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Ethics and Religion

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Abstract

Recent debate on the relationship between morality and religious belief has tended to cast the role of religion in a negative light. While there are certain facts that may support this view, a philosophical investigation of the link between ethics and religion can contribute to the debate by focusing on certain fundamental issues. Noting the importance of the debate and showing the implications of whichever side one takes, this article argues that the claims for a purely humanistic ethics can be supported by an empirical observation, a philosophical argument and even on theological grounds. At the same time, however, it defends the view that religious belief in a personal God can have a positive contribution to morality by way of *vision* and *motivation.*

Keywords

Ethics, religion, philosophy, vision, motivation

The Debate

Any debate on ethical issues inevitably leads to a discussion on the relationship between ethics and religion. This interest on the topic is far from being a characteristic of our age, of course, but somehow the alleged decline of religion today, or at least of its more organised forms, has prompted the question as to whether there is a consequent leveling-off in morality. Not a few have expressed the fear that if people do not believe in God then they cannot be expected to be moral. According to them, religion is the only adequate bulwark in our attempts to lead moral lives. The same belief is articulated, in a more sophisticated way, by thinkers who assert that without religion, there can be no objective foundation for our moral principles. On the other hand, one also hears of the devastating effects that religion (or to be more accurate, adherents of a particular religion) has had and

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continues to have on morality.[1] The crimes committed in the name of religion are too many to be ignored but too obvious to be mentioned. Hence, the counterclaim is sometimes made that not only can one be moral without religion, but that one should even give up religious beliefs to be truly righteous.

This debate is far from being a merely academic one for there are practical conclusions that can be drawn from whichever standpoint one adopts. For instance, if it is true that morality can only be grounded in religion, then all moral education, especially of the young, must take the form of religious instruction. Again, if the above position is correct, then the state, insofar as it is expected to champion the common good, should necessarily uphold religion and promote religious beliefs. The state cannot fulfill this particular task unless it advocates some kind of religion. In contrast to this viewpoint, one can say that, if there is indeed a strict separation between religion and morality, we do not have to be over-anxious about the present decline of traditional religion for it can only mean a change in the content of morality and not necessarily the complete disappearance of moral values. Furthermore, assuming that it is true that religion as practiced by some has had a negative influence on people's morality, then it may not be altogether wrong to welcome the demise of the more extreme forms of religion. Clearly, there are significant implications.

In what sense then can one talk of the relationship between ethics and religion? To what extent is morality dependent on religious belief? What contributions do religious beliefs make to the practice of morality? I will defend the view that there are non-religious forms of morality, a defense which consists of an empirical observation, a philosophical argument as well as a theological viewpoint. In supporting this stance, I shall also argue that religion does provide an important positive contribution to ethics in terms of *vision* and *motivation*.[2]

An Empirical Observation

By an empirical observation, I simply mean that if we look around us, we will discover that there are countless individuals who, without any explicit religious beliefs, can be said to lead morally

[1] This would seem to be the position of Prof Richard Dawkins in his documentary "The Root of All Evil?" aired by Channel 4 (Britain) on January 9 and 16, 2006. He argues that religion is the source of much suffering and evil in the world and that much immorality is being perpetuated by the various religions.

[2] These reflections have been prompted and informed by Prof. Dawkins's documentary and by Kai Nielsen's book, *Ethics without God.* This article is my response to their criticisms of religion in ethics.

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good lives. Concern for others, for instance, is not exclusive to religion as the admirable lives of many non-religious people can testify. There are non-religious reasons, such as the concept of community, which can result in our treating people fairly and in respecting them. Our individual welfare is dependent on having a device which equitably resolves social and individual conflicts. It is unfair to depict secular morality in a way that makes it seem egoistic and a kind of gross hedonism in which the human person is nothing more than a purely self-concerned secularist, clever little animal. There are times when people's interests clash and the common good can be served only at the expense of some individual's interests. But morality requires this sacrifice of us *when necessary* for the common good. One does not have to turn to religion to cultivate this attitude. Indeed, many do not. The life of even just one of these is sufficient to contradict the claim that there can be no morality unless there is belief in a God.

There is a related issue here. Any realistic morality, be it religious or secular, links morality in some way with happiness, that is to say, with what human beings on reflection actually desire for its own sake rather than as a means to something else. The theist takes the human craving for happiness to mean desire for God. Our many desires, the theist tells us, are but particular expressions of a more general desire: for God. According to some theists therefore, the secular moralist's great mistake is in failing to see that in God alone can we find lasting happiness—God is the end of all moral striving. Without God, the human deepest wish cannot be gratified. The theists accuse the secular person of not grasping the true meaning of morality and human happiness. But to justify the allegation that without God humans will be driven to despair, we need evidence and not just *a priori* statements that without God humans must despair or that they will be happier with a belief in God. On the contrary, there are people who, despite conspicuously non-religious lives, are happy. In holding and living up to some kind of ethical code even though they have no religious commitments and in leading what could only be described as fulfilled lives, they contradict this particular theistic claim. Unless we are to act as judges of other people's thoughts and lives, we must accept that they are indeed happy. Relatively permanent sources of happiness can bring true happiness to some people. The final arbiter of the genuineness of their claim must surely be those people concerned. It would be foolhardy and indeed unfair to doubt what they say.

