Morality, Does It Require A Religion?

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True or false, people are immoral if they do not subscribe to or practice a religious ideology. An individual’s moral imperative is derived from more than just a person’s affiliation with religion because morality and religion are both subjective, leaders and people of “faith” commit horrible crimes and the fact that the founders felt that religion was detrimental to the formation of this country. To support this argument, research suggests that religion and morality are subjective terms that depend on ones’ character, beliefs, perspectives, and ideas. Additional support of the argument can be found in the immoral actions and behavior of leaders and religious figures throughout the centuries. Lastly, the United States was founded on the idea of omitting religion, as a governing factor, in its entirety from its constitution and bill of rights which will also support the argument that morality does not require a religious ideology.

Attempting to define “religion” would require one to have already defined the term “religion”, thus making it “A priori, as we cannot look at religion in order to define it” (Martin, 2014). When defined, religion is based on an individual or group's perspectives and observations, and because of that one persons’ definition may differ from that of others. Martin answers the question “What is religion?”, by stating that defining religion would depend on what terms were used in the definition (Martin, 2014). This answer supports the notion that religion is subjective and privy to many definitions based on different ideas and beliefs. Continued research into religion and morality yielded information that suggests that it is a “modern term” strongly shaped by the past 100 years of Western scholarship. The term religion is derived from the ancient Roman term “religio which referred to the socially acceptable cultic duties that people did for the Gods.” (Flipse, 2016) The term religion was first used by anthropologists as an anthropological category in the 1500s. Later, in the 16th Century, it was adapted to distinguish the domain of the church and the domain of civil authorities. (Morreall & Sonn) Based on the information thus far, one can infer that religion is based not just on who is defining it but also when.

Shifting our focus towards morality, another interesting research paper that suggests that an individual’s moral imperative is derived from more than just a person’s affiliation with religion. Morality is “an accumulation of customs and habits that shape how we think” (Hare, 2019) and plays a role in our view or idea of right and wrong in society. This definition provides some insight as to why morality and religion are closely associated with each other. Another source reinforces Hare’s notion by stating that morality can be “used in two distinct broad senses descriptive and normatively.” (Gert & Gert, 2017) Descriptive morality focuses on the codes of conduct that a community or society adheres to or those that are accepted by individuals as a basis for their own behavior. In this use of the term, the codes of conduct are defined and accepted by societal groups and are not necessarily accepted by others outside the group that establishes the codes. The other, Normative morality relates to codes of conduct that would be accepted and adhered to when reviewed by rational persons. Usage in this sense suggests a set of codes of conduct, that when a person of common sense reads or hears them, are widely accepted and followed. In both senses of use of the term morality, each person has a choice to adopt or reject the set of codes of conduct.

Religions are based on stories that establish descriptive moral edicts and norms that can be selectively adhered to or ignored at will. These choices can be observed by the immoral acts of religious figures throughout the centuries as well as the positive contributions that Atheists and Agnostic individuals have made to society. “Sexual activity between religious leaders and help-seekers has occurred within many religious denominations and belief systems.” (Kane MN, 2013) The long list of religious clergies that have been convicted or accused of sexual misconduct in over 19 countries provides proof of this fact. That scandal caused the catholic church to task the John Jay College to review church records from 1950 to 2002. They found that approximately 4% of US Catholic clergy had been accused of sexual misconduct with minors. (Kane MN, 2013) “These allegations involved 10,667 victims. In some dioceses, the percentage of priests was as high as 7%.” (DJ, 2008) These men and women of faith who were entrusted with the spiritual well-being of millions made conscience decisions to disregard their codes of conduct and act against the moral codes of conduct of their religions and faiths.

To depict the opposite of moral depravity, there have been numerous non-believers that have shown the positive direction of their moral compass. Robert Ingersoll, Emma Thompson, Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Bruce Lee, Carrie Fisher, Morgan Freeman, have all contributed to or continue to give to society and communities around the world. Each being of differing races, countries of origin, upbringing, and gender but still, collectively give of themselves to help others. Neither of these individuals associates or even acknowledges religion, and some have a religious background in their childhood but ultimately all abstain from practicing any modern religious faiths. They each choose not to cause harm to others but to give aid where aid is needed. The preceding arguments show that even with a religious upbringing the choice to do what is morally correct is the individuals to make and is subject to many factors that make up the sum of the individual.

Lastly, the framers of the Constitution of the United States intentionally left “God” out of the document because of fears that fanatics would seize upon the wording and construct another religious driven government like the one they left behind in England (Greenawalt, 2009). Robert Ingersoll argued back in the 19th Century “The marvel of the framers”, he argued, “was that they established the first secular government that was ever founded in this world at a time when every government in Europe was still based on the union between church and state.” (Jacoby, 2013)

Due to their past experiences with the Church of England, the framers saw that religion and power together were a terrible combination. Yes, there were some really dark moments in our nation's history but the constitution has always guided the country back into the light. For example, slavery, women's rights, LBGT rights, etc. have all been remedy by means of the law, argued in courts, and upheld by the constitution. Our nation welcomes refugees from all over the world and provides a safe haven for them. Billions of dollars every year leave the US to other countries in aid, food, and shelter. A nation without religion at its foundation is able to function successfully and prosper and at the same time establish morally accepted norms and perpetuate them across the globe.

Religion plays a part in a lot of things in our lives, but it does not define or determine the constitution of a person or idea. Morally depraved individuals stand in the pews of churches around the world preaching about what is right and wrong. Yet the followers of those men still maintain their moral centers. Agnostic and Atheist men of women have risen to power and helped others around the world without the help or influence of religion. Wise men knew the perils of adding power to religion as they all fled England to escape persecution. Centuries later, this nation, though run by a few flawed immoral men, still prospers and its diverse people fight to keep its moral center upright and help those that are in need. Religion may be a factor in each of our moral imperatives, but it is not the reason people are morally enlightened or morally depraved. Our ability/gift to choose and decide right from wrong ultimately shapes our perspectives, our choices, and ultimately the direction our moral compass points.

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