

Religion and Morality: Exploring the Connections

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I. Historical Observations

It is obvious that there are connections between religious dimensions of human life and its moral dimensions. Let us begin by noting just a few of the historical and psychological connections between them:

- > In the Western family of religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), all members of the family revere the figure of Moses and view God's revelation of the divine law on Mt. Sinai as a central element of their common heritage.
- > Many individuals look to their religious heritage for insight and guidance regarding the proper course of moral action and the hope for divine reward and the fear of divine punishment provide motivation for their conduct.
- > Many people seem to believe that belief in God is an essential grounding of morality: "If God does not exist, all things are permitted," one of Dostoevsky's characters says, speaking for this popular belief.
- > At the level of popular belief, many in our society expect as a matter of course that religious leaders and institutions will live up to a higher standard of conduct than that of the general society³ and are correspondingly more shocked and dismayed when those religious institutions fail to meet that expectation.

Specifically within the Department of Defense and the military generally, there seems to be a deeply embedded assumption that religion and moral conduct are closely connected. The pivotal place of chapels and chaplains in military affairs surely comes from a number of beliefs, but one is the conviction that religion is morally beneficial. The prominence of chapels and, until recently, the requirement for mandatory chapel

attendance at military academies presumably rests on similar assumptions. The inclusion of chaplains as a matter of course in discussions of moral matters throughout the defense community rests on the belief that chaplains have a special moral expertise to bring to bear on moral questions.

II. The Historical "Problem"

Despite the depth of the grounding of such beliefs in the popular mind, philosophy has found the close linking of religion and morality difficult almost from its origins. In Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*, Socrates presses the question whether things are morally right simply because the gods say they are. Must it not be the opposite, he implies: that the gods, if they are good, would only command those things which are right and good, independently of their being divinely commanded? Implicit in Socrates' question is the suggestion that human beings have and use a *rational and independent standard* for assessing moral value. The gods' commands, if present at all, could at best serve to sanctify the already-known moral right; at worst, belief in the gods' commands might cause one to perform acts which violate rational morality because one believes the gods require them.

The theme of the independence of true morality from religious backing and grounding is picked up with a new energy at the time of the Enlightenment in Eighteenth Century Europe. The Enlightenment's ablest exponent and deepest thinker, Immanuel Kant, stressed the need for the autonomy of morality—of independent and individually chosen motivation—as the precondition of any truly moral action. No matter how well one acts, Kant insisted, if the motivation for the action is deference to or fear of an external authority—even God—then one's actions are thereby deprived of genuine moral worth.

It remained to the Nineteenth Century for the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard to draw out the full implications of the philosopher's account of morality.

In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard explored in depth the story of Abraham as the exemplar *par excellence* of biblical faith. In particular, Kierkegaard was drawn to the account of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Rather than focusing on the "happy ending" of the story where God intervened to spare Isaac's life and to substitute an animal as sacrificial victim, Kierkegaard found Abraham to be the "Knight of Faith" en route to the sacrifice. If Abraham is the exemplar of faith, Kierkegaard reasoned, it was precisely in his obedience *before* he knew God's true intentions. But if that is the case, it means the greatest obstacle to faith *is the temptation to be ethical*. According to the tradition of philosophical ethics, Kierkegaard argued, Abraham should have recognized in the divine command to sacrifice his son an immoral command and should have rejected it. Abraham's role as the exemplar of faith, by contrast, resulted precisely from his willingness to *suspend the ethical*—to act on distinctively religious motivations which supersede human moral standards^¾in the belief that God will (all appearances to the contrary) assure that his promises concerning Isaac will yet be fulfilled!

