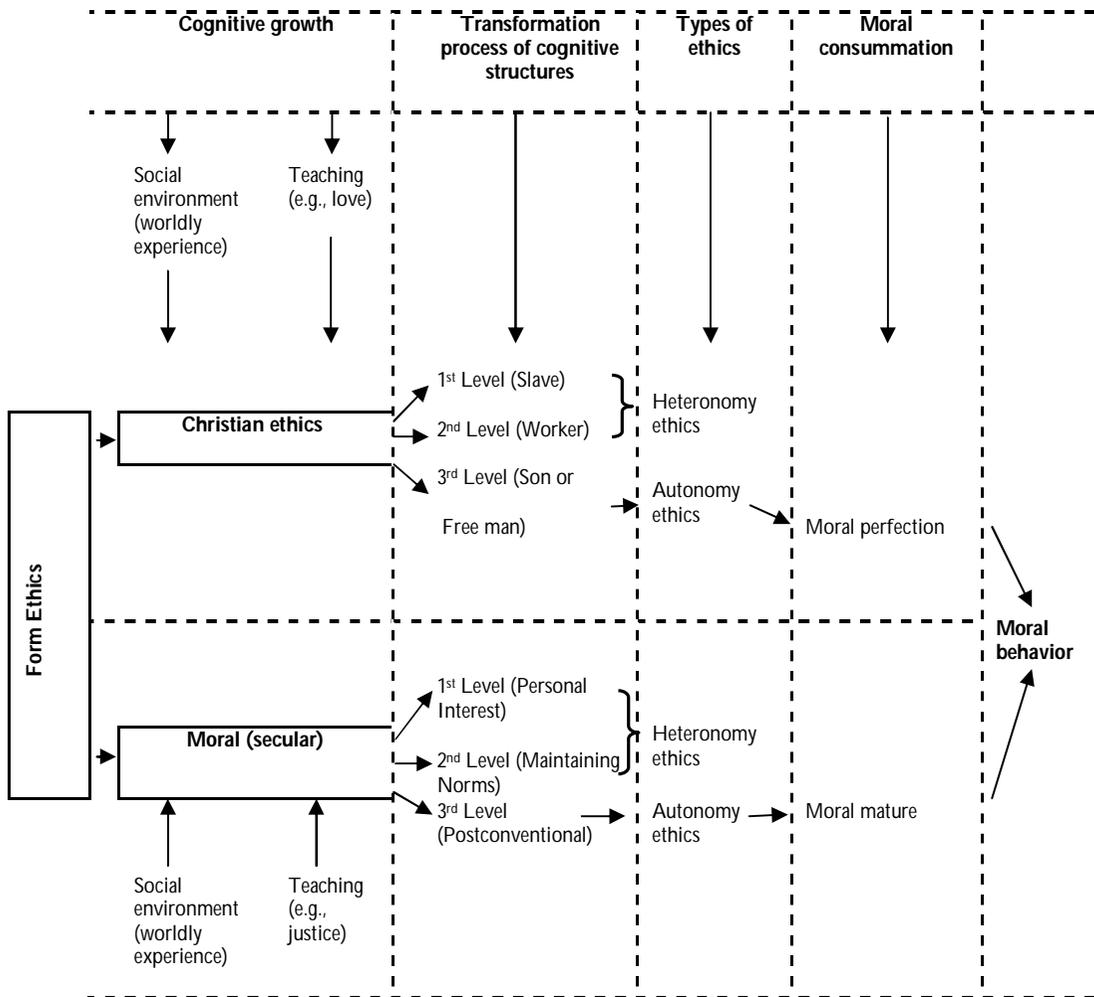
In ethics, the transformation process of cognitive structures leads to man's moral maturity. On this level, man functions with the criterion of justice. Justice is the natural and necessary fruit of love, which is over and above justice, because justice is based on the application of law while love on sacrifice for the sake of the brother regardless of laws and rights. St. John, the Evangelist, in his 1<sup>st</sup> *Catholic* letter wrote about the great virtue of love

*"Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." (1 John 4: 8).*

## **Discussion**

The aim of the present study was to search for the features of the developmental process of Christian ethics for the moral recovery of man. The findings of this search were compared to those supported for moral development in the context of cognitive-developmental theory, a psychological theory (see Table 1). This comparison was pursued since the picture sketched by Piaget and Kohlberg for cognitive and moral development presents some similarities to references in the Bible (Richards, 1972).

