

Religion and Morality

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America likes to think of itself as a distinctively good country. Our founding is heralded as a great moral advance for mankind; certainly its architects articulated their purpose in rousing moral terms. Ours was the first nation expressly “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” the first to establish itself on the foundation of inalienable human rights. Despite profound national embarrassments such as slavery and the forcible removal of the Indians, this moral vision of America has proved remarkably resilient, and in recent years “the new patriotism” has taken America’s “moral superiority” as a rallying cry.

It is also a commonplace that America is a religious country. “In God We Trust” is our national motto (although it was chosen only in 1956, two years after “one nation *under God*” was inserted by an Act of Congress into the Pledge of Allegiance). Our most cherished statements of national ideals are couched in religious language, from the Mayflower Compact to Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream.” Recent years have seen as well a resurgence of concern to make this religious dimension of public life more explicit, particularly in the movement to reestablish some form of school prayer.

These two facets of the American self-image may seem to be closely related. It is claimed that America’s character as a moral nation depends on its character as a religious nation—indeed, that morality itself depends on religion. Such a claim was made by the first president in his Farewell Address: “Of all the disposi-

tions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. . . . And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. . . . reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." The same claim is made by the current president: "It is only in . . . faith that sees beyond the here and now, that we find the rationale for our daring notions about the inalienable rights of free men and women. . . . The Western ideas of freedom and democracy spring directly from the Judeo-Christian religious experience."

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The claim that morality depends on religion, however, can mean very different things, and its truth or falsehood varies accordingly. In what ways does morality depend on religion and in what ways does it stand alone or even serve to criticize religion? On what particular "brand" of religion does morality depend? And what implications can we draw from the relation between religion and morality for policy issues such as prayer in public schools?

The Mount Sinai Summit

One way in which morality might depend on religion is that morality has religion, to some degree, as its origin. Much of our present moral code is derived historically from religious teachings—from the Ten Commandments and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This seems to be what President Reagan had in mind when he observed that our ideas of freedom and democracy "spring directly from the Judeo-Christian religious experience." In the words of Secretary of Education William Bennett, "From the Judeo-Christian tradition come our values, our principles, the animating spirit of our institutions. . . . American history—the fundamental shape of the American experience—cannot be understood without reference to the Judeo-Christian tradition, a tradition which gave birth to us and which envelops us."

There seems to be a good deal to be said for such claims, as a matter of historical record. But whatever their truth, they imply little about any present-day connection between morality and religion. As John Stuart Mill pointed out over a century ago, while we may be indebted to Judaism and Christianity for imparting to us various moral truths, the fact remains that they have been imparted: "this benefit, whatever it amounts to,

has been gained. It has become the property of humanity, and cannot now be lost by anything short of a return to primeval barbarism." Mill's position, then, is that we can take the moral truths religion has imparted to us and leave the religion behind.

Certainly many people today seem to have done just that. Despite their differences in theology, religious and secular ethicists agree on a wide range of moral issues. Believers and nonbelievers alike join in affirming kindness, compassion, honesty, and fairness. That we can often agree on moral matters while disagreeing vigorously on religious ones suggests that moral judgments have a life of their own, whatever their long history. Given the amount and extent of religious disagreement in the world, it is fortunate that this is so.

