

Religious Faith Influences Morality in People: Motivations and Contradictions

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Abstract. Religion and morality are two relatively independent ideologies, and there are important differences between them in terms of ideological content, forms of expression and social role. There are differences between the two, but there are also close links and profound mutual influence. Religion has the side of harmonization and consistency with morality, as well as the side of opposition and struggle with morality; religion has the function of moral exhortation in many cases, and many moral norms have often become the precepts and rules of religion. In modern times, with the development and progress of society, many religious behaviors have become unethical and even contrary to human decency.

1. Introduction

Religion and morality are two of the oldest social and cultural phenomena in human history. Compared with morality, religion seems to be more "superior" and farther away from real life, but from the perspective of the historical process of origin and development, morality was created earlier than religion. According to archaeological data, the primitive religion arose in the late Paleolithic period, while the most primitive morality already existed when the earliest human beings lived in groups. Primitive religion evolved on the basis of customary morality, and the development of religion has gradually restricted morality. Overall, the relationship between religion and morality is intricate and complex, and the two are differentiated from each other and independent of each other, but also closely related to and influenced by each other. The interaction between morality and religion has both positive and negative effects on the whole and on individuals.

2. The link between religion and morality

First, religion itself. Religion mainly regulates the relationship between man and God, but it also regulates the relationship between man and man and man and society, but the emphasis is on the former. Moreover, the relationship between man and man and man and society is subordinate to the relationship between man and God. This necessarily involves ethical and moral issues. Of course, we cannot simply agree with the religious view that morality is set by God and is eternal. But equally importantly, we cannot ignore the existence of this area of religious morality. Religion is not only an ideology, but also a social entity linked by faith. It cannot live or operate in isolation from society, but within it. In order to ensure

the implementation of its doctrines and the consolidation and development of the status of the religious community, it is inevitable that believers are subjected to ethical and moral constraints, which results in the formation of a system of religious moral norms such as commandments and precepts. In addition to the special norms for religious believers, it is in fact also compatible with some of the most basic secular moral norms, such as the "Ten Commandments" in the "do not kill, do not steal, do not commit adultery" and so on, which is not only the norms that religious believers have to abide by, but also the maintenance of the secular social order is indispensable norms. It is not only the norms that religious people must abide by, but also the indispensable norms for the maintenance of secular social order. In this sense, religion is an outlook on life that combines sacred and secular values, with ethics and morality embedded in it.

There are different schools of thought on the question of the interrelationship between religion and morality. Marxist historical materialism holds that religion and morality are two relatively independent social ideologies and that there is no question of who determines whom. Religion, as a socio-historical phenomenon, is a product of the development of mankind to a certain stage of history. Morality, as a kind of ideology, is likewise gradually formed by human beings in the course of long-term social practice. In ancient times, when man was separated from the animal world, he gradually formed a collective of laborers in the struggle with nature, and in order to coordinate and adjust the mutual relations among the members, morality arose in the form of a germ. There is neither divine "revelation" nor traces of religion in it. Therefore, according to Marxism, it is groundless to say that morality is rooted in religion.

The commonality between the two is first and foremost manifested in the similarity of obligations. There is no essential difference between moral and religious

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obligations in terms of their literalness alone, and the obligatory character of morality, as a manifestation of virtue, fully embodies the sanctity and sublimity of religious obligations; in other words, the obligatory character of morality fully expresses the religious character of morality itself. From the point of view of the history of the origin of morality and religion, the two have a common source, and primitive morality and primitive religion are one and the same. From the point of view of the characteristics of morality itself, morality that does not have the transcendence and sanctity of religion, especially the faith of religious piety, cannot be regarded as morality in the true sense of the word. From the point of view of the content of moral obligations and religious laws, they have a primitive unity, and "both have the same root: the will's desire for perfection". But that which is a requirement in morality becomes a reality in religion. Morality describes perfection in abstract formulas, whereas in religion it is possible to visualize perfection in concrete form, as a divine, holy, and well-being-enjoying life. Thus, morality and religion appear to be two sides of the same coin: the individual is moral insofar as he seeks perfection in his will and actions, and pious insofar as his feelings, beliefs, and hopes are inspired by the image of the Most High.

