

Ethics and Religion

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ethics and Religion go side by side, is what a person will say to clarify on this subject. So the question arises as to why one needs to be ethical or religious, or in other words why everyone wants a label of being good and just or term themselves as ethical or religious. Most of the moral philosophers would say this is not the case, yet it can really be helpful to understand this concept. This means that people can maintain certain ethical perspectives, principles and behavior without engaging oneself in religious or spiritual beliefs, institutions, or practices.

Ethics, or moral philosophy as we say, asks some very fundamental questions of how human beings should live: what goals and values should one strive for, what is right and what is wrong, what is virtuous and what is wicked. On the other hand Religion can be understood as a belief system that gives meaning to people's lives and professes their existence, the ultimate supremacy of a supernatural power or a divine realm that transcends the material reality of the day-to-day life. The realms of ethics and religious belief do overlap but are not identical. Mostly though not all religions provide their faithful way of carrying out the instructions to give guidance as to ethical conduct. Much to say but by no means all moral philosophy has roots in or connections to religious belief.

2. ETHICS AND ITS REVELATION

Many religious systems adopt a super-naturalist, or God-based, ethics. The deity or some natural power or an idol is the only source of moral rules, and people must do what God wants, to lead a good and prosperous life. God speaks directly to people through the prophets and recorded texts. This approach is notable in the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. God's rules are passed directly to the people and recorded in the holy scriptures. The Ten Commandments of Moses, much of Christ's preaching in the Gospels and many of the Quran's ayats and suras are such direct teachings concerning ethical conduct. Hindu Vedas are another example of a words of the deity revealed directly.

Interpretation of Ethics:

Direct communication from the deity is only one way religions teach about ethics. The best ways to live one's life and solve moral dilemmas are explored indirectly in many sacred books and texts of religious significance, from the Hindu epic Ramayana to the whole tradition of Christian apologetics to the Taoist Tao Te Ching. Besides the written word, the priests, monks and teachers of most religions, from the Zen Buddhist gurus to Judaistic rabbis are considered to be moral authorities, who are able to provide with ethical guidance through their deep understanding and study of the spiritual realm and their devotion to God.

But still the Question arises why be Good:

Most people would agree that one should lead a good life, whatever the definition of the good life their particular belief systems or religion proposes. There is less agreement on actually why this is desirable. A supernaturalist approach dominates the Abrahamic religions and refers to God's will as the ultimate moral authority: It generally states that people should do what God desires, and what God desires is always good. This still leaves the problem of finding out what does God actually wants us to do? This is then usually approached through a combination of routes, from sacred texts or holy words to spiritual authorities and individual's direct communication with God. Such rules of conduct are usually quite specific and absolute in almost all religions and transgressions of any of this means a punishment, often in the afterlife. Other religious systems, for example Taoism, Zen Buddhist or Shinto, concentrate on the general principles that help one

attain spiritual balance. The ethical rules are seen as supplement than as absolute prescriptions and is considered more of an expression of the best way to progress on the spiritual journey.

3. ETHICS WITHOUT RELIGION

Much moral philosophy is rooted in religious belief, although some secular ethics have a tradition going back to the ancient times. Many thinkers who subscribed to some form of a religious belief system recognize that it is possible to live a good life without recourse to religion. That includes the Apostle Paul in the New Testament and the current Dalai Lama, who called for promotion of universal "human values" with "no relationship with any particular religion." Although it is clear that atheists can live ethical existence, the difficulty they grapple with is to find out justification for their ethics, the question of where the morality ultimately comes from. The most common answer point to this is to share social convention and the universal human nature which are its evolutionary roots.

On the other hand religion and Religious organizations and practices have a wide variety of comprehensive services, programming, groups, lectures, readings, models, and so forth that can regularly impart, support, and provide corrective feedback about ethical principles and guidelines to their members. The secular community just doesn't seem to have the organizational structure to do so. There are some exceptions of course to these situations. These groups highlight virtues such as honesty, integrity, and responsibility. So, it appears that one doesn't have to be religious or spiritual to be ethical but it might help having the organizational structure that religion offers to encourage and reinforce ethical principles and behavior. On the other hand Religious engagement and practices encourages and supports "clean and clear living." Research has consistently found that religious people are less likely to engage in criminal behavior, like marital infidelity, alcoholism, murder, rape etc to some extent, but on the contrary will engage themselves in social behaviors such as volunteerism and charity. Mother Teresa. In a nutshell, to say people in the church choir usually don't do criminal conspiracy. Harold Koenig's *Handbook of Religion and Health* as well as his *Handbook of Religion and Mental Health* are examples for this scholarly support.

Religion and spirituality encourages ethical behavior in their sacred scripture readings. The point is that, research supports the view that spiritual and religious practices like, meditation, Church sponsored social ministries, religious services talks have certain physical, mental, community health, and ethical benefits.