We are, at this juncture, left with an uncomfortable conclusion if we wish to view the connection between religion and morality positively. On the one hand, we have Plato and Kant, speaking for most of our philosophical tradition, insisting that morality must appeal to rational and intelligible standards of human beings. On this analysis, religious motivations and sources of morality are, at best, potentially dangerous and misleading; and at worst, undermine the autonomy that is essential to true morality. On the other hand, in Kierkegaard we find the defender of the independence and priority of the religious over all rationally comprehensible moral systems. Abraham is the Knight of Faith precisely because he is willing and able to "suspend the ethical" in the blinding and transcendent submission of heart and will to the inscrutable divine purpose which, against all reason, he affirms to take precedence in his conduct.

Whichever horn of this dilemma we grasp, we are left with a difficult choice. In either direction, we encounter a sharp disjunction between rationally comprehensible morality and genuine religious understanding. Either religious language and thought provide a descant over the *cantus firmus* of rational morality (if we follow in the tradition of Plato and Kant), or it transcends it and swamps it in the blinding light of religious submission of mind and will (if we prefer Kierkegaard's spirited defense of the independence of religion). Neither position provides much comfort for the popular belief in the deep and inherent connection of good morals with religion.

III. Religion and Rationality: Religious Syntheses

In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the awareness of the difficulties we have just enumerated has been obvious from the first moments of their expansion into the world of Greek philosophical thinking. Each tradition has attempted to find a way of articulating at least the bulk of morality in such a way that it did not depend wholly, or perhaps even primarily, on strong claims of divine revelation.

Judaism developed the concept of the Noachide commandments³⁴ commandments which, because they were given to Noah and his immediate family, were binding on all Noah's descendants (i.e., all humanity). This concept provided a means by which the rabbinical tradition could find a basis *within the tradition* to speak of common human morality. Medieval Jewish thinkers such as Maimonides, borrowing much from Aristotle, could elaborate these concepts into a version of common moral standards, intelligible to and knowable by all rational persons.

In Christianity, the brilliant synthesis of Aristotle and earlier Augustinian-Platonic Christian thought in the work of Thomas Aquinas performed a similar function. Aristotle (*the philosopher* for Thomas) had provided a thorough articulation of human morality as it could be understood by unaided reason³⁴an understanding which revelation could supplement with important information about humanity's

supernatural and spiritual ends, but not fundamentally subvert. Natural law, therefore, could provide a common moral knowledge for believer and non-believer alike, accessible to each by means of reason. God remained connected to this rational system because God created both the world of our experience and the reason by which we experience it. Nevertheless, we do not need to look directly to God's revealed will for the bulk of our moral information and can rely to a considerable degree on the human intellect, common to all humanity, for the basis of moral thought.

In Islam also, philosophical-theological thought moved in the direction of common rational bases for morality. Especially in the thought of *Al-Ghazali* (1058-1111 AD.) and *ibn-Rusd* (Averroes, 1126-1198 AD.), revealed law (*sharia*) could be understood only in the light of the rationally comprehensible moral standards available to careful and critical thinking.

It is an irony that all such attempts to bring together independent rational thought and religiously based morality become, in their later evolution, somewhat wooden systems of inherited thought. To use only the Christian example, Thomism, by the Nineteenth Century, had ceased to be a dynamic and open system of thought. Whereas Thomas had bravely attempted to come to terms with the newly-rediscovered thought of Aristotle in the face of the church's opposition, Thomism itself had become the tradition of an inflexible church hierarchy and an ecclesiastical education system both of which perpetuated themselves on the ground of their traditional status. Similar fates befell the Judaic and Islamic systems integrating philosophical and religious morality.

Still, such perhaps inevitable developments should not blind us to the universal impulses of the great philosophical thinkers of each of the Western religious traditions. For reasons internal to their most fundamental theological impulses, each of these traditions sought to find room within a religious framework to accommodate and acknowledge the worth of the best of secular and even pagan moral thinking.