All objects that can be believed in must have the perfection of truth, goodness and beauty, and are ideal "beings" that can only be worshipped, but can never be juxtaposed with human beings and are completely objectified in the other side of the world. In religious belief, whether a proposition is proved or disproved has nothing to do with whether it can be believed or not, especially since the supreme object of belief, God, is outside the chain of causation and is impossible to prove. The object of moral belief is a value ideal - its highest object is the ultimate value goal, and although it does not lack its realistic roots, the value ideal it embodies is not the result of empirical evidence, but the crystallization of a humanistic realization and emotional concern. On the one hand, the formation of common religious beliefs enhances the affinity and cohesion between people in the community of believers. Religion, as an ideology related to ultimate values, itself plays the role of a spiritual bond in the social community and is the basis for a consensual moral order. Religion is an important quality of social civilization and an important force for social solidarity. On the other hand, through the promotion of its spirit of humility, fraternity and self-sacrifice, religion soothes the tensions and pressures of interpersonal relationships that are inevitable with social competition, especially market competition.

The question of whether morality could exist absent religion is persistent and pressing. Socrates famously pondered this very dilemma, asking whether an action is moral precisely because it is endorsed by the gods (Plato, 2004). Although Socrates admittedly criticized the notion of morality being contingent on piety, other notable philosophers like Dostoevsky (1993) argued that morality was contingent on the concept of – and belief in – a God. Reflecting this latter position, conservatives have often claimed that the global decline

in moral standards is attributable, at least partially, to the waning influence of religion and the concurrent universal rise in secularism (Sarkissian & Phelan, 2019). This essay examines whether religious belief is indeed a precondition for morality in individuals, examining how people conform to or contradict this assertion. It posits that morality is not contingent on religious faith due to the contradictions evident in implicit and explicit acts of religiosity and the incompatibility(s) of various religious tenets with contemporary universally-held moral codes.

The belief that morality is contingent on religious faith has been historically widespread but is diminishing in current society (Journal, 2021). For example, a survey conducted by Pew Research Centre in 2019 queried over 38,000 people across 34 countries and six continents, and overall found that 45% of respondents did not believe that religious faith was a precondition for morality (Tamir et al., 2020). Nevertheless, despite a declining belief that morality is contingent on religious faith, a study by Gervais found significant implicit bias in the general population associating atheists with immortality. Atheists faced substantial moral prejudice from religious people, where this association was more robust, and even atheists intuitively saw immoral acts like murder and sexual depravities to be more reflective of atheists than any other cultural or ethno-religious groups (Gervais et al., 2017).

As expected, atheists vehemently deny such associations, even suggesting that atheists are the accurate moral compass of any society because they take their civic duties seriously and do not trust that a god would deliver humanity from its indiscretions (Edgell et al., 2016). Nontheistic believers, like Buddhists, Jainists, and Hindus, take a more nuanced stance, indicating that morality is deeply ingrained in our collective and evolved psychology, thriving naturally with or without religious indoctrination.

There are considerable, rigorous, and scientific investigations into the connection between religious faith and morality from theological, sociological, and psychological perspectives, and many more debates from a philosophical standpoint. However, these results yield somewhat mixed and sometimes incongruous outcomes. According to Edgell, one of the biggest difficulties in interpretation is that the terms morality and religious faith are ambiguously defined and, at times, imprecisely utilized by those within and in opposing domains.

This ambiguity is evident in the Socrates-Dostoevsky argument conflating the different senses in which morality might (or might not) require religious faith. The positions of the two philosophers are seemingly antagonistic, with Socrates disputing the notion that there is no basis for morality without a god and Dostoevsky arguing that a god, and belief in such a deity, is necessary for moral behavior to have coherence. However, despite the two arguments being viewed as opposing, they could be mutually valid, where the concept of morality is self-sufficient without a deity (Socrates). However, believing in a deity and the imminent threat of punishment is necessary to enforce moral conduct (Dostoevsky). Another contradiction that further blurs the distinctions between these opposing camps is Gervais et al. (2017)'s results, where the researchers found that, despite religious

individuals being more morally prejudiced against atheists, both believers and atheists perceived good deeds to be less moral (and more performative) if done for religious reasons.

