

RELIGION AND MORALITY

Is it necessary to be religious in order to be moral?

by Brian Lewis*

For many Christians and for religiously minded people generally, morality, in the sense of what one should or should not do, is perceived as imposed upon us from outside, by God, by Church or by some other authority. For example, people who see morality as coming to us from God, believe that God has revealed to us what we must do and what we must avoid in order to become the persons we are destined to be and to be pleasing to God.



God's prescriptions for right living, for instance, the Ten Commandments, are clearly laid out and perennially valid, because they spell out the will of God, which is thus the source of moral duty. For Christians these norms are set out for us in the Bible (other religious groups have their own sacred writings, Moslems for example the Koran). Christian moral living is therefore quite

different from the moral life of those who do not profess the Christian faith. In this perspective the distinction between morality and religion is obliterated and a person's moral behaviour becomes a religious matter.

Discussion regarding the element of truth in this viewpoint is beyond the scope of this article. In general terms an obvious difficulty with this perspective is that it seems to run counter to actual experience. Everybody knows of people who are not Christians, who perhaps do not espouse any religion or even are anti-religious, but who nevertheless lead highly moral lives. How then are we to account for this? Most people, if pushed on the question, would, I think, really say that it is not necessary to believe in God to be a *good* person. Religious convictions, beliefs and attitudes may provide guidance and additional warrants for living ethically but they are not required for people of any religious persuasion or none to develop a strong value system and moral code, and to stick by these in their conduct.

A clear distinction, therefore, can and should be made between morality and religion. Failure to do so makes the question 'Why be moral?' practically unanswerable apart from religion and leads to the conclusion that, if one were not a Christian or a Catholic, there would be nothing wrong with sleeping around or falsifying income tax returns or doing whatever one liked short of getting caught.

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Morality a Human Reality

It is not hard to defend the principle that the basic criterion for evaluating what is to be judged ethically right or wrong is the fully and authentically human person. What is to be considered essential for the wellbeing of human persons in their world and in interpersonal living? We humans have to work this out for ourselves and human beings have been trying to do this, with greater or less success, since the beginnings of the human race.



Certain basic directions of moral striving have emerged regarding, for example, the dignity and value of the human person, human happiness, fidelity and fairness, the building of a just society. Recognition and realisation of such values is indispensable for truly human living. The full implications have, of course, to be worked out in greater detail, but about the basic thrust there seems to be general agreement among all peoples today. In this sense we may say that a basic common morality, rooted in our shared humanity, unites Christian and non-Christian, existentialist and idealist, creationist and evolutionist, indeed all human persons.

The existence of a basic common morality leaves plenty of room for differences at the practical level, especially in a country such as Australia, in which there is a pluralism of belief and practice. It is a fact of modern life that our society is made up of people of a variety of religious traditions or of none, and come from a great diversity of cultural backgrounds. Some, perhaps many, community members agree with the teaching of the Catholic Church that human life from its inception to its end is sacrosanct and that therefore, not only abortion, but embryonic stem cell research and therapeutic cloning are morally wrong.

Many others in the community do not accept this on the grounds that the human embryo has not as yet personal status and hence cannot be the subject of human rights. For them personhood comes at some later stage of human development. A similar lack of consensus exists in regard to gay and lesbian marriage, some strongly opposing this, others (according to findings about 50%¹, particularly among young people) seeing no problem with it.

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It is legitimate, therefore, to speak of morality, whether in the sense of a basic common reality or in terms of specific concrete ethical issues, as the result of the human quest from the dawn of reasoning. It is an ongoing process. In striving to live harmoniously together human

beings make morality, or at least discover it – but they do not discover it ready-made. In general, the practical patterns of ethical living are not as such the creation of any church, of Christianity, nor even of God (except of course in the sense that God has made human beings the way they are). It is the fruit of human moral striving.²

Concrete moral rules originate from human reason, as it assesses new experiences, arrives at a moral judgment about them and then puts these judgments into moral statements. They are binding, therefore, not because they have been formulated by some authority external to us, but because they are an expression of a right insight into what it means to be truly human. So, at least in principle, they remain open to further human insight and reflection.³ The point to be made is that morality in itself is essentially a human truth, to be discovered by human endeavour and moral reasoning.

