

**MORALS
WITHOUT
RELIGION**

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THE WORD "religion" is used in a greater variety of senses, perhaps, than any other word in the English language. For example: "Religion is a sense of the mysteriousness of the Universe" (W. A. Sinclair), "Religion is the total response of man to all his environment" (C. A. Coulson). "Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness" (A. N. Whitehead), "Religion is an active enthusiasm for a fine quality of life" (Delisle Burns). Clearly, there can be no question of morals without religion if religion is defined in any of the ways just quoted. But these definitions have no real authority. Those who coin them are behaving like Humpty-Dumpty who said, it will be remembered, "When *I* use a word it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less".

To find the "real" (i.e. the generally accepted) sense of the word "religion" we must turn to the dictionary; and the dictionary definitions, though their wording varies, all make it clear that the essence of "religion" in its primary sense, is the belief in a supernatural power or powers. Thus Chambers's Dictionary gives "The recognition of supernatural powers, and of the duty lying upon man to yield obedience to these." It is in this primary sense that the word "religion" will here be used; by "morals without religion" is meant morals without supernatural sanctions".

Moral Training and Religious Instruction

The belief in the necessity for such sanctions is, of course, widespread. Eminent persons repeatedly tell us that morals depend on religion, and that any decline in Christian belief must lead to a moral landslide. This claim, indeed, is now one of Christianity's main lines of defence; for today the case for Christianity — at any rate Protestant Christianity — is frequently argued on the grounds of utility rather than truth. It is not suggested that the Christian dogmas are credible, but rather that any reference to their incredibility is in poor taste; that it is the duty of right-thinking people to endure a certain amount of intellectual discomfort for the sake of their morals — or perhaps more often for the sake of other people's morals and, especially, for the sake of the children.

Because of this widespread feeling, many people who are themselves only nominally Christian still want their children to be brought up in Christian belief, and to be given religious instruction in school. They argue that the Christian stories appeal to the child and are suited to his stage of development, and that though he will probably cease to believe in the stories when he grows older, the moral training that has been based on them will be likely to stick.

But there seems little evidence for this optimistic view. If moral training is tied up with religious instruction — to be more specific, if the child is given the impression that the obligation to be honest and truthful and kind is somehow bound up with believing what he is taught in "RI" — there is an obvious danger that if he later casts off his religious beliefs he may throw out the moral baby with the mythological bathwater.

Though it does not conclusively prove anything (since many factors contribute to causing delinquency) it is surely a striking fact that in this country those who receive the most intensive religious training, and for whom moral training is most closely tied up with religion — i.e. the Roman Catholics — have a delinquency rate two to three times that of the population in general. When this unwelcome fact is forced on their notice, Catholics usually argue that most of the delinquents are not "true" Catholics, but men and women who have lapsed from their faith. This may be so; but it has to be explained why lapsed Catholics are more prone to delinquency than lapsed members of other religious groups.

As will now be clear, Humanists do not deny that the current increases in delinquency may be connected with the decline in Christian belief. But they wholly reject the implied conclusion that the best way to reduce delinquency is to step up religious indoctrination. What is needed is to base moral training on a less precarious foundation than myth — in other words to replace a religious by a Humanist ethic. There is considerable evidence that convinced Humanists — as distinct from those who merely "couldn't care less" — are the most law-abiding group in the population. As Havelock Ellis long ago remarked "it seems extremely rare to find intelligently irreligious men in prison" (*The Criminal*, 1895).

Christian and Humanist Ethics

The essential difference between Christian and Humanist ethics is that while on the Christian view morality is concerned with the relation between man and God, on the Humanist view it is concerned with the relation between man and man. To the Christian, acting rightly means obeying divine commands; to the Humanist, it means acting so as to promote human well-being. To put it yet another way, the Christian regards morality as something that has been imposed on man from above by a supernatural lawgiver, whereas the

Humanist regards it as something that has been worked out — and is still being worked out — by men themselves, in the process of learning to live happily together in communities. In brief, Christian morality is largely authoritarian, while Humanist morality is social.

On the Humanist view, authoritarian morality is, quite literally, childish. It is like the morality of small children, to whom "right" means simply "what pleases the grown ups" and "wrong" means what makes them angry. As Professor Nowell-Smith has said, to the small boy the reason he must not pull his sister's hair is that mummy will be angry, or mummy will punish him. He has made a great step forward towards maturity of moral judgment when he realises that the fundamental reason why he should not pull his sister's hair is that it hurts her. And there is a similar step forward in the morality of communities, when they pass beyond the idea that virtue consists in blind obedience to the arbitrary commands of some inscrutable authority, to the realisation that, basically, to act rightly means to act for the common good – in other words when they pass from authoritarian to social morality.

The Basis of Social Morality

Christians frequently ask what motive the Humanist can have for behaving unselfishly if he does not believe in God. The Humanist answer is that the mainsprings of moral action are to be found in the altruistic, co-operative tendencies that are fundamental in human nature.

Humanists do not share the depressing Christian view that we are all "miserable sinners" and that there is "no health in us." But, equally, they reject the starry-eyed notion that human nature is entirely good. They realise that our nature is mixed, and that we are often selfish, aggressive and cruel. But there is ample evidence that we have also native, inborn tendencies towards co-operation and altruism. Man, after all, is a social animal, and no social animal lives for itself alone. To look at it from the evolutionary point of view, as Darwin long ago pointed out, one of the qualities most conducive to the survival of a species is a high degree of co-operation and mutual aid. So, inevitably, certain tendencies towards altruism have been built into us in the course of our evolutionary history. Darwin called these tendencies "social instincts", a modern psychologist might prefer some term like "built-in-group-survival responses". But whatever term is used, the tendencies it denotes provide an adequate basis for morals. There is no need to postulate a God to account for social behaviour. To quote Darwin himself: "The social instincts—the prime principle of man's moral constitution—with the aid of active intellectual powers and the effects of habit, lead naturally to the Golden Rule ['do unto others', etc.] and this lies at the foundation of morality" (*The Descent of Man*).

But obviously we do not always feel like helping our neighbour; there are times when we feel more like knocking him down. Humanists do not deny this self-evident fact, but what they do reject is the distorted Christian view that if we attack our neighbour we are behaving spontaneously, whereas if we help we are curbing our spontaneous impulses because we want to please God or to earn an eternal reward. After all, the social animals behave altruistically without (presumably) the support of religious belief, so why should we deny that man can do likewise?

Moral Training

It would be unrealistic, however, to suppose that the "social instincts" alone are enough to keep us morally on the rails. They have constantly to pull against the selfish, aggressive tendencies that are also part of our biological inheritance, and in a straight fight they would often prove too weak unless they had been reinforced by training and discipline, and were upheld by public opinion and, in the last resort, by law. So moral training, in the Humanist view, has a twofold function, first, to foster the social tendencies, and to encourage the development of warm-hearted and generous natures that will spontaneously want to behave co-operatively; and second, to instil habits and principles that will reinforce the social tendencies, and make us behave kindly and justly even when a good many of our spontaneous impulses are pulling us the other way. How best to achieve this is of course a large question; but on the Humanist view it can be done, and far better done, without the aid of supernatural sanctions. As Einstein said "A man's ethical behaviour should be based effectively on sympathy, education and social ties; no religious basis is necessary. Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hope of reward after death" (*The World as I See It*).

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