

Godless Morality

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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I just came upstairs from a conversation with our children about how we know what is right and wrong. They already know that some of this sense comes from within – that we each have a conscience to which we are called to be true. And they already know that sometimes our worst punishment for doing something wrong is how we feel about ourselves afterward. But I am getting ahead of myself...

I'm going to assume that there are few in this congregation this morning who believe in the omniscient and omnipotent God of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, the authoritarian God of punishment for disobeying his commandments and the God of eternal reward in Heaven for your complete surrender to his will. I'm assuming also that few of us would want to be under the jurisdiction of a God that could willingly subject all women to painful childbirth and all humans to lives of labor for the sin of eating an apple from an off-limit tree.

In her essay "If God is Dead, Is Everything Permitted?" Elizabeth Anderson says more about this God of the Bible: *[This God] regrets his creation, and in a fit of pique, commits genocide and ecocide by flooding the earth (Gen. 6:7). He hardens Pharaoh's heart against freeing the Israelites (Ex. 7:3), so as to provide the occasion for visiting plagues upon the Egyptians, who, as helpless subjects of a tyrant, had no part in Pharaoh's decision. He orders David to take a census of his men, and then sends a plague on Israel killing seventy thousand, for David's sin in taking the census (2 Sam. 24:1, 10, 15). He sends two bears out of the woods to tear forty-two children to pieces, because they called the prophet Elisha a bald head (2 Kings 2:23-24).* (Philosophers Without Gods, Louise M. Antony, ed. p. 218)

This God commands humans to *put to death adulterers (Lev. 20:10), homosexuals (Lev. 20:13), and people who work on the Sabbath (Ex. 35:2). Peter and Paul [espouse] the despotic rule of husbands over their silenced wives, who must obey their husbands as gods. (1 Cor. 11:3, 14:34-5; Eph. 5:22-24; Col. 3:18; 1 Tim, 2:11-12, Pet. 3:1)* . (p. 220)

Consider also what the Bible permits [us to do]. Slavery is allowed (Lev. 25:44-46, Eph. 6:5, Col. 3:22). Fathers may sell their daughters into slavery (Ex. 21:7). Slaves may be beaten, as long as they survive for two days after (Ex. 21:20-21, Luke 12:45-48). Children may be sacrificed to God in return for His aid in battle (2 Kings 3:26-27, Judg. 11), or to persuade Him to end a famine (2 Sam. 21). (p. 219)

Anderson believes that there are moral limits that require we do not take the words in the Bible as literal truth, although she cites colleagues who argue that "such a liberal approach to faith is theologically incoherent." Anderson counters, "Still, given a choice between grave moral error and theological muddle, I recommend theological muddle every time." (p. 224)

For the most part, the God of the Hebrew or the Christian Bible is not the authority figure I want to look up to as my moral example. But if we cannot, or do not, believe in this God of

retributive justice, what does keep us from doing whatever we want to, regardless of how it affects other people or the world? What keeps us from eating the forbidden cookies when Mom runs to the grocery store? If God is not watching us, who is?

There are many in this world, and in this country, who vehemently deny that morality is possible without fear of God. I have trouble even framing this argument, myself, because it makes so little sense to me. It seems to me, from both my intellectual and intuitional sides, that creating stories and sacred texts in which a God commands a certain morality was the natural reaction to the early human desire to explain what was already their experience. If God was created as vindictive and violent, it's because people were vindictive and violent. Retribution must have seemed the most logical form of justice.

Why was it important in early human societies to have rules of behavior “orthodoxed” from on high? Because early societies mostly operated on the assumption of submission to authority. It has not been until relatively recently that we have been able to question authority without having our heads chopped off or our bodies burned at the stake. We know so much more about what is happening in our world, that it is easy to see the mistakes that our leaders make, eroding our respect for authority in general. In addition recent new understandings of how our brains operate and the evolution of human behavior complicate the idea of blind obedience. Even without these scientific studies, we know that “if a teacher told the children in her class that it was always okay to hit a neighbor to resolve conflict, most if not all the children would balk. Authority figures cannot mandate moral transgressions.” (Moral Minds by Marc D. Hauser, p. 5)

I believe we are in a time of transition in our world, between the need to have rules and absolutes, and the ability to live in the uncertainty of each moment, willing to adjust our thinking to the situation. It is rarely so simple that there is only one answer to any given predicament. “We have recognized that moral struggles are frequently between competing goods, rather than between a straight good and a straight evil.” (Godless Morality by Richard Holloway, p. 159)

I want to get back to my earlier question about how do we make our moral decisions if we are not following a handbook of mandated behavior. There are many new theories about how this process has evolved and about how it actually takes place in our brains in the moments before we even know we've reached a decision.

Early studies in this area of behavior concluded that basic evolutionary principle, that of survival of the fittest, might dictate that the most selfish of the species, those who best looked after their self interests, would be the ones whose genes would get passed on. But this so-called selfish gene is not enough to explain our obvious sensitivity to the plight of others as well as ourselves. “For animals that live in groups, selfishness must be strictly curbed or there will be no advantage to social living. Could the behaviors evolved by social animals to make societies work be the foundation from which human morality evolved?” (New York Times Science Times, Sept. 18, 2007 “Is ‘Do Unto Others’ Written Into Our Genes?” by Nicholas Wade)

The article discusses the research and conclusions of University of Virginia moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt, whose findings indicate that our morality is “driven by two separate mental systems, one ancient and one modern, though [our] mind is scarcely aware of the difference. The ancient system, which he calls moral intuition, is based on the emotion-laden moral behaviors that evolved before the development of language. Moral intuition helps us know, quite strongly, that something is wrong, but we are not necessarily able to explain why. The modern system – he calls it moral judgment – came after language, when people became able to articulate why something was right or wrong.”