Many Christian moralists feel that this position is important to maintain because it enables the Christian community to remain open to dialogue with non-Christians and to speak a language that makes sense to everyone. Otherwise the Church will have little to contribute to the discussion of ethical issues of current concern, for example, the abortion and euthanasia debates, and will be expected to remain within its own backyard rather than try to enter the public forum.

It is true that their faith often leads Christians to adopt a particular stance in relation to certain moral issues. Some may conclude from this that the influence of religiously motivated ethical positions should be limited to persons who share the same faith convictions, and that Church members should not take a public stance on social, economic and political issues.

There is no valid reason to support such a conclusion, as long as the positions in question can be explained and defended in terms that are understandable and cogent to others in the community. Catholics, for instance, may well oppose voluntary

¹ 'Poll shows support for gay marriages', *The Age* 20/06/06, p. 2

² See Vincent MacNamara, *The Truth in Love* (Gill and Macmillan: Dublin, 1989), pp. 15-19; John Macquarrie, *Three Issues in Ethics* (SCM Press: London, 1970), Chapter 4

³ Josef Fuchs, *Christian Ethics in a Secular Arena* (Georgetown University Press: Washington D.C., 1984), pp.34-45

euthanasia or direct abortion for religious reasons and because they are condemned by the Catholic Church, but this does not preclude them from entering the arena of public debate about the issues, provided they can present their rational arguments in a way that is accessible to persons of other faith traditions or none.

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This means being able to discuss the status of the embryo, the moral significance of prenatal development, maternal welfare and rights, and social support systems for pregnant women and for children, in a way that those not of the Catholic faith can grasp and recognise as worthy of serious consideration. If they engage in public discussion in these terms they cannot be accused of attempting to impose *religious* positions on others.

In his encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est (God is Love)*, Pope Benedict XVI, apparently thinking especially of Church leaders or officials, says:

[The Church] cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. It has to play its part through rational argument and has to reawaken the spiritual energy with which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply (no. 28).

However, as Charles Curran affirms⁴, under certain conditions both Church leaders and members may be justified in seeking to influence specific laws and public policies, not on religious grounds, but on the basis of public order.⁵ Cardinal George Pell did this recently in his speech to the National Press Club in Canberra in which he expressed apprehension about the Industrial Relations legislation before Parliament, emphasising the need to protect low-income earners and even bring about increased Union influence.⁶

Teachers of Christian ethics need to be clear that to be moral one does not have to be religious. Morality is of itself independent of religion and does not cease to bind even if religion is abandoned as irrelevant. It is not superimposed on young people from

⁴ *The Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II*, (Georgetown University Press: Washington, D.C., 2005), p.223

⁵ Public order is not identical with the common good as such but is a partial aspect of the common good. Public order has three elements: justice, public peace and public morality. It is the immediate end of the State and the justification for enforcement by civil laws. See the Vatican II *Declaration on Religious Freedom* (par.7). This ground-breaking document makes an important distinction, valid at least in the context of a democratic society, between the State with its more limited focus (public order) and the broader society directed towards the common good.

⁶ See Brendan Long, *Industrial relations is the Church's business*, in <eurekastreet.com.au.article.aspx.aeid-1161>

outside nor imported as a foreign product into their lives. It is essential to being human in the full sense of the word.

This needs to be brought home to young persons and it can be done simply by helping them to understand themselves and to discover what it means to live as a human being in society. Even when they adopt a negative stance towards morality and profess to reject the moral norms that have been taught them, they still remain open to discussion of the demands of living together as they experience this, for example, in being fair to one another, playing as a member of the team, or, as MacNamara suggests⁷, by insisting that morality not be rammed down their throats, perhaps a good place to start.

⁷ *The Truth in Love*, pp. 18-19.