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6

Goodness

Thomas G. Plante

*And what does the Lord require of me?
To love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God.*

—Micah 6:8

This quote from the Hebrew Bible has been one of my favorite quotes from sacred scripture in the Judeo-Christian tradition for a very long time. It well summarizes how we should live. It well articulates how to live a good life. In this brief and simple statement in response to what God wants of us, it makes clear that there are three things that we should do throughout our lives if we want to follow the dictates of the God in the Jewish and Christian tradition. Even if one isn't affiliated with the Judeo-Christian traditions, it is still pretty good advice regarding how one should live.

First, we must love mercy, meaning to always be compassionate. Many of the various religious traditions support the view that we should treat others with compassion and mercy. For example, in the New Testament used by Christians, the Gospel of Luke states, "Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate" (Luke 6:36). Other religious traditions also support the notion that compassion is the very heart of religion.¹ In fact, the well-known author Karen Armstrong states that when closely examining all of the major religious traditions that came to fruition during the Axial Age (starting in the ninth century B.C.), compassion was the heart, soul, and point of them all. She states: "... the spirit of

compassion . . . lies at the core of all our traditions” (p. 476)¹ and that “religion was the Golden Rule” (p. 468).¹

Second, we must focus our attention on justice, treating everyone fairly with honor, dignity, and respect. In doing so, we strive to become more responsible and respectful and behave with integrity toward others when we treat everyone justly. Again, all of the major religious traditions highlight the need to treat others fairly and with justice. Even the most famous part of the Hippocratic Oath, although not part of our current religious traditions, regarding first doing no harm, actually reads, “I will keep them from harm and injustice.”² Curiously, the emphasis on justice in this sentence appears to have been dropped from the public and perhaps physician radar screen, who tend to think that the sentence (erroneously) reads, “first do no harm.”

Finally, we are instructed to walk *humbly* with God. In my view, *humble* is very much the operative word here. Sadly, many people who report being religious or are closely affiliated with a particular religious tradition have behaved in ways that are hardly humble at all. In fact, sometimes the word *arrogant* comes to mind. They somehow know the mind of God and are quite clear that they are correct in their views and perspectives and others are clearly wrong. Some seem to be quite confident about who is going to heaven and who is going to hell and exactly what the afterlife looks like. Some are quite clear and confident of what God thinks of people different than themselves who may come from other religious or spiritual traditions and practices or who are identified by their sexual orientation, clothing, both private and public behavior, beliefs, and so forth. They seem to know exactly what God thinks. Curiously, some seem much more confident in what the sacred scriptures mean than almost all of the scholars who study these documents (often in their original languages) as a full-time career with numerous advanced degrees in the field to prepare them. Thus, humble they are not. Yet again, at their best, all of the religious and spiritual traditions highlight the value of and support humility.

There is much to digest and reflect upon in this very brief, simple, and, may I suggest, beautiful scripture quote. In my view, behaving in a way that encourages a humble journey with God while treating others with both mercy and justice well summarizes an ethical model of how to behave in the world and how to be good. It briefly states the principles to live a life of goodness.

All of the religious and spiritual traditions offer much guidance on how one ought to live one's life. They provide principles for living and decision making. They provide ways of living an ethical and good life. The religious and spiritual traditions provide wisdom on how to be in the world. Therefore, one of the fruits of the spirit from all of the wisdom traditions found among the great religious and spiritual frameworks is ethics. While it is true that one doesn't necessarily need to be engaged in a religious or spiritual tradition to be ethical or good, these traditions offer such rich material that it would be foolish not to learn at least a few things from them.

For some examples, let us consider a few quotes from sacred scripture and religious commentary that well illustrate how the traditions offer ethical principles for living. Since I am most familiar with the Jewish and Christian traditions, most of my examples will come from these two closely related religious traditions.

Examples of Ethical Principles within Religious Scriptures and Documents

Consider these quotes from the Talmud within the Jewish tradition:

"Have you dealt honorably with your fellow man?" (Talmud Shabbat 31a).

"Respect one another" (Eleazar ben Azariah, Talmud).

"If the community is in trouble, a person must not say, 'I will go home, and eat and drink, and my soul will be at peace.' A person must share in the concerns of the community" (Talmud Ta'anit).

These are just a few of many examples in which ethical behavior (e.g., respect, integrity, and concern for others) is emphasized and encouraged.