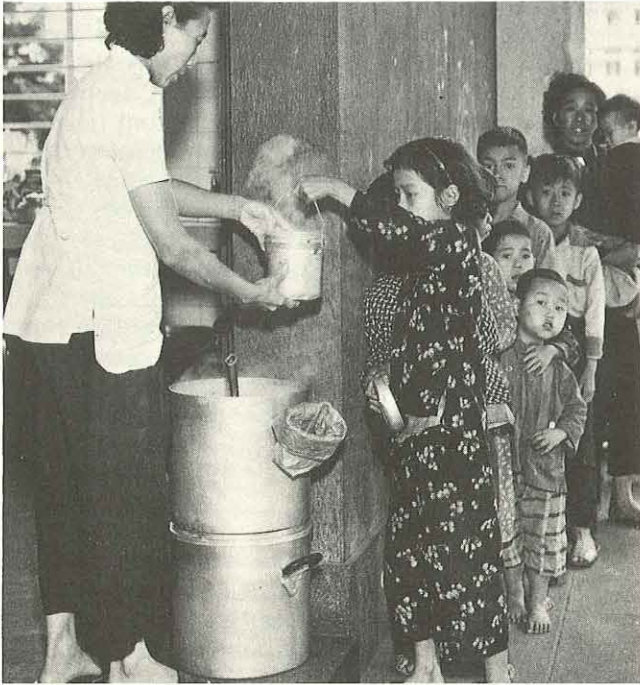
If God Is Dead, Everything Is Permitted

A deeper claim is that morality finds in religion not only its origin, but its justification. Here the claim isn't that we learn moral truths through religion, but that without religion—without God—there would be no moral truths.

Consider one of the most bedrock moral notions in our political discourse: the idea of fundamental human rights. Secretary Bennett quotes Jefferson's ringing proclamation that all men "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." Without a Creator, Bennett asks, "Whence come these rights?" Who endows human beings with rights, if not God? If there is no God, there are no God-given rights, and maybe the notion of natural inalienable rights becomes, as Bentham thought it was, "nonsense on stilts." Similarly, it is asked, how can there be moral commands without a commander? How can there be binding moral rules without some supreme rule giver?

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The original and still powerful objection to this argument was given by Plato in the *Euthyphro*. In modern dress, it is this. If a given action is right because God requires it, we have then to ask why God has chosen to issue that requirement. Either the reason lies in some morally desirable feature of the act, in which case God's choice depends on an external moral standard rather than itself setting that standard. Or else God's choice is essentially arbitrary—he just happened to feel like saying, "Thou shalt not kill." If the latter, morality hardly has a more secure foundation than when it rested on supposedly arbitrary human desires. Moreover, it is difficult to conceive that if God had happened



A United Methodist relief project.

instead to feel like saying, "Thou shalt torture innocent children," that would be our moral law. Torture seems to be wrong because it causes undeserved suffering, not because God said so.

In fact, in one sense religion seems to depend on morality. Part of the way in which we recognize God as a fitting object of worship is by attention to his perfect goodness. If we do not worship God in recognition of his goodness, then, as Kant argued, we bow down to God only as "a mighty lord whom we should have to placate . . . with flattery and incense." An omnipotent being can compel our obedience, but only a supremely good being deserves our worship. But this means, Kant concludes, that "All religion assumes morality, and morality cannot, therefore, be derived from religion."

But if morality doesn't depend on religion, what does it depend on? One answer is that it depends on what human beings collectively have decided are central rules for living together in harmony. These are grounded, not in divine commands, but in human needs, wants, loves, and fears. Compassion, respect, and tolerance are important moral virtues because they are the values that work best to preserve dignity, protect autonomy, enhance security, and make life happier and richer.

Such a foundation does not make moral rules arbitrary and subjective; it does not leave individuals free to make up the moral rules that suit them best. Moral rules are made collectively by human society and are grounded in the reality of the human condition. This is enough to justify our adherence to them. Morality, then, need not depend on religion for its justification.

You Better Be Good, You Better Watch Out

Even if morality doesn't depend on religion for its justification, it might depend on religion as a source of motivation. On the least attractive view of human psychology, people require the fear of future hellfire in order to behave toward each other with tolerable decency. But even on a more benign view of human nature, religion may be an important impetus to moral conduct. Robert Adams, a philosopher at UCLA, notes that most individuals have a plurality of motives for action, some self-interested, some concerned for the well-being of other people, still others concerned with values and ideals more abstractly conceived. Clearly the different springs of motivation may conflict, "but in Judeo-Christian ethics," Adams suggests, beliefs about God's will "are supposed to enable one to *fuse* these motives, so to speak, into one's devotion to God and His will, so that they all pull together." Aside from any narrow regard for one's own salvation, faith in God can make the believer simply want to be good, to please a loving Father.