Therefore, the differences in the conceptualization of morality between and across the religious and non-religious domains significantly complicate – and at times, contradict – their respective views on morality. For example, Sarkissian and Phelan (2019) argue that despite some people making an automatic assumption that morality is contingent on religion, some religious systems invariably share various tenets with secular moral frameworks, like utilitarianism, consequentialism, and freethought. Therefore, morality and religion often overlap, but assigning the former as a constituent of the latter is a somewhat limited view of their association (Sarkissian & Phelan, 2019). Nevertheless, it is nearly undisputable that religious faiths have provided consistent and often useful value frameworks for moral conduct over space and time, leading to the assumption that a moral life is contingent on religious faith, but the fact that moral guidelines are developed and revised over time and space, rather than remain absolute as prescribed by most religious tenets somewhat contradicts the validity of religious faith as a precondition to morality (Sarkissian & Phelan, 2019).

3.Conflicts between religion and morality

The nature of the object of belief in morality and religion is not exactly the same; the object of moral belief is morality, belief in the truthfulness of morality and the sublimity of moral values, and the object of religious belief is God or an illusory object similar to God - a firm belief in the omnipotence of God as a personified object. Since the object of moral faith has more reality, it is not non-critical or non-revolutionary, but critical and revolutionary, evolving with practice; but the object of religious faith is absolute and ultimate, non-critical or above criticism.

Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator (free version) Religious traditions also prescribe morality differently. For example, current monotheistic religions like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism distinguish right and wrong based on the rules and laws that are set forth by their respective deities and interpreted by religious leaders – perceived as representatives and messengers of their deities – within their respective faiths. Nontheistic and polytheistic religions tend to provide less absolute conceptualizations of morality. For instance, Buddhism holds that extenuating circumstances and the intent of the individual are factors that determine whether an action can be perceived as moral or immoral (Baumard & Boyer, 2013)0. Conversely, right and wrong in Hinduism are practically determined based on the categories of kinship, social rank, and the stages of life (Miller, 2004)0. For contemporary Westerners who equate moral conduct with the ideals of egalitarianism and universality, the relativity of moral obligations and values prescribed by Hinduism is somewhat problematic to understand. Hinduism does

not absolutely prohibit killing – a universally immoral action – and, in fact, recognizes that it may be inevitable and sometimes necessary in select circumstances. Such tenets are challenging to reconcile in contemporary society across both religious and atheistic domains. Such tenets also significantly contradict the assertion that religious faith makes us moral.

To reconcile the contradictions raised by various religious doctrines on morality, some studies like Gervais et al. (2017) and McKay and Whitehouse (2015)0 instead examine the impact of religious belief on various social dimensions of morality. McKay and Whitehouse (2015) underline that such an examination is necessary due to the conflicting findings stemming from rather ethnocentric perceptions of morality, the muddled distinction between in-group altruism, and an incoherent definition of religiosity and, at times, morality. On the other hand, Gervais et al. (2017) noted that members of a religious group were more prone to perpetuate behavioral biases towards out-group members, explaining a lower overall proportion of interracial friends and higher levels of approval of torture tactics among religious members. Gervais et al. (2017) also found that religious morality could also be motivated by the need to appear moral, which can be associated with a desire to further an individual's religious group. This type of performative and often egoistically-motivated practice of morality could also influence self-reports where individuals inflate their own records of moral conduct and thus result in biased results. Peer ratings within such groups could also be heavily influenced by stereotypes, and indications of group affiliations are sufficient conditions to report bias (Gervais et al., 2017).

This perspective by Gervais et al. (2017) further accentuates Baumard and Boyer (2013)'s findings that, despite religious individuals partaking in higher levels of humanitarianism and charity, such actions were largely directed at in-group members. Additionally, greater depictions of religiosity, stronger religious identification, and greater levels of religious fundamentalism were all associated with higher levels of racial prejudice, which further underlines why nearly half of all religious congregations in the United States are racially segregated, and a meager 12% have a high degree of racial diversity (Baumard & Boyer, 2013)0. These findings overall allude to the religiously-motivated moral conduct being rather performative and not indicative of genuine morality or ethicality.