Of course there are many examples of religious beliefs and practices being terribly harmful to oneself and others in the society, and there are many examples of outstanding non religious and completely secular organizations and individuals who are outstanding models for ethical behavior, community engagement, and physical and mental health. So, there are exception to these general principles for sure but the overall trend suggests that religion does assist and support people in living more ethically.

So, to answer the question, "do we need religion to be ethical?" The answer appears to be no but it could be helpful under the right circumstances.

According to Mathew Arnold, "Religion is nothing but morality touched with emotion." This view does not; in anyway, distinguish between religion and ethics.

In Samuel Alexander's words, "There is infact no duty to be religious any more than there is a duty to be hungry." Religion is a very natural human tendency and it may take any form of manifestation. Thus from the above statement, it is inferred that religion is based upon emotion but ethical sense is based upon reason. People who believe in the identity of religion and ethics should forget their differences.

4. RELIGION AND MORALITY

Scholars like Descartes, Locke, Paley believe that religion precedes morality, that the latter arises from the former. It is God's will which decides what is good or bad.

God's laws are the ethical laws. God himself creates ethics of his own desire and is not bound by any other ethical law.

God himself is a source of treasure house for ethical qualities. He receives good and rejects evil. Ethics is based not on his absolute desire but on his ethical nature.

Activities are not good or bad because religious texts say so. It is the goodness or badness of activities to know what pleases God. Therefore neither religion nor ethics can stay in the world if God is believed to be either unethical or different in morality.

Religion satisfies the emotional aspect of man whereas Ethics satisfies the volitional aspect of man. If the complete and all round development of man is desirable, ethics and religion should be complementary.

5. RELIGION SUCCEEDS MORALITY

According to Kant the philosopher, religion is mostly based upon ethics and the existence of God is due to existence of ethics. Kant believes that happiness invariably accompanies the virtue of goodness to complete it. Thus virtue is the ultimate good but without happiness or joy it is not complete good.

But in the ultimate analysis virtues are not always accompanied by happiness. It is seen quite often that while good people suffer in a number of ways, and most of the times, the bad enjoys themselves throughout. But if the ethical order is true it should not be so.

Thus, Kant imagines that God is the one who arranges virtue with pleasure and vice with pain in this world. It is God who conjoins pleasure with virtue. We may see this or not but it is true. Thus according to Kant, God is a postulate of ethics.

6. THE BASIS OF RELIGION AND ETHICS ARE TOTALLY DIFFERENT

God exists not only in the soul but also in the world created by him. It is this urge for realisation of God, the first step towards an ethical attitude.

Thus a person trying to be ethical must serve all living beings because all the living beings are God's creation. In this way, as the author of Gita has said, God is the source of moral obligation.

The basis of moral obligation cannot be man or society. The individual is the source of moral obligation when he realises the true soul. When the soul is truly recognised, no difference remains between that soul and god; everything in the world appears to be Godly in nature. At that stage man himself becomes ethical. Moral obligation becomes the normal law of everything internal and external.

In such stage the volitions of the individual become identical with God's will. But this does not destroy his freedom. Real freedom lies in becoming God's instrument and fulfilling God's will. This is true religion in itself. His law is the law of self and real freedom is in proceeding along the law of self.

Being based on emotion rather than reason, the religion, maybe beyond the ethical one but it is still a state of good filled with goodness desired by everyone. Hence its path passes through ethics. A man with vices or having bad qualities in him cannot be religious. Unethical religion is merely a blind faith. An immoral God is as good as the devil.

Thus, ethics is essential for religion. On the contrary religion does not follow ethics, because both are found on dissimilar grounds. Reasons and emotions should develop simultaneously, not successively. A person is not first religious and then ethical or vice-versa but he is both ethical and religious at the same time. Only an integral outlook can carry man to perfection.

7. RELIGION AND MORALITY ARE INTERDEPENDENT

Thus, the view, that Religion is the ideal basis of the Ethics. Moral is the expression in society, of our spiritual consciousness.

A person, who sees God in every object unconsciously, turns to social service. A truly religious person sees the entire world permeated with goodness. Religion and ethics both make important contributions to the development of the human personality, though their sources are different.

Religion is concerned with the relations between God and the individual. Ethics depends upon volitions and religion upon psychic emotions. In human development, both ethics and religion develop side by side and influence each other. It is

possible that in some circumstances religion may be unreasonable or illogical, in such a case it would be inappropriate to call it as a true religion. A true religion is faith in the realisation that there exist God and the state of God's existence cannot be unethical. Religious fulfilment satisfies our whole personality. Thus, it must be ethical, because without being ethical it cannot satisfy our volition aspect.

Emotion without action is only one sided and lifeless and thus not true . Religion is incomplete without ethics. Thus ethics acts upon religion and makes it pure and refined. Religion reacts upon ethics and motivates it. Neither ethics can replace religion nor can religion substitute ethics. Both religion and ethics are indispensable for the complete and integral development of the relations between the individual, society and God.

8. RESOURCES

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