To cite only these examples is, of course, to tell only half of the historical story. Within their own communities, each of the thinkers I have cited has been the object of severe attack and criticism from within the religious community. Each has in his time been accused of showing too much accommodation to rationality and failing to emphasize sufficiently the strong role of revealed morality. Both in earlier times and at present there are movements we might broadly call "fundamentalist" which grow impatient with the hard intellectual work of harmonizing faith and reason. To cite only the Christian example once again, the very reading of Aristotle was prohibited at the time Thomas was writing his great synthesis, and Thomas' work remained officially condemned as too rational by the Church for a century until it was rehabilitated to become the official theology of Roman Catholicism.

Each of these traditions also has periodic resurgences of movements which look to scripture alone as the source of religious knowledge and deplore reason as "that great whore" (to use Martin Luther's phrase). Yet such movements are generally short-lived before the more thoughtful members of such communities look once again for a basis for linking up to rational morality. It is not long, for example, before Luther himself, having discarded reason in its scholastic guise, finds a need for "orders of creation" and "two kingdoms" which can guide political and moral thinking apart from direct use of biblical revelation.

To summarize: thoughtful religion *always has*, and in my judgment *always will*, end up advocating a variant of Natural Law thinking. It will inevitably evolve in the direction of acknowledging that most of the morality important from within the religious framework can be found and understood apart from a distinctively religious base. To that degree, Kant and Plato win the day; few religious thinkers, and few religious individuals, are willing to follow Kierkegaard in sharply separating the Knight of Faith from all ties to the morally comprehensible!

IV. The Contribution of Religion to Morality

We are now prepared to explore anew the contribution of religion to morality. We have established that strong claims that morality is and must be derived from distinctively religious sources is 1) potentially dangerous to the integrity of morality itself and 2) not a claim which is well-grounded in the best of religious thinking. On the other hand, this is a fact about the fundamental logic of morality and religion; it is obviously not a point about the psychological, sociological, and personal connections individuals find between their religious beliefs and their moral lives.

One of the most astute treatments of this question is found in James M. Gustafson's small work, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* At the risk of oversimplifying Gustafson's subtle treatment, I wish to focus our attention on three areas he identifies where religion clearly has impact on the moral life of individuals. These are:

- 1) the "sort of person" one is;
- 2) reasons for being moral; and
- 3) the impact of religion on our interpretation of particular circumstances of action.

1. **The "sort of person" one is** For much of post-Enlightenment ethics (until the recent beginnings of recovery of "virtue" ethics), ethical reflection and analysis has focused on the choice of particular actions. Yet it remains true that an equal or even more fundamental aspect of the moral life of individuals flows not from moments of crisis decision-making, but rather from the habits of character and dispositions they bring to action. Religious communities communicate powerful images of the preferred dispositions that should characterize their adherents. Some examples:

- > To have been raised from childhood thinking of compassion as the fundamental disposition toward the world and to revere the Bodhisattvas who forgo their own Nirvana in order to save all other

sentient beings colors the style and personality of the Buddhist in a manner than long predates moments of decision.

- > To think of love as the fundamental moral requirement, and to have that response illustrated from one's infancy in stories like the Good Samaritan and the images of the Crucifixion shape the Christian's fundamental personality and style in ways that, one hopes, surely shape action, and yet which are not simple action-guiding rules.
- > To recite the Passover Haggadah is to be reminded in the midst of the celebration of Israel's deliverance from Egypt of the worth of all human lives, even those lost in Pharaoh's pursuing army, is to deeply color one's reverence for human lives, even those of the enemy.

In the terms of anthropologists, religious traditions hold up different "modal personalities" as embodying the ideals of a community. The songs religious communities sing, the parables and stories they tell, the "lives of the saints" recounted ¾each in their own way communicate in a powerful and yet pre-rational way the kinds of persons we should be in this community.

2. **Reasons for being moral** Ethics as generally understood in philosophy devotes a great deal of time to the question of morally correct behavior. Yet such a focus often neglects a more fundamental issue, often neglected because it is wrongly assumed to have an obvious answer. That question is, "Why should I be moral?"