Religious tenets and values could also diverge considerably from universally-held contemporary moral positions. Religious ethics has a negative side. Religion, by its very nature, suppresses the autonomous initiative of man. Its path to the realization of moral ideals can only be illusory. In a certain period of history, the result of suppressing or even submerging humanism by the divine way constitutes a serious confinement and destruction of the freedom of human nature. Under certain specific conditions, it may also help to become a pretext for killing human life. For example, the Crusades, under the sacred banner of jihad, led to the deaths of millions of innocent people. Hinduism justifies murder, but this is not an exception or religion. Mass atrocities, colonialism, and

slavery have all been historically justified along religious codes, further marring the justification that religion spawns morality. For example, Zuckerman (2008) indicates that Hinduism was intricately involved with the caste system, while Islam has an overly harsh penal code and highly concerning attitudes toward women and 'infidels.' Christianity also prescribes rather harsh attitudes towards children, divorcees, unbelievers, animals, the mentally disabled, elderly women, and sexual minorities (Zuckerman, 2008)0. The author further outlines how a religious tenet prescribed in Exodus 22:18, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live..." was used to kill and persecute thousands of women in Europe and America, and notes that the Christian God had no qualms with a slave-owning society, levied the death penalty for birth control, and was rather keen on child abuse (Zuckerman, 2008, p.31). In contemporary society, observing such religious tenets as value frameworks would be unjustifiably harmful. The condemnation of birth control, if it prevailed, would make the poverty-mitigation measures rather impossible, and barring divorces and the remarriage of widows causes needless suffering.

Modern society has even given rise to religious terrorism, the theological basis of which is religious extremism and fundamentalism, the essence of which is the defence of the real interests of religious communities, which are in a vulnerable position in the process of globalization and modernization, by means of irrational and violent means. Religious terrorism regarded religious doctrine as the sole source of legitimacy for all acts, and believed that the practice of religious doctrine and the struggle to protect it were not subject to the legal constraints and limitations of any secular State or international organization. Therefore, in order to oppose and resist all "paganism, heresy" and secular power that dares to challenge it, and to achieve the greatest victory at the smallest cost, religious terrorism has gone to great lengths to sanctify and legitimize, in the name of religion, all kinds of terrorist acts, ranging from assassinations, kidnappings, suicide bombings to armed attacks. Acts of religious terrorism are reckless, unscrupulous, uncontrolled by secular Governments, borderless, grass-roots, international and uncertain, and pose a serious threat to the lives of ordinary people in all countries. Religious terrorism has become an important factor in triggering and exacerbating regional disputes and international conflicts, and in influencing contemporary world politics, in the midst of the intricate struggle between world patterns and interests, with all the implications of such acts having nothing to do with morality, and standing in complete opposition to society.

4. Conclusion

Overall, the need for religious faith as a precondition to morality can be refuted on two broad case studies, according to Zuckerman (2008). The first is that the greatest crimes in human history have often been compatible – implicitly or explicitly – with some form of superstitious devotion or piety. This makes it unsafe for

an individual to infer moral codes from the fervor of religious tenets, even if they believe them to be sincere. On the other hand, there are non-religious or highly secular societies like Denmark and Sweden that rank highly in objective measures of morality, like the societal levels of integrity and corruption (Zuckerman, 2008). The 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, an epitome leader in the Buddhist community, further indicated that while all the world's major religions can (and do) promote inner moral values due to their emphasis on love, patience, compassion, forgiveness, and tolerance, the reality of the contemporary world renders grounding ethics in religion rather inadequate. Thus, the Dalai Lama calls for people to think about morality – and in fact, spirituality – beyond the frameworks of religion altogether (The Dalai Lama, 2017).

Therefore, this essay, through an examination of extant literature, elucidates on the association between religious faith and moral conduct, and supports its central argument that religious faith is not a precondition to morality. The alignment of various religious tenets with secular value frameworks like consequentialism indicates that morality is not exclusive to religion, and might have developed alongside it. Additionally, the absolutism of morality prescribed within religious tenets is often contradictory to the evolving nature of moral conduct, as some actions that might have been considered moral historically – and justified under religious zeal – are revised in contemporary society and considered universally immoral.

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