Looking to society at large, the motivational claim that morality goes hand in hand with religion comes down to a sociological thesis: as religion founders, so will morality as well. But on this the historical record is at best indecisive. For one, the mere fact of correlation between religious and moral decline wouldn't of itself prove that the two were directly connected, nor suggest which way the connection is to be drawn. And while religious institutions have often set a shining example in ministering to the wretched, many have pointed out that religion has as often occasioned war



Crusaders charging the infidel.

and bigotry as peace and harmony. Hume puts these sentiments into the mouth of Philo in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*: "If the religious spirit be ever mentioned in an historical narration, we are sure to meet afterwards with a detail of the miseries, which attend it. And no period of time can be happier or more prosperous, than those in which it is never regarded, or heard of." The Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem witch burnings, present-day Iran—all bear no witness to the salutary moral effects of religion.

Robert Fullinwider, Research Associate at the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy, suggests that many who link immorality to a falling away of religious faith make their case chiefly by equating morality with "sexual decorum." William F. Buckley, for example, lambastes the absence of religious training in the schools for "its possible relationship to abandoned moral sanctions." The core of his argument is that "instruction in religion diminishes promiscuous sexual activity." Perhaps. But Fullinwider argues that a nation's morality is not a matter only of its sexual mores, but has to do as well with the development of a humane foreign policy, the decent conduct of economic life, integrity in public service, and a spirit of amiability and generosity in private life.

Nor is it surprising, he maintains, that sexual rectitude should require enforcement by religious sanctions in a way that other areas of morality do not, for while other moral rules—against stealing, killing, lying—arise naturally from human needs and desires, sexual prohibitions seem to go against the grain of human nature. To the extent that religious threats are required to sustain such prohibitions, this may show only that they don't fit comfortably with the rest of our moral framework.

Since every society must have some institutional mechanism for transmitting moral culture, religion, in fulfilling this function, may be morality's chief ally.

However, religion may yet play an important role in moral life. The strongest case for this, Fullinwider suggests, begins with the observation that "religious institutions are the only institutions in our society, outside the confines of the family, in which people talk about moral values on a regular basis in a systematic way." Public schools have never rivaled religious institutions as a serious force for sustaining moral culture; it is in Sunday school classes and Sabbath-day sermons that moral issues are most likely to be thoughtfully raised and considered. Since every society must have some institutional mechanism for transmitting moral culture, religion, in fulfilling this function, may be morality's chief ally.

Religion may be an ally of morality in another way as well. Adams raises the possibility that one danger of morality without religion is that morality then becomes a religion—an object of "maximal devotion." While most fear that severing morality from religion may undermine the motivational commitment to morality, a parallel danger is that it may remove any check on that commitment. This can result in an obsessive and oppressive form of moral zeal. Morality itself is "too narrow to be a suitable object of maximal devotion," since it excludes too many human excellences. But since God, for the believer, includes within him all that is true and good and beautiful, religion makes room for a richer view of human flourishing, within which morality can find its proper place.

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"Religion" or My Religion?

The last two arguments give reasons to value religion for the contribution it makes to society. Do they give a reason for explicitly incorporating religion in some way into public life—perhaps by amending the Constitution to include some provision for school prayer?

The central fear involved in incorporating "religion" into public life is that religion almost inevitably comes to be narrowly identified with the religion of the dominant group. It is easy for "We are a religious nation" to slide into "This is a Christian nation," as one U.S. representative recently declared on the floor of the House—prompting Rep. Barney Frank, who was chairing the wee-hours session, to retort, "If this is a Christian nation, how come some poor Jew has to get up at 5:30 in the morning to preside over the House of Representatives?" Mr. Thwackum in Henry Fields's *Tom Jones* stipulated, "When I mean religion I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England." The Thwackums of this country mean by "religion" Protestantism of a fundamentalist and evangelical stripe.

President Reagan and Secretary Bennett may see themselves as protecting "religion-in-general," but it is not clear that there is any such thing. The much-cited "Judeo-Christian tradition" does not represent "religion-in-general" to Buddhists, Hindus, or Moslems—nor to Jews, who resent seeing their religious heritage treated as an "Old Testament" prelude to Christianity. Within Christianity itself, Protestants and Catholics read the Bible in different translations, even say the Lord's Prayer—often viewed as a lowest-common-denominator Christian text—in different versions. And

Protestants differ among themselves on how to view Christ's command to pray only in private, making no outward, public show of one's piety. Religion-in-general would have to be so bland and contentless that it is hard to see how it could count as religion at all.

