

# ***Moral Theology***

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## **INTRODUCTION.**

This paper treats the question of the role that morality plays in theology. For responding adequately to this research question, morality will be firstly defined in the general sense of the term. Secondly, two basic uses of morality will be highlighted, with a complementary use added later in the paper. Thirdly, moral theology will be defined (in this case moral theology refers to Christian moral theology). Fourthly, developments; this part of the paper will deal with morality from societal, group, and individual points of view. Fifthly, the role that morality has in theology. Again, as a point of information, morality and theology will be addressed from a Christian's viewpoint, as it will be discovered that theology does not automatically mean the study of a unique God, nor does morality automatically imply Christian morality. In addition to the special emphasis placed on man in society the Christian's response of what morality should be, and the consequences engendered by its practice or neglect will also be brought to light.

## **MORALITY DEFINED.**

*The word morality (Latin moralitas defines such words as “manner, character, and proper behavior”) is the differentiation of intentions, decisions, and actions between those that are “good” (or right) and those that are “bad” (or wrong). Morality can be a body of standards or principles derived from a code of conduct from a philosophy, religion, culture, etc., or it can derive from a standard that a person believes should be universal. Morality may also be specifically synonymous with “goodness” or “rightness.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University.*

## **THE DESCRIPTIVE AND NORMATIVE SENSES OF MORALITY.**

Morality may be used in a (1) descriptive sense to refer to some codes of conduct put forward by a society or, (a) some other group such as a religion, or (b) accepted by an individual for his or her own behavior. (2) In a normative sense to refer to a code of conduct that, given specified conditions would be put forward by all rational persons.

As an example, for descriptive morality let us suppose that in a given society laws had been developed for the smooth running of daily affairs. Murder, theft, prostitution, homosexuality, and trickery if figured on the list of acts to avoid, would be considered the code of conduct of that society. Doing the contrary however, would place a person or group within that society in a state of immorality.

## **MORALITY AND THEOLOGY.**

Morality (the art of right conduct) and Theology (the knowledge of God and, or the gods) should go hand in hand. Yet as we have noticed earlier, “Morality” entails many facets and is very vast in definition. Theology however may be more restrictive as a subject for treatment. It implies obtaining a maximum of knowledge concerning God or gods. As gods

seemed to be the feared hierarchy of mankind, then to each god a designated morality. In this sense Morality could take on the form of standards or principles based on their (mankind's) philosophy (thinking/way of life) and religion (cultic practices/rites) in connection with their belief for societal codes of conduct.

Let us take for example the worshiping of images in place of a god. Many ancient societies favored these types of practices, and even had a selected host of gods reproduced in image form for worship. The moon, sun and stars (the host of heaven) were generally worshiped, but also the birds of the air. Egyptians favored the hawk, while the Assyrians the dove. Earth gods were oxen, sheep, cats and particularly the dog gods of Egypt. Water gods were Dagon of the Philistines, Derceto of the Syrians among countless others. To worship those deities according to stipulations provided by the codes of conduct, would be to do justice to society in its entirety.

Blessings were presumably obtained through the worship of the deity, especially after it had been appeased. Accordingly, codes of conduct dictated the types of behavior or comportment an individual or people in general should adopt to be considered as executing right, good, or proper actions in that given society (descriptive sense).

Apart from this descriptive sense cited above, comes a more jurisprudential aspect of morality. It caters for the, "normally this or that is not right, but because ..." Herein lies the differentiation of intentions one may have, or decisions, and actions one may make and take (against others or concerning one's own person); because of circumstances that are at times beyond their control (normative sense).

For instance, in certain modern societies abortion is considered an immoral act, thus a woman who aborts is not honoring the national code of conduct in so doing. Nevertheless, abortion may be excused, accepted, or may even be leniently judged based on certain circumstances (from which she intended/decided to act differently to what is legally prescribed).