A Philosophical Argument

But let us carry on this empirical observation at the philosophical level. How can it be shown that there are reasonable grounds for

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holding on to the view that morality is to some extent independent of religion? Centuries ago Plato posed a problem which is relevant to us: did the gods command that something be done because it is good *or* is it good because it has been commanded by the gods? Plato had anticipated a common formulation of the general thesis that morality depends on religion, namely that morality is "what God commands or wills". In this view, moral right and virtue are interpreted as obedience to divine authority and what God wills is used as the criterion for one's actions. But in what way does God's will actually serve as a moral criterion? There is of course real sense in maintaining that the believer ought to take God's will as final court of appeal in moral decisions. That is, if a rule, act or attitude is seen by the believer to be in conflict with what he or she sincerely takes to be God's will, then on pain of ceasing to be an upright believer, that individual must reject that rule, act or attitude. The believer may not always be in a position to resort to God's will as to what is good or as to what he or she ought to do, but if that individual honestly regards something to be contrary to God's will, then the obligation not to do it exists. Thus, "what is wrong" becomes "what is prohibited by God". This has led some to think that there is an intrinsic link between morality and religion to the extent that if one does away with religion one is destroying the only solid support that morality has.

But let us examine this use of God's will as a moral criterion more closely. There is really an assumption here. It may be prudent to do what someone commands, particularly if that someone is powerful, but it does not make obeying that individual's commands or carrying them out morally obligatory. Obedience by itself does not constitute a relevant moral reason to act. This would be the case only if it could be argued that whoever issued the command, in this instance God, is good. Or to put it in another way, doing something because it is willed by someone can be morally justified only if that someone is good. This in turn is possible only if the believer *already* has an idea of what good is. The criterion of God's will is in logical dependence on some distinct criterion, namely the idea of goodness, in virtue of which the believer concludes that carrying something in accordance with God's wishes or as explained before, not doing that which is forbidden by God, is demanded of him or her. But that person is in reality appealing to a concept of good which is logically prior to and is independent of any understanding or acknowledgement of God. In short, we all have a certain concept of good which is more fundamental to any belief in God and which therefore shows that we can judge something to be morally good without necessarily bringing in theistic considerations.

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A Theological Observation

Can we still uphold this independence of morality from religion if we bring in theological considerations? Many of us consider the pronouncement of the ecclesial magisterium or Sacred Scriptures as a special source of ethical wisdom in the sense that their judgments make things right or manageable. On moral matters, what is sometimes forgotten is that the magisterium does not create moral value. What it does is to *articulate* it in a special, privileged and completely dependable way. The same can be said about the function of the Scriptures vis-à-vis moral concerns. I must admit, however, that different religions, indeed different groups within the same religion, would take another view.[3] But if the particular view mentioned above can be defended, the question becomes: To what extent do the Scriptures provide us with moral guidance? One answer is to say that Scriptures contain a code of revealed morality. Biblical quotations are used as arguments against or for a certain practice. But this way of using Scriptures to throw light on morality has led to no small confusion in contemporary discussions of moral issues. Scriptures do have to be read intelligently. Biblical studies have shown us that in their moral teachings as well as other types of teaching, scripture writers drew on available sources to try to express their beliefs. In formulating the Decalogue, for instance, the Israelites made use of the accumulated wisdom of the surrounding peoples as well as their own experience. Jesus himself left no detailed code of morality so the New Testament writers simply fell back on the moral codes current at the time, particularly those of Stoic philosophy.

That we should exercise caution in regarding Scriptures as providing us with a revealed code of morality can also be seen when we examine its moral teachings. What sometimes escapes our notice is that there is *growth* in the scripture writers' understanding of the moral life. The high moral passion of Amos and Isaiah does not appear in early Isaiah. In post-exilic writers morality becomes refined although legalised. The New Testament writers are full of the new law—a concept which the Old Testament writers did not have. There are also *limitations* in their understanding of morality. The Old

[3] It had been pointed out to me that a certain understanding of the Koran would not accept this point. I acknowledge this. It seems to me, however, that Asghar Ali Engineer, an Islamic scholar, would actually agree with me. He argues that it is necessary to separate what is divine from what is the opinion of the medieval "ulana", claiming that even the most eminent Islamic thinker cannot escape various human factors which influence one's understanding of the divine. He makes the distinction between laws and values, asserting that laws are merely temporal expressions of the values in the Qu'ran. Cf. *A Modern Approach to Islam, Dharma Endowment Lectures No. 7* (Dharmaram Publications, 2003), 7.