**Table 1: Characteristics of the growth of Christian Ethics and Moral**



Initially, the study of the literature revealed the existence of a cognitive element in Christian ethics. The cognitive feature is perceived by parts of the soul (cognitive [reasoning], affective [emoting] and volitional [behavioral]), which is the subject of religion (Nisiotis, 2006). The cognitive element of morality appears also in the science of psychology as a component of the cognitive-developmental theory. It has already been mentioned that cognitive growth is for example an issue of teaching Divine commands or human laws. As Dettoni and Wilhoit (1998) acknowledge,

“Christians do not emerge from the spiritual experience of being born again as full and complete Christians but as childlike Christians, who, like human children, have all the potential for growing into complete and mature adults but need to be nurtured and guided” (p. 28).

At this point, however, the distinction between commandments and laws should also be noted. Although the Church features rules and laws for pedagogical reasons, yet these are not a form of moral teaching but rather a “new creation”; the commandments of God are not a law but merely a freedom index (Mantzaridis, 2010). In addition, at this point it should be underlined that the issue of experience as a mean of cognitive growth is different as well. The difference lies on the fact that Christianity emphasizes experiences within Church life because they provide a clear picture of the truths of the Holy Bible (Giannaras, 2011).

Moral has been considered as a set of cognitive structures allegedly transformed over time, in both forms of ethics, Christian (Gibson, 2004; Mantzaridis, 2009) and philosophical (Kohlberg, 1969, 1976). Richards (1972) states that Christian growth seems to imply a process in which one’s world view is progressively reshaped. Fowler and Oser et al. (as cited in Day, 2010; p. 221) considering that religious reasoning includes components of moral reasoning, argued that it would seem logical for the stage transition in moral reasoning to precede stage change in religious development since all people must wrestle with and resolve moral dilemmas throughout life, whether or not they do so in relationship to religious beliefs, practices or belonging to communities of faith. Downs (1998) suggested that one must acknowledge that spirituality “cannot be reduced to predictable developmental stages” (p. 82), without wishing to present spiritual levels as rigid.

At this point we could state that religious growth shows similarities to moral growth. The three levels are the same as Kohlberg’s: pre-conventional (egocentric thinking based on religious laws and rules); conventional (conforming to accepted religious standards); and post-conventional (selfish way of thinking beyond stereotypical rules). The transformation process of moral structures in ethics is distinguished by certain features such as inclusiveness, hierarchy, successiveness and irreversibility (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987), features seem to exist in Christian ethics as well (Fowler, 1981).

More specifically, the attribute of “totality” on the levels of spiritual maturity is distinguished by the fact that they are single sets of cognitive traits. The first level is dominated by fear, the second by compliance with the commandments under the form of social interaction and the third by the cognitive element of love. “Hierarchy” exists because the next higher level is based on the previous one. “Successiveness” exists because spiritual maturity follows a sequence (slave worker, son). Finally, the feature of “irreversibility” exists because the hierarchical constitution of the social moral structures is not considered reversible.

Furthermore, the levels of spiritual maturity such as those of moral development in the worldly environment, exhibit criteria that help their distinction in cognitive and moral. Some cognitive elements contributing to the distinction of these levels are: “fear”, a psychological trait at a first level; “reward”, a social trait, at a second level and “love”, a spiritual trait at a third level. Regarding moral criteria, they are different on each level because along with growth of cognitive ability there is also a corresponding growth of moral perception. For example, love/ fairness (as moral criteria at a third level) are not immediately exhibited in perfect form, but rather start with fear (as moral criterion at a first level), and self-interest (as moral criterion at a second level) (Mantzaridis, 2010).

Finally, the study of the literature reveals that man’s moral perfection for the Christian faith is an ontological rather than merely a moral event. Specifically, worldly human moral perfection aims at the psychological and social perfection of man, while the purpose of Christian ethics is the promotion of man from the psychological and social level to the level of the new ontology, new creation, to take man from time to eternity, from the created to the uncreated (Mantzaridis, 2009).

## **Conclusions**

Considering the fact that the use of developmental psychology assists us in better understanding spiritual growth (Conn & Conn, 1990), the processing of literature in the present study led us to the conclusion that the latter is distinguished from all the features of a developmental psychological theory. This approach is considered to contribute to conclusions for better defining the nature of the Christian religion. However, according to Christian anthropology while developmental theories can assist the apprehension of the human aspect of spiritual formation, they fail to address its Divine aspect (Estep & Kim, 2010). Such an approach could also be used as a defining tool for understanding and assessing human relations.

Another conclusion of this study is that although for Eastern Orthodox Church Christian ethics is not an objective measure for assessing character and behavior, yet, it is noted that Christian ethics could be measured by the criteria of social ethics and the evaluative categories of good and virtue. However, we should underline the fact that Christian ethics is not identical with the above and this is all that matters (Giannaras, 2011).

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