

# Morality

## Morality: A Muslim View

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The Qur'an asks human beings to establish a just social order and to create morally upright individuals. The obligation to act morally arises from human obligation to repay its debt to the Creator. Verse 7:172 in the Qur'an indicates that human beings had not only accepted to obey God's dictates in a primordial covenant but also suggests that they agreed to behave in a morally responsible manner. Because they are moral agents, human beings are free to choose between virtue or vice.

Morality is at the root of social interaction. Human beings are required to behave based on certain traits or virtues. How can they know what these traits are? The Qur'an posits a universal morality for humankind that is conjoined to values ingrained in the conscience of all human beings (30:30). This suggests a universal, ethical language that all human beings can connect to and engage in. As the Qur'an states, "He (God) has inspired in [human beings] the good or evil [nature] of an act, whosoever has purified it (the soul) has succeeded, one who corrupts it has surely failed." (91:8-10). The Qur'anic concept of a universal moral order is grounded in the recognition of an innate disposition (*fitra*) engraved in the human conscience. On the basis of universal guidance, the Qur'an posits the presence of an objective and universally binding moral standard that is accessible to all intelligent beings.

Since they are accessible to all beings, moral values are also based on a common understanding of ethical terms. Thus, the Qur'an commends the good without stipulating what it is; it exhorts to act virtuously but seldom specifies the exact form of virtuous conduct. The Qur'an also uses terms like *ma'ruf* (that which is known), *salih* (virtue), *zulm* (oppression), without explaining or elucidating what they mean. Through this notion of a universal moral order, Islam embraced human values that could form the basis for interaction with a diverse "other."

It is also correct to state based on the Qur'anic ethical system, human beings can perceive a moral truth when confronted with a particular situation. They recognize that a particular act is correct because of its intrinsic nature, they act virtuously because that is what one ought to do. Moral virtues transcend religions and religious communities. Thus, all human beings, regardless of their religious or cultural background, understand a common moral language. Furthermore, moral principles are not to be compromised under any circumstance, even when interacting with those we do not like. Thus, the Qur'an states, "do not let the hatred of others make you depart from that which is just" (5:8). It is on the basis of their innate capacity and shared moral values that human beings can deal with others based on the principles of fairness and equity.

The basis of a universal moral order can also be traced to verses like the following, “Humankind, be aware of your duties to your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women (4:1).” The verse suggests a common genesis and unity of human beings based on God’s creation. It also implies that human beings have to recognize and live with their differences.

The Qur’an challenges humans to base moral precepts on the traits it enunciates. For example, it requires everyone to abide by basic human values – to respect the dignity of all human beings (17:70), not to be judgmental (95:8), not to defraud or cheat others (83:1-5) and above all, to connect with others based on the principles of mercy, love, and affection (33:21). The Qur’an also emphasizes other moral traits. Thus, justice is repeatedly enjoined throughout the Qur’an. Other virtues enjoined on human beings include endurance (*sabr*) and integrity (*sidq*). Endurance means something like the ability to maintain commitment despite difficult circumstances (2:177) and to persevere on the truth.

The Qur’an also stresses ethical precepts that unite human beings. All human beings recognize and cherish principles like dignity, respect, and mercy. Such principles are the starting point of constructing the human family. Whereas religious laws and precepts divide us (since every religious community has its own laws), ethical principles connect us in the name of God. Hence, we do not need to share a common religion to get along; instead, we need to share moral commitments.

## Ethical Behavior

Muslims see ethical behavior as the outcome of the cultivation of virtues within a human being. Stated differently, ethical behavior is premised on the cultivation and development of inner virtues that can govern outer behavior. In fact, one can talk of three types of ethics in Islam; divine, human, and social ethics. Divine ethics refers to how God connects with us based on His attributes (compassion, forgiving, sustainer). These attributes are manifested in the ninety nine beautiful names of God. Human ethics is how we respond to the Divine, i.e., submission to the will of God. The highest form of human ethics is when every limb in the body moves “ethically”, for the sake of God. So, the ethics of the tongue, for example, would be to remember God continuously and to speak only good about others. The Qur’an elaborates on the cultivation of inner virtues whose effects are seen in outer behavior. It states that a good word is like a good tree, its roots are entrenched in the ground, whereas its branches reach the sky (14:24).

## Social Ethics

Social ethics refers to our behavior with fellow human beings based on the virtues instilled in us. Social ethics is the realm which impacts our worldly plane directly. We are supposed to do good to others as God has instilled the capacity to do good in us. To act otherwise would be to misuse the trust of virtuous behavior that He has instilled within us. Thus, one

pursues virtue not only to make the world better place but as that trait emanates from the one and only absolute God.

In the Islamic understanding, the more we develop our social relations, the more we get closer to the source of all virtues, God. Thus, the more we love fellow human beings the more we experience the love of the Divine. The more we have compassion for God's creatures, the more we experience God's compassion. As the Qur'an instructs us, we should forgive others just as God has forgiven us. (24:22).

Social ethics is not only the attempt to behave ethically with others. It is also a process of generating an ethical social structure. Stated differently, moral behavior in the Islamic understanding is a process of knowing what is good and then performing good deeds on a regular basis so that one becomes good. At this stage, virtue has been so deeply ingrained within a person that he or she automatically behaves in a virtuous manner. The final stage in the moral process is that a person becomes an ethical model, i.e., through him or her, others are inspired to act virtuously as s/he generates goodness in others.

For Muslims, it is emulation rather than obedience or reflection that shapes most ethical endeavors. Muslims find this moral challenge of behaving ethically exemplified in the personality of the Prophet Muhammad, who is regarded as the highest pinnacle of moral behavior. He is reported to have said: "I have been sent to perfect moral/ethical behavior." It is the Prophetic ethical model that has inspired millions of Muslims throughout history.

## CHRISTIAN MORALITY

Dr. James Gaffney

### Morality as a Human Phenomemon

Morality refers to a certain kind of goodness or rightness in human behavior that cannot be defined by reference to anything more basic than itself. Awareness of morality as a value, and its expression in imperative norms of conduct, emerge spontaneously in the course of normal psychological development in every human society. Psychologists offer conflicting theories of how this initially happens. With the development of cognitive skills and the broadening of experience, moral norms are articulated, coordinated, and applied by processes of moral reasoning. Critical analysis of these processes and syntheses of their results are called ethics. That term is also applied to systematic collections of moral norms or principles. Such collections often become traditional in human cultures and communities, and transmitted as authoritative to successive generations. In the case of individuals, therefore, it is not easy to distinguish between personally intuited and reasoned morality, and the morality imparted by their societies. The validity and importance of that distinction appears most clearly, however, when individuals criticize and challenge the prevailing moral tenets of their societies, sometimes causing permanent changes in them.

## Morality as a Theological Concept

Theologically interpreted, morality refers to the behavior of free rational creatures in conformity with the will of God. For Christians, with few exceptions, it is assumed that the behavior God wills for his rational creatures is behavior consistent with their rationality. Consequently, to behave in accordance with conscience, identified with right reason, is in principle, to behave according to God's will. But there is a wide range of reasoning ability among human individuals, and even for one individual in changing circumstances. Christians also generally believe that a primordial sinfulness ("original sin") has diminished the power of human beings either to arrive at sound moral judgments or behave according to them. Christian theology teaches that God provides two partial remedies for this moral weakness. One is revelation, which declares God's will. The other is "actual" grace, direct divine assistance to obey God's will.

## Morality as Christian

Christian Morality refers to the reasoned or revealed moral norms or ethical standards of behavior common to Christians in general and regarded as essential to their religion. Although the diversity of Christian denominations and schools of thought certainly includes moral or ethical diversity, there is general agreement that the moral teachings found in the New Testament, especially those attributed to Jesus in the Gospels, enjoy ultimate authority. And since in the New Testament Jesus acknowledges the validity of the moral teachings in the Old Testament's "Law" and "Prophets," they also, especially as epitomized in the Ten Commandments, figure prominently in Christian Morality.

## Jesus' Moral Law

It is commonly noted that in the Gospels Jesus is several times represented as saying that the whole "Law" and "Prophets," which is to say the whole of religion and ethics, can be reduced to two fundamental principles, both found in the Old Testament: "Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, soul, and strength" and "Love your neighbor as yourself." Regarding the latter, Jesus makes it clear that "neighbor" may not be interpreted narrowly to justify any preferential bias, but must include even one's enemies. This latter stipulation has generally been regarded as the most remarkable feature of Christian morality, for which it has been both admired and ridiculed. It implies that all human beings are entitled to the same moral regard. This applies not only within one's own community or society, but equally to strangers and enemies. The moral treatment of enemies, including mercy and forgiveness, is in fact several times cited in the New Testament as the crucial test of Christian morality.