Take as an example a woman pregnant due to rape or incest, even though the populace admits that the act of aborting is wrong, the cause judged to be of a certain degree immoral gives reason to the victim. The same is the case with murder where capital punishment is the sentence. Murder is surely against the codes of conduct in many societies, yet if one slaughters another to save his own life or that of someone in jeopardy, and that legitimate defense can be proven, the man slaughterer may not be executed for his act.

Morality from a purely rational point of view, is as complex as the human mind. Quite blatantly, anyone could say; "my philosophy is not your philosophy, my religion is not your religion and your culture differ from mine." Thus philosophy, religion, and culture in themselves cannot suffice for the establishment of universal morality. Here again in this case, the differentiation of decisions and of actions as seen above may come into play to determine right or wrong action on a global scale.

We may well agree on the principle that with each god applies a certain code of conduct. This concerns the spiritual aspect of society, whether pagan or not. The same could be said for the secular governmental system where the establishment of political institutions and their hierarchy are invented to maintain some form of proper moral conduct supported by their society. Because of its regular use of much compromise and the absence of appropriate rigor for the upkeep of morality, the normative sense of morality will not be used in the argumentation in response to the question what role morality has in theology. For as far as morality is concerned from a biblical point of view, there can be no compromise. If one is to

associate him or herself with the kingdom of God, that person's life must be exemplary. Notwithstanding our imperfections as human beings, the fact is that the Christian should not condone or engage in continuous immorality. For this reason, the Bible describes and prescribes the way of life (code of conduct for every man).

## **MORALITY'S ROLE IN THEOLOGY.**

### **Morality sets criteria for judgment:**

Religious and political institutions, groups of persons, and individuals govern or are governed by the supreme powers with which they identify. Yet there is one government and code of conduct with which we have not dealt. Perhaps we could start to answer this question by employing the terms Christian morality (the Christian's code of conduct), and theology from a Christian's point of view (the Christian doctrine concerning the knowledge of God and his purpose for humanity), when referring to morality and theology hereafter. Another distinguishing feature to note, is that in responding to the question of what role morality has in theology, special attention will be paid to two forms that morality embraces in the Bible (prescriptive and descriptive).

We have already noticed in this study that morality proper could not suffice for a global code of conduct. And this is due to its incapacity to stand alone without a governing principle: a philosophy, government, religion, and culture. These are coupled with the differences that are proper to each human being (their intellectual capacity to conceive things differently and at varying degrees). If we were to put confidence in man's concept of morality, or his capacity to produce a model of morality adaptable to the entire world, our hope would be in vain. Morality's role in theology (Christian) is to describe and prescribe correct conduct for humanity. If we know that God desires the subjects of his kingdom to be irreproachable in the eyes of the world, then we must know why we serve him and what this service entails. God in giving to man guiding principles described the way life should be lived. This true religious practice and appropriate cult bears eternal consequences (those of life and death/heaven or hell).

Whether morality was prescribed or described to Noah's ascendants is not known, but God's intervention against Noah's contemporaries by way of the flood, proves that he (God) was surely not in favor of a normative form of morality. Saying this, partially contradicts the thoughts of Aquinas who in agreement with the theological version of Natural Law Theories (the normative sense of theology), that any rational person in society, even one that has a defective morality, can know the general kinds of actions that morality requires, discourages, encourages and allows. Aquinas stated that; "*God implanted this knowledge in the reason of all persons.*" I do agree with Aquinas in certain respects to the fact that all rational persons can know the actions morality prohibits, but where I disagree with him can be simply put this way. In absence of a set guide or guidelines which delineates good or bad conduct; who can judge one's actions, and to what measure? Reason does not always inform by what standard morality could be judged as right or wrong.

For example, polygamy in Occidental societies is immoral, yet in most Oriental societies it is permitted. The question is, what is wrong with Oriental reasoning as opposed to that of the Occidental? This brings us back to the famous, "it's their philosophy," as response. Without a universal moral code which is decided upon by the societies afore mentioned, morality can only be judged by the reason of those societies (based on what they think is

morally sound). For we see the parallel in Genesis. The moral standards supported by men of renown was predominantly condoned. Yet they could not have been brought into some form of judgment unless they had been informed, that their acts seemingly moral were immoral. With this we may say that Noah was probably the first evangelist. Hence through his presumed preaching/exhorting, the criteria by which his contemporaries would be saved or judged became officially known. Morality places criteria for judgment as far as God is concerned. Remember he is just and righteous, would he not provide escape from damnation for those who so desire?

### **Morality reveals God's volunteer to save ailing humanity.**

Apart from all we have seen vis-à-vis morality, we may add its effect on national groups and individuals as they are affected by the moral judgment it engenders. When the prophet Jonah was sent to Nineveh, it was with the unique aim to inform that society of their 'amoral', and the judgment that would follow. These were the prescriptions, (God's instructions) to be followed for them to be saved (Jon. 1:1). Yahweh did not decide that it was normal for the Ninevites to act the way they did and place it on the bill of innate morality. Rather, he revealed that he was a God providing escape to those who would do his will. If Jonah revolted because he thought that the inhabitants of that city were undeserving of God's salvation due to immoral practice, God was willing to inform them, thus making aware the unconditional need for a set standard of moral practice to be implemented if they were to escape from his wrath (God's moral judgment).

Morality's role in theology is to reveal God's volunteer to save humanity by providing a blue print for us to follow. This blue print informs us by describing and prescribing the knowledge, thoughts, and actions we must possess and produce to be morally clean (Jon. 4:11).

Hobbes tells us that, "morality is concerned with promoting people living together in peace and harmony, which includes obeying the rules prohibiting causing harm to others." Nevertheless, at a group, or even individual scale within any given society this causes problems, and thus calls for arbitration by the state's laws. But what happens when national groups take their morality beyond their own frontiers?

Nineveh was one of the major cities displaying Assyria's glory, yet they did not reach the summit unless God had permitted (Col. 1:16; 2:10). Their war machinery was awesome, they were versed in astrology and the sciences and were the elite of the day.

Nonetheless, Jonah tells us how ignorant they were concerning "Godly morality." We saw later in history the things which transpired in Jerusalem while the civilized world was under Roman domination. It is quite understandable that pagan philosophy and the moral code it supports, even with many similarities, cannot measure to the richness and outcome of morality laid out by God. Could you now imagine an Assyrian conquest annexing many other nations to their empire and enforcing upon them their immoral practices. How would you envisage God's people in the process? Would tyrannical domineers care for any moral standards, which prohibited the causing of harm to people who feared a God whose ways were unknown, and considered (God's way) one of great mediocrity such as to allow the infliction of defeat by an enemy?

## **Morality inspires change by appealing to reason.**

On a more individual note, Lot projects the conflict that differentiation in moral thought can cause. Though not insensitive to Sodom's code of conduct (Gen. 19: 1b – 8b), Lot possessed and expounded moral principles that were pleasing to God. The Sodomites thought their way of life was correct. Yet Lot took upon himself and lived according to the true moral standards his uncle Abraham, the devout man of God had taught him. But the men of Sodom when opposed by Lot's differences of opinion on true morality. They were nullified by the man's decision to act out his proper code of conduct. So, conflict was the result with the intention of causing hurt. The rest as we know it, gave way to moral judgment by way of God's destruction of Sodom and its neighboring cities. Yet still, we may suppose that this moral judgment did not come before the city was made aware of their immoral practices. Lot had no sons, he probably was feared because of Abraham. To this point he was tolerated as a stranger, so long as he did not interfere in their affairs (19 :9). He had dwelt with his contemporaries as did the Noah family. He was tolerant even though disturbed by the lifestyle of the Sodomites. So much so, that he even referred to them as brothers. Nonetheless, Lot stuck to what he believed was true morality in God's eyes and was eventually rescued from moral judgment. Almighty God is tolerant to the point where reason causes moral change. So, we might add that, the part morality plays in theology is also to inspire moral change by appealing to reason. Sadly, not everyone adheres to reason when it endorses a restrictive sense. True morality may be to a point restrictive, but the consequences once accepted, are a life of everlasting peace and joy in Jesus Christ.