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Testament writers accepted slavery, polygamy, divorce, double standard of morality, hatred of foreigners, inhumanity in wars and so on. We are all familiar with some of Paul's teachings on moral matters, which would be regarded differently today. The point I am making is that even on theological grounds we cannot maintain that morality is necessarily linked to religion. On the contrary, we discover that our theological understanding of what is morally right is very much dependent on non-religious sources.

Religion and Ethics

If the above considerations can be defended, then there can be morality without religion. Or to put it in another way, theists do not have a sole claim to the moral life. If this claim is true, then the question arises: Does religious belief, i.e., belief in a personal God, have any contribution to make to morality? If, as has been claimed, the process of deciding on moral matters is one that theists share with secularists, what is distinctive about religious morality? Some theists have regarded religion as adding *depth* to morality. But the word sounds very much like a negative judgment over non-religious forms of morality. It would also be quite difficult to show, given the complexities of validating the belief in a God, that religion really deepens our knowledge of morality. A less contentious word is *vision*.[4] This means then that despite admitting that our process of decision-making is a human one, we can still claim to be influenced by a vision not shared by secularists of what it means to be human. Because religion holds that creation stands in a relation with God, our judgments of right and wrong are shaped by that conviction. Karl Rahner put it rather succinctly when he said that what we have is a theological anthropology. It is on this very point where I believe the scriptures, be they Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, play a significant role.[5] For the scriptures capture and express in written form that religious vision. On this point let us retrace our steps. Earlier I had said that scriptures (at least from the standpoint that I was taking) do not provide us with a revealed code of morality. What it does offer is this vision of creation standing in a certain relationship to God. There are insights and themes which bring out this understanding. This vision

[4] I should like to believe that such a vision would contribute positively to the development of what is referred to as "moral sense".

[5] In his *Lights of the World: Buddha and Christ, Dharma Endowment Lectures No.2* (Dharmaram Publications, 1997), Ninian Smart shows how inter-religious dialogue between Mahayana Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity is not only possible but also can bring about harmony to human civilization while preserving the distinctiveness of the religious traditions.

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influences the Biblical writers in their approach to moral problems and sensitises them to certain values and colours their outlook and attitude to daily life. This is well illustrated in the Pauline writings. Paul talks of the baptised Christian as a new creature whose conduct ought to reflect this new mode of existence. If one checks Paul's exhortations and instructions, one will discover that they *follow* from his explanations of what it means to be a *pneumatikos*. What gave the early community its distinctive character was its faith more than the conduct of its members. The new life is not to be measured primarily by what Christians do, but by what they hope, believe and love.

There are other sources of this vision. The sacraments or the rituals and worship of the different religions highlight this relatedness to God because these do not make sense apart from this belief. To a great extent, the sacraments are a celebration of our awareness of being related to God. What we are trying to do in the context of morality is carrying out the awareness that is being celebrated in the sacraments and affirmed in the scriptures.

But of course, that vision is at the same time a challenge. If one believes in that vision then one would be expected to live by it.[6] Here I come to another distinctive feature of religious morality. I shall call it *motivation.* In other words, why we ought to do certain things marks a theist off from the secularist. Again, there is no claim to a higher kind of motivation, simply a claim that it flows from this religious vision.[7] A traditional distinction in Christian moral theology can help in explaining this point. The material content, i.e. what we ought to do, does not differ significantly from a non-religious one. But the formal content, i.e. the meaning and context of what we ought to do, is a distinguishing feature of Christian morality. In other words, what motivates a Christian (and the same can probably be said of other theists) is not what motivates a secularist.

However, a further clarification is needed here because in wanting to be motivated by the religious vision of creation, theists have been accused many times (at times rightly so) of not taking this world and our responsibility towards it seriously enough. But this can happen only if we regard God as "being out there" uninvolved in our affairs. But a vision that is prompted by a realisation of God's presence *and*

[6] For an illustration of this point in Hinduism, cf. M. Sivaramkrishna, *Hindu View of Life: a Contemporary Perspective, Dharma Endowment Lectures, No. 5* (Dharmaram Publications, 2001)

[7] This point assumes, of course, the existence of a personal God, an issue which needs addressing in another context. My point here is that one's relationship with a personal God—and I would use the analogy of a loving relationship with someone—has a way of motivating us to act in such a way that it deepens that relationship. It may even lead us to do certain acts which we would not do otherwise.

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involvement in our daily affairs cannot but take our humanity and creatureliness seriously.[8]

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[8] For a development of this point, cf. Marian F. Sia and Santiago Sia, *From Suffering to God: Exploring our Images of God in the Light of Suffering* (Macmillan, 1994).

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