## The Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments, taken from the Hebrew Torah, are typically applied by Christian churches in a very broad sense. The first three refer explicitly to religious belief and worship. The remaining seven are usually treated as general headings for major areas

of moral regulation that go well beyond their literal meanings. Thus "honor father and mother" refers to social authority not only in the family, but in larger communities including political ones. The commandment not to "kill" introduces the whole subject of violence, mental as well as physical, and the moral limits of punishment and medicine. The prohibition of "adultery" is referred to sexual and marital morality in general. Not to "steal" serves as the heading for all moral issues involving acquisition and use of property, and relief of poverty. To "bear false witness" is extended beyond perjury to include all abuses and right uses of communication and communication media. The two commandments that forbid the "coveting" of "wife" or "goods" imply that to cultivate vicious interior attitudes, such as lust and envy can be as morally objectionable as overt behavior.

### Salvation by Faith

In view of the Christian belief already mentioned, that human beings are inherently weakened in their capacity to think and act morally, even with revelation and supernatural assistance, it was taught by St. Paul, that salvation did not depend ultimately on moral achievement. It depended on faith, that is, on belief and trust in the divine mercy revealed by Jesus Christ. Such salvation, however, would be expressed in moral behavior, in a life of unselfish and unrestricted love. The resulting concept of a faith that saves and a salvation that is manifested in morality has proved contentious, giving rise not only to movements rejected as heretical, but to different emphases among different Christian communities.

### The Cardinal Virtues

The early development of Christian moral teaching was stimulated and partly determined by the influence of classical moral teaching derived from Greek and Roman philosophers and jurists. The understanding already noted, that God's will is harmonious with reason, encouraged the cultivation of reasoning in moral matters, and the use of writings that were celebrated for their moral wisdom. As a result, early Christian writings on morality typically combine biblical and classical elements. A lasting result of this combination of sources, was the adoption, alongside the Ten Commandments, of the so-called Cardinal Virtues, which figure prominently in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and their commentators. There were four of these, Prudence (moral judgment), Justice (fairness in exchange and distribution), Temperance (self-discipline), and Fortitude (courage). Commentaries on these virtues, each with many subdivisions, were undertaken by most of Christianity's most distinguished moralists.

### Confessional Casuistry

Another feature of early Christian life that greatly influenced moral thought and action was the organization of penitential rituals associated with the sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation. These rituals entailed public or private confession of sins, accompanied by repentance and followed by absolution, administered by a priest and signifying the bestowal of God's forgiveness. The need to confess sins in this formal way led naturally to classifying sins by types, and grading them by degrees of seriousness. Thus the

penitent was assisted in the task of declaring what kinds of sins he or she committed, and how grievously and frequently. Evidently, this classifying process could easily be carried to casuistic extremes, and has often been blamed for burdensome legalism resulting in moral anxiety that blurred the Gospel emphasis on forgiveness and love.

### Protestant Moral Revisions

The Protestant Reformation led, on the Protestant side, to an increased reliance on the Bible, and distrust of secular authorities in moral matters. By the same token, it led to an increased emphasis on St. Paul's insistence on salvation by faith alone, rather than by human striving. The penitential system, with its elaborate labeling, tallying and weighing of sins was rejected as a departure from authentic Christianity. Pagan philosophers, and moral teachings derived from them, were distrusted. Adherence to biblical standards was seen as a sign rather than a cause of salvation. Acknowledgement of one's sinfulness and acceptance of God's forgiveness were essential. Churches kept their members aware of the saving message, and offered counsel and admonition to live up to their new life. Certain Protestant denominations distinguished themselves by detaching themselves as far as possible from their political and cultural settings and cultivating a way of life modeled on the earliest Christians and measured by literal observance of Jesus' moral teaching. Their rejection of retaliatory violence made them ardent pacifists, and their social separateness combined with common convictions often made them models of communal cooperation.

### Post-Reformation Stagnancy

The Protestant Reformation overtook the Roman Catholic Church at a time when its most illustrious moral teachers had been breaking new ground in efforts to apply Christian values to changed circumstances of life. Most outstanding was a doctrine concerning the morality of initiating or pursuing warfare that combined and developed elements of classical and Christian tradition and became part of the foundation of international law. Of great importance to political morality were critiques of absolute rule, and insistence on popular consent. These and other promising developments were abruptly curtailed when Roman Catholic reaction to Protestant adversaries effectively stifled innovative thought and generated an atmosphere of reactionary conservatism. Moral teaching became predominantly the confessional casuistry that Protestants at first despised, but later matched with casuistry of their own.

### Moral Response to Economic Ruthlessness

Protestant moral preaching achieved great eloquence during the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century, and at the same time Protestant moral philosophy was stimulated by Enlightenment thinkers, both as adversaries and as mentors. These developments were most prominent in Great Britain and Germany. Roman Catholic moral teaching awoke in the twentieth century from a long, if not quite unbroken slumber. The awakening was closely related to a new kind of papacy, far more alert and sympathetic to modern developments than previous bishops of Rome. The first great stimulus arose from the

economic plight of workers in an era of laissez-faire capitalism and accelerating industrialization. For many such workers, Christian churches seemed to offer only futile platitudes, and they readily defected to socialist and communist movements that dealt vigorously with their needs and saw Christian theology as part not of the solution but of the problem. What has come to be called "the social teaching of the Catholic Church" arose in response to this combination of human misery and atheistic temptation. It was presented in a series of worldwide communications ("encyclical letters") from the popes. Their novelty lay in their sustained attempt to apply the moral values of the Gospel to situations unimaginable to the biblical writers and to most of their successors until the nineteenth century. They had to deal with the morality not of personal behavior but of organized practices and policies that operated independently of transient individuals. They had to translate an ethic of love into standards of economic justice and claims of economic rights.

The resulting body of doctrine has been neither simple nor stagnant. It has shared common ground with many Protestants, but has had the advantage of emanating from a central position with a worldwide scope. Christianity has appeared as a moral critic of both Socialist and Capitalist extremes, and an advocate of programs that combine opportunity with protection, individual enterprise with social responsibility.

### Social Equality and its Limits

The acquiescence of European, especially German churches, both Protestant and Catholic in the rise of malevolent fascism and colossal ethnic persecution displayed the weakness of Christian moral teaching. By contrast, perhaps the most impressive display of Christian moral strength in the twentieth century, in both doctrine and practice, was the American Civil Rights Movement headed by an African American preacher and theologian who combined Gospel and Constitutional principles into an unforgettable and irresistible lesson. American churches that shrugged at slavery and at segregation were inspired or shamed into an unprecedented opposition to racism. For many, racism became a paradigm for immemorial patterns of unjust social discrimination that had been dealt a crippling blow by faith, reason, law, heroism, and martyrdom. A vigorous Christian critique of sexual discrimination has followed, with notable success. The moral unmasking of such forms of unjust discrimination has, however, left open important questions about what discrimination is and what is not just, as in the case of homosexuals' exclusion from marriage, the exclusion of human fetuses from protection, and the shift of environmental sacrifices to our faceless posterity.

### A Simple Doctrine in a Complex World

Christian moral teaching has had to address enormously complex issues generated by social and technical developments. In contrast to previous eras, the churches have typically welcomed rather than deplored scientific advances, even when they introduce ominous opportunities. Likewise, they have increasingly sought and used the advice of real experts in the matters at hand, regardless of their ideological sympathies. The task of Christian moral teaching remains what it has always been, to trace a rational way from

some answer to some question about what is right and what is wrong, to that most categorical of Christian imperatives, "Love your neighbor as yourself." In modern conditions, that way tends to get ever longer and ever more circuitous, but good maps continue to be made.

#### Points of Agreement:

Both Muslims and Christians agree that there is a universal, objective moral order, which is rooted in God and God's will. This is known through revelation, but can also be known through conscience. As Paul writes in Romans 2:25: "They [the Gentiles] show that what the law requires is written on their hearts...." Both religions emphasize virtue as a basis for morality (see statements above). Moreover, within Christianity, the four cardinal virtues (prudence, temperance, justice, fortitude) were taken from Greek and Roman authors, indicating that even pagans can recognize what is virtuous; put another way, we do not need revelation to know what is virtuous. Again, both religions emphasize that a large part of morality is establishing a just social order, in which the poor, victims, widows, and orphans, are treated with justice and with mercy. Finally, neither the Bible nor the Qur'an lists in detail all the requirements of the moral law, but these writings speak in general terms about doing good and avoiding evil.

#### Points of Disagreement:

There do not seem to be many points of disagreement. One might be the importance of love. For Christians, love of God and neighbor fulfills the law and one's moral obligations. Jesus (quoting the Hebrew Scriptures) sums up the law as follows: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). Many Muslim theologians, including the authors of "A Common Word" also claim that love is central to their tradition, but it is not clear if a majority of Muslim theologians would endorse this view.

#### Points for Further Discussion:

While the two traditions can agree in general terms about morality, there would seem to be a good deal to discuss when dealing with particular moral issues. Certain moral issues, such as abortion, the legitimacy of same sex marriage, euthanasia, and so on are causing serious divisions and even schisms with many Christian denominations. These same issues, and others, could certainly be points for discussion between Christians and Muslims.