Conclusion

In his August 1985 address to the Knights of Columbus, Secretary Bennett argues that "neutrality to religion turns out to bring with it a neutrality to the values that issue from religion." The choice, as the Secretary presents it, is this: either we put religion in the classroom, or we take morality out. Either we post the Ten Commandments on classroom bulletin boards, or we are left with nothing but "values clarification"—a kind of moral relativism which places all values on a par, none more right or wrong than any other. But if moral truths are truths in their own right, not just corollar-

ies of religious principles, if some values *are* better than others, independent of any religious pedigree, then the Secretary's dichotomy is a false one. We can argue directly for our moral beliefs and urge our children to adopt them, whatever our religious convictions. We can pray to different gods—or to no god—and still work together to revitalize our shared moral life.

Sources for preparing this article not identified in the text include: John Stuart Mill, *Nature, the Utility of Religion, Theism, Being Three Essays on Religion*; Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*; Robert Merrihew Adams, "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness," in *Religion and Morality*, edited by Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr. (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1973); Adams, "Saints," *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 81, no. 7 (July 1984); William J. Bennett, Address to the Supreme Council Meeting of the Knights of Columbus, Washington, D.C., August 7, 1985; William F. Buckley, Jr., "... And Religion," *Washington Post*, April 9, 1986; and interviews with Robert K. Fullinwider.

Buy Like a MADman, Use Like a NUT

When theoreticians think about nuclear deterrence, often they focus on a nasty choice between two rival package deals. The two have gone by various names over the years, but let me take the paired epithets: MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction) versus NUTS (Nuclear Use Theorists). Each package is a bundle of policies: centrally, policies for the procurement of strategic nuclear forces and conditional intentions about how to use those forces in case of war. I think we can break up the packages and keep only part of each. What we get may be in some sense MAD and in some sense NUTS—for the terms are elastic—but I hope it is the better half of both.

In a debate between MAD and NUTS, each side may say that the other's policies involve a twofold risk: a grave moral risk of committing massacres and a grave prudential risk of inviting and undergoing massacres. If they say so, they are right. The contest between these two repugnant alternatives gives nuclear deterrence itself a bad name. How does the very idea of nuclear deterrence turn into the nasty choice between MAD and NUTS? Does it have to happen? Is there no way around it?

MAD: If You Can't Be Credible, Be Dreadful

To trace the reasoning that drives us MAD, start with a simple conception of nuclear deterrence. We deter the enemy from doing X by threatening that if he does, then we will punish him by doing Y. But the enemy

might notice that if he does X, we will then have no good reason to do Y. What's more, he may be able to give us a reason not to: he may threaten that if we do Y, then he will punish us by doing Z. Of course we may threaten that if he does Z then we will . . . but he might doubt that as well. In short we have a credibility problem: our deterrence is apt to fail because our threats are not believed.

How to solve it? One way is to make the threatened retaliation very, very severe. Then even if the enemy thinks we would have excellent reason not to retaliate, still he would not dare to call our bluff. If he evaluates risks as he should, multiplying the magnitude of the harm by the probability, we can make up in the first factor for what is lacking in the second. We can threaten a vast nuclear massacre, on an altogether different scale from the ordinary horrors of war. Destruction on this dreadful scale needn't be credible to deter. Although it could serve no good purpose to fulfill the threat, the risk that we might do so in blind anger suffices.

The MADman thinks it obvious that deterrence requires a solution to the credibility problem, and obvious that the only solution is to find a threat so dreadful that it needn't be credible; and he expects the enemy not to overlook the obvious. Therefore he thinks that for the enemy, as for us, an assured capacity to destroy cities will be seen as the *sine qua non* of nuclear deterrence. Further, he thinks it would take no great effort for the enemy to counteract any steps we might take