Haidt continues “The emotional responses of moral intuition occur instantaneously – they are primitive gut reactions that evolved to generate split-second decisions and enhance survival in a dangerous world. Moral judgment, on the other hand, comes later, as the conscious mind develops a plausible rationalization for the decision already arrived at through moral intuition.” These systems combine to create what Haidt calls our five inborn components of morality. Two of them protect the individual: one helps us protect ourselves from harm, and the other has to do with reciprocity and fairness. The other three have to do with moral decisions that strengthen the group or the community, not the individual. Specifically these are “loyalty to the in-group, respect for authority and hierarchy, and a sense of purity or sanctity.” “For social living to evolve, selfishness had to be curbed, [Haidt’s] theory suggests.”

Most of the authors I read have theories that are very similar to Haidt’s. Mark Hauser, in Moral Minds, believes that “all humans are endowed with a *moral faculty* – a capacity that enables each individual to unconsciously and automatically evaluate a limitless variety of actions in terms of principles that dictate what is permissible, obligatory, or forbidden.” (p. 36) Richard Holloway (Godless Morality) writes that “just as obedience to the commands of authority, whether God, state or any other center of power, was the dominant characteristic of ancient traditions, so, today, is the consent of our reason and emotion.” (p. 156) As the kids downstairs knew, our sense of what is right and wrong comes from inside us, from something we call our conscience. That still, small voice from within.

“Where morals are concerned, [a] loss of faith changes [little]. That you have lost your faith does not mean that you will suddenly decide to betray your friends or indulge in robbery, rape, assassination and torture,” wrote the author of The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality. (Andre Comte-Sponville, p. 41) “A good deed is not good because God commanded me to do it; on the contrary, it is because an action is good that it is possible to believe God commanded it.” (p. 42) “Atheists are as liable to be virtuous as believers are liable *not* to be.” (p. 44)

Michael Shermer, in a chapter called “Can We Be Good Without God?” in his book The Science of Good and Evil, goes one step further in this conversation. In talking about the world today and its immense and complicated problems of immorality and war, he postulates that “It is the wedding of extremism, fundamentalism, and absolute morality, coupled with the means of murder and access to masses of humanity that results in the wanton destruction we have witnesses in modern times. And it is only fair to ask, what if religion is not the solution but is actually part of the problem?” (p. 154) It is a fair question, indeed, particularly as we

continue to have seemingly innate feelings of respect for most men and women in the “Church.”

Let me give you an example, from another NYT article, this one by Steven Pinker called “The Moral Instinct.” (January 13, 2008)

Which of the following people would you say is the most admirable: Mother Teresa, Bill Gates or Norman Borlaug? And which do you think is the least admirable? For most people, it's an easy question. Mother Teresa, famous for ministering to the poor in Calcutta, has been beatified by the Vatican, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and ranked in an American poll as the most admired person of the 20th century. Bill Gates, infamous for giving us the Microsoft dancing paper clip and the blue screen of death, has been decapitated in effigy in “I Hate Gates” Web sites and hit with a pie in the face. As for Norman Borlaug...who the heck is Norman Borlaug?

Yet a deeper look might lead you to rethink your answers. Borlaug, father of the “Green Revolution” that used agricultural science to reduce world hunger, has been credited with saving a billion lives, more than anyone else in history. Gates, in deciding what to do with his fortune, crunched the numbers and determined that he could alleviate the most misery by fighting everyday scourges in the developing world like malaria, diarrhea and parasites. Mother Teresa, for her part, extolled the virtue of suffering and ran her well-financed missions accordingly: their sick patrons were offered plenty of prayer but harsh conditions, few analgesics and dangerously primitive medical care.

It's not hard to see why the moral reputation of this trio should be so out of line with the good they have done. Mother Teresa was the very embodiment of saintliness: white-clad, sad-eyed, ascetic and often photographed with the wretched of the earth. Gates is a nerd's nerd and the world's richest man, as likely to enter heaven as the proverbial camel squeezing through the needle's eye. And Borlaug, now 93, is an agronomist who has spent his life in labs and nonprofits, seldom walking onto the media stage, and hence into our consciousness, at all.

As Unitarian Universalists we may have had more practice than most at resisting the illusions of sanctity than many place on the clergy. As Unitarian Universalists, we take our authority for moral matters from our 7th Principle understandings of personal responsibility in an infinitely connected world, and also, primarily, from our personal sense of right and wrong as it has emerged out of our own experience.

When it comes to what is good or what is evil, what is right and what is wrong, does “their significance come from the existence of a higher power, or simply from [our] human need to connect to one another and the universe?” (inside jacket cover of The Little Atheist Book of Spirituality)

As I quite often say, it's all about relationships.

Blessed Be.