It does little good to discuss the question of morally desirable action if one is not motivated to do the morally right thing in the first place¾and not everyone is, of course. Religious ideas, symbols, and communities often serve to provide reasons why one should care about being moral.

Religion is not unique in meeting this need, of course¾any morally serious person has some answer to this question. Possible answers range from being true to one's own rational nature (Kant), because one aspires to human fulfillment (Aristotle), or because keeping one's contract with one's fellow citizens is necessary to prevent social chaos and warfare (Hobbes), to cite only a few examples. So I am by no means

claiming that only religious motivations can meet this need. My claim is the more modest one that, *for those who are informed by religious ideas and practices*, those religious matters commonly do provide their answer to the question, "Why be moral?"

For the Western religions, gratitude to God for creating and sustaining the world often serves as a fundamental motivating factor for moral action. We should care about the welfare of the world and our fellow creatures because, for example, God has given us stewardship over the created order. Or we should help those in need, because God's fundamental stance toward us is one of undeserved favor. Or we are members of a community covenanted with God to keep God's commands.

Again, this level of moral thinking and discourse is considerably deeper and more fundamental than questions of the "What should I do?" variety. They go to the most fundamental levels of our interpretation of our place in the world and our responsibilities for it. Religion, since it provides that comprehensive and over-arching framework for many, is one of the ways individuals find meaning and motivation in the moral lives.

3. Religion and the interpretation of the circumstances of action Another commonly neglected, but fundamental, aspect of moral thinking concerns interpretation of circumstances. Situations which raise moral difficulties and issues are not self-interpreting^{3/4}a precondition for choosing to act is determining "what's going on," and that determination is itself value-laden.

To cite a deliberately extreme example, suppose we're observing the military destruction of a village of civilians. Depending on the religiously-informed "glasses" we wear observing these events, we may spontaneously describe what's occurring as the divinely mandated destruction of infidels or the slaughter of innocent civilians^{3/4} images informed, perhaps, by the biblical stories of the conquest of Canaan and the Slaughter of the Innocents, respectively.

Again, encountering a helpless and needy individual may equally be described as an encounter with a social parasite who should learn to tend to his own needs, or to the religiously-informed imagination, as an encounter like that of the Good Samaritan.

In short, religious symbols, stories, and ideas fill the imagination of religiously sensitive individuals with analogies and metaphors which spontaneously inform their perceptions of the circumstances of action and, by means of that interpretation, with value-colored predispositions to approach moral choice in particular ways.

V. Conclusion

We have seen that religion and morality have complex interrelationships. At their best, both the religious and the philosophical traditions have found reasons to seek the normative content of much of morality in commonly available and rational standards. To that extent, the strong religious claim that morality *is and must be* founded on religious perception is a mistake.

On the other hand, we have also noted that religion has a profound impact, for those with serious religious perception, on the stance they take toward moral life. For the adherent, religion presents and sustains a vision of the kind of person he or she should be; it provides an interpretation of his or her place in the world that profoundly inspires reasons to be moral; and the images, symbols, and stories of the religious tradition condition pre-rationally our perceptions of "what's going on"^{3/4} of the circumstances of action.

Throughout the Defense Department, because of both the popular beliefs regarding religion, and because of the connections between religious frameworks and moral motivation, perception, and character, chaplains will inevitably be called upon by commanders and individuals for moral guidance. Furthermore, the service branches seem to contain large numbers of individuals of very strong and, often, quite conservative religious orientation. In all cases, it is imperative that persons of religious

conviction functioning in leadership positions of institutions governed by the U.S. Constitution be able to articulate the impacts of religion on morality for those individuals who share their distinctive religious perspective.

But equally, both to be true to the best of their religious traditions and to provide the moral perspectives of greatest use to their commands, it is crucial that they be able to draw on and articulate those "natural law" (i.e., commonly available to rational agents) aspects of their tradition which can enlighten and guide careful moral reflection in our ever more pluralistic society and military.