Morality, Does It Require A Religion?

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My past experiences have led me to do a little research into what religion and morality really are and if one requires the other for validation. After reading an essay, “What Is Religion?” by Craig Martin, I realized that trying to define “religion” would require me to have already defined the term “religion”, making it “A priori, as we cannot look at religion in order to define it” (Martin, 2014). That thought left me scratching my head, more so because I realized he was right. I can describe what religion is based on my perspective and observations, but that perspective may differ from another person’. So one answer to the question “What is religion?”, would depend on what terms were placed in the definition of religion (Martin, 2014). This left me in an awkward place, happy that my initial thoughts were validated, yet unfulfilled due to me not having a clear answer. So, I continued my research and came across a video that stated that “religion is a modern term strongly shaped by the past 100 years of Western scholarship.” (Henry, 2016) With that in mind, I decided to move on in my research. The modern term religion is derived from the ancient Roman term “religio which referred to the socially acceptable cultic duties that people did for the Gods.” (Henry, 2016). The term religion was first used in the 1500s to distinguish the domain of the church and the domain of civil authorities. (Morreall & Sonn). Based on that information can we infer that religion is based not just who is defining it but also when? If anthropologists are scientists and they were the first to use the term religion as an anthropological category, does that make “religion” a scientific term? I seem to end up having more questions arise as I did deeper into this topic.

Turning my focus towards defining morality led me to a 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. Another of my sources reinforced Hare’s notion by stating that morality can be “used in two distinct broad senses descriptive and normatively” (Gert & Gert, 2017) This can be observed by the immoral acts of religious figures throughout the centuries, the positive contributions that Atheists and Agnostic individuals have made to society, and the simple fact that the greatest nation in the world was founded on the idea of omitting religion, as a governing factor, in its entirety from its constitution and bill of rights. Does the moral compass, of those men and women we elevate to power, just break when they acquire that power? The individuals that left behind, forgotten, and overlooked, are they there because of a lack of morals? Is the United States immoral for not incorporating God in its governing laws?

Just about every religious denomination has a founder or religious leader that has been convicted of violent or non-violent crimes. Joseph Smith of the Latter-Day Saints, L Ron Hubbard Founder of Scientology and I’m not going to list the number of catholic priests that have been convicted or accused of sexual misconduct in over 19 countries. To add the King James Bible itself has at least 14 verses about not trusting in man (King James Bible Online, n.d.), yet in the 13 years of my teachings as a youth not one of those verses was taught. Yes, I still quote the bible even though I am agnostic. All these men in power, did they lose their moral compass? Did they ever have one? How about the moral standing of all those followers of those immoral leaders, are they morally correct? If they are morally good, then is it man that determines its moral direction and not the religion?

There have been numerous non-believers that have shown the direction of their moral compass. Robert Ingersoll, Emma Thompson, Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Bruce Lee, Carrie Fisher, Morgan Freeman, I could go on and on. These individuals have contributed to society and communities around the world and yet do not affiliate and some not even acknowledge religion. Different races, countries of origin, upbringing, and gender but still all give of themselves to help others. They live not to cause harm to others but to give aid where aid is needed. Did these individuals have a foundation in religion at any given time? That religious foundation would explain a lot, but what differed in the foundation of these secular people and those of the immoral religious leaders that broke the trust of their followers?

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. 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)

Even the framers saw that religion and power together are a terrible combination. Yes, there was some really dark moment in our nation's history but the constitution has always pulled the country from its dark place. 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 core is able to function successfully.

Religion plays a part in a lot of things in our lives, but morality isn’t one of them. 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 before us all knew the perils of adding power to religion as they all fled England to escape said treatment. 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. Taking the time to research these topics have convinced me that religion may be a factor in my moral compass, but it is not the reason it continues to point to truth, honor, and righteousness. Our ability, or should I say gift, to choose and decide right from wrong ultimately shapes vector our moral compass takes.

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