## **Morality identifies and unifies God's children.**

Finally, fitting morality into our knowledge of God and his will, affords unity based on an unconditional kind of love. Tyranny and domination based on race, religious belief, and social status will be extinguished. We will become impregnated with God's character, which will be evident in our lifestyle. We will fervently appeal to the reason of our contemporaries, that change is needed – but Godward. Christians will identify themselves by unique moral values, which will bring them under the sole headship of Christ. Though we may be different in many ways, morality with God is one and the same. This kingdom identity will keep the body of Christ closely knitted until the day of judgment.

## **CONCLUSION.**

In concluding, we have looked at a few examples of the role or part morality has in theology. God worked with individuals, family groups, and later the nation Israel to vehicle his will by acting out true morality. As Christians today (spiritual Israel), the onus is on us to live our lives in a way that is pleasing to God. We are blessed to have the Old Testament, which may be qualified as descriptive of the morality God condones. Today's Christians are heirs to salvation through the New Testament. This testament contains many prescriptions for holy living (Rom. 12:1). Accordingly, this form of morality (prescriptive), is as we have seen earlier, what the individual believes are the true moral standards to be practiced for obtaining salvation. Looking at the world around us today we can see, morality being acted in different

forms. World governments' form of morality (normative), makes countless compromises regarding abortion, homosexuality, corruption (...), as opposed to the descriptive and prescriptive forms of morality that identifying with God implies (Col. 3:5-9). The imperative nature of the author's prescription comes from the revealer who revealed them to him by inspiration. Furthermore, it is by that authority the world must be judged. Those who do not comply will be condemned. This is particularly so because, and I repeat, morality defines the way Christians must act or live (our proper behavior), based on our sound knowledge of God's will. That sought of lifestyle is to be lived amongst ourselves (in the church), but also in the eyes of our secular neighbors, and the world by extension.

Our mission as Christians, is to carry out the prescriptions prescribed to us by the great physician (Jesus), and described to us through the Holy Spirit (our counselor/pharmacist). The doctor says, "take this medication for a certain period," the pharmacist deciphers, and makes that which has been prescribed more comprehensive and applicable.

In addition, we must be careful not to fall into the traps of secular thoughts on how mankind should live, nor of certain bizarre interpretations of love. A parent out of love, and not being brutal administers a mild flogging to a child – this would be done in contemplation of future disastrous effects, if the bad habit is not curtailed or totally eradicated. Flogging with proper justification may well prevent embarrassing repercussions. But when nothing is done, we condone wrong doing, and the child is misled and spoilt. In other words, if as Christians we sit around and say that homosexuality among other immoral acts is okay, because it is normal today, or based on not wanting to hurt the feelings of a "gay" person, the same is as if we were condoning a child in wrong practice.

Murder, burglary, theft, and other forms of violence is the outcome of this so called secular love, that permits almost anything on the grounds of normative morality. The result is always an affair of justice (the legal system). Likewise, judgment is the result for all those not heeding to our appeal; that there is no escape nor compromise before the judgment seat of God.

Nevertheless, as far as we Christians are concerned, morality will always be the unifying factor for all God's children. Mainly because it is on God's moral standards that mankind will be judged. Yes, descriptive/prescriptive morality might seem to cause hurt to others. Especially those whom it does not please to embrace righteousness and righteous living. But be it so at present, rather than to face eternal damnation. This is nothing more than the love Christian morality portrays, one that foresees and anticipates the terrible judgment of God against the wicked (immoral souls). Remember the flogging parent may have caused temporary bodily hurt to the child out of love, by contemplating the disaster which laid ahead.