Now consider these quotes from the Christian tradition:

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5).

"... share with those in need" (Ephesians 4:28).

"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves" (Romans 12:10).

As seen in these few examples, an emphasis on being concerned for the welfare of others is highlighted in these texts.

Both Christian and Jewish traditions endorse and support the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), which many consider a reasonable,

useful, and practical set of ethical guidelines regardless of religious tradition affiliation. In fact, during recent years, a number of conservative politicians in the United States have suggested that the Ten Commandments be posted in all public schools and other public spaces such as courthouses. Some even have boldly asserted that if the Ten Commandments were posted in public schools, there would be a decrease in many of the troubles that teens get themselves into (e.g., teen pregnancy, drug use, and violence). Whether true or not or supported by empirical research data, this perspective underscores the popularity of the Ten Commandments as a set of rules for ethical living.

The well-known and sometimes controversial German theologian Hans Kung³ maintains that all of the major world religions endorse, support, and encourage five basic ethical principles of behavior. These include avoiding killing, lying, stealing, and behaving immorally while respecting parents and loving children. Additionally, all of the major religions of the world advocate integrity and responsibility as well as concern and as respect for others. Sadly, there are too many examples of people behaving in ways contrary to these ethical ideals in the name of their religions.

What Do We Mean by Ethics Anyway?

Ethics simply are a set of principles or guidelines that we use to decide how we ought to live.^{4,5} Several thousand years of writing and thought in the area of moral philosophy have arrived at several key principles that guide our way to make ethical decisions. They include the following approaches:

Cultural Relativism

Cultural traditions, experiences, and expectations over time create particular guidelines and rules for behavior. What might be ethical in one cultural tradition might be unethical in another. Culture can be defined as broadly taking into consideration race, ethnicity, socioeconomic level, educational level, and so forth.

Egoism

An egoism approach to ethics is often the one that most people use naturally and perhaps without much thought. It also might be the most difficult

one of the list to fully understand. When faced with an ethical dilemma, most people probably consider what decision likely would benefit them the most. Egoism often can be well masked in altruism. For example, one might send money to help those in need but do so to relieve guilt, making the giver feel good that he or she has done some part to help. Someone might help a marginalized group of people in need by helping to build a house for someone poor or perhaps going to a third-world country to help out in some way. However, the motive may be to brag about the experience or perhaps include the activity on a resume that might help them to get admitted to a competitive college, for example.

Utilitarianism

The utilitarianism approach is democratic in that it approaches ethical issues by what will please the most people. Thus, voting and allowing the majority to decide an outcome would often be the utilitarian approach to an ethical issue. What results in the most happiness for the most people is considered the ethical choice using this perspective on ethics.

Absolute Moral Rules

The absolute moral rule approach to ethics states that there are specific rules for behavior that should apply in all circumstances regardless of the consequences. For example, one should always be honest, kind, respectful, generous, and so on. No one should ever be allowed to rape or torture children or animals as well. Thus, ethical rules are universal and applied at all times and in all situations.

Social Contract

The social contract approach to ethics states that in order for us to live ethically in community, we ought to use formal and informal guidelines about how to behave in order to get along. Most laws and other rules are based on this important notion. Laws provide structure and guidelines so that a group of people can live together in a safe and orderly manner.

84 Religion, Spirituality, and Positive Psychology

If individuals or a group of people choose to violate an important social contract, then societal structures are in place to arrest and punish them or at least provide corrective feedback.

In addition to laws and rules, there are many informal contracts that we go along with while living with others. For example, people naturally wait in line to buy movie or subway tickets. If a child you don't know is hurt on a playground and there's no parent or guardian nearby, you'd likely try and help the child. While there is no specific law that states you must wait your turn in line at a movie, we have come to expect that this is the informal procedure to get along well with others.

Rights Approach

The rights approach to ethics suggests that every human being has certain rights that should be protected and promoted. For example, many people in America agree that people have a right to express their opinions, even if they are unpopular ones. Americans also value the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Many feel that as long as you harm no one, you have the right to think and behave as you like. Some argue that every human should have the right to food, housing, a living wage, and perhaps marriage regardless of sexual orientation and gender of the partner.

Justice Approach

The justice approach focuses on treating others in a fair, reasonable, and respectful manner and holds that the rules and laws of the land apply to all regardless of position, status, power, wealth, and so forth. Thus, what is ethical is what is fair.

Common Good Approach

The common good approach to ethics states that what's in the best interest of the community is what's most ethical. Therefore, if it is in the best interest of the community to imprison child molesters, then it is ethical to take away their rights to freedom in order to protect the larger community. The

common good approach might, for example, suggest that it is important to insist that drivers not drink when driving because it is in the common good to be sure that everyone drives sober.

Virtue Approach

The virtue approach to ethics suggests that there are a number of qualities or personal characteristics that we value and should all strive toward. These might include honesty, integrity, responsibility, compassion, politeness, thoughtfulness, kindness, competence, and so forth. Each person might have a list of personal characteristics that he or she strives toward in being ethical.

Most people would likely agree with a core list of virtues that we hope that all members of society would strive toward. We would hope that everyone is honest, responsible, thoughtful, caring, kind, civil, generous, loyal, friendly, courteous, and so forth. These are values that we encourage our children to adopt and that we usually seek in selecting friends, coworkers, and relationship partners.

A popular virtue approach to ethics includes the Boy Scouts' list of ethical principles.⁶ These include the following characteristics to aspire to. A Scout should be:

- Trustworthy
- Loyal
- Helpful
- Friendly
- Courteous
- Kind
- Obedient
- Cheerful
- Thrifty
- Brave
- Clean
- Reverent

Most people would likely feel comfortable with following at least the majority of these characteristics. For example, most people would likely agree that being trustworthy, courteous, and kind are ethical principles worth following whether one is a Boy Scout or not.

Religion and Ethics

Religious Modeling and Observational Learning

The religious traditions not only provide guidance for ethical behavior but also models for it. The popular question “What would Jesus do?” is an excellent example. All of the religious traditions offer models of ethical behavior that people are encouraged to emulate. Jesus, the Buddha, the Dali Lama, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, the various saints (St. Francis, St. Ignatius, St. Dominic), Mohammad, and Gandhi, among so many others, give followers models to copy. In doing so, the religious traditions provide both guidelines for behavior as well as models of exemplary behavior for followers to emulate. Perhaps Jesus’s well-known comment as quoted in the Gospel of Luke, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37), well summarizes this emphasis on modeling ethical behavior by watching and repeating what exemplars do.

Bandura^{7,8} articulates how modeling or observational learning must attend to four important stages for learning and behavior change to occur. Although not likely aware of the empirical social science research on observational learning, religious traditions have been using this theory for centuries. According to Bandura, the observational learning stages include *attention*, *retention*, *repetition*, and *motivation*. One must first *attend* to the desired behavior demonstrated by a model. One must watch it carefully. Then, one must *retain* the behavior by observing it repeatedly and using other methods to remember the desired target behavior in question. Then the person needs to *repeat* the behavior to be sure that he or she can do it, practice it, and work out the details that might make any new skill or behavior pattern challenging to do. Finally, one must be *motivated* to conduct the target behavior in question on an ongoing basis. Much of what religious traditions do in their use of modeling follows these principles of observational learning. By attending religious and spiritual services as well as religious community activities on a repeated basis, one

has the opportunity to attend to, retain, repeat, and be inspired to engage in desired target behaviors, to obtain corrective feedback and support from others, and to better perfect the target behavior or behaviors in question.

For example, perhaps an important virtue that religious traditions typically encourage is charity. Religious services might offer sacred readings on how religious models (e.g., Jesus) behaved in a charitable manner. Religious leaders such as priests, rabbis, pastors, and other ministers might model charity in their behavior with congregants. Finally, congregants might be encouraged and reinforced to be charitable with opportunities for volunteerism and donations to causes supported by the religious community made available.

Research has demonstrated that people do learn from spiritual models, including not only famous religious figures but also family, friends, neighbors, and others. They learn to behave in a spiritual, religious, and ethical manner by observing and mimicking others.^{9, 10}

Are Religious People More Ethical?

Do we need religion and spirituality to be ethical or to be good? Most moral philosophers would say no . . . but it can help.⁵ People can certainly maintain ethical perspectives and subscribe to ethical principles without engagement in religious or spiritual beliefs, institutions, or practices. However, there are few secular forums that can offer the guidance, fellowship, support, models, and engagement that the religious institutions offer. These organizations have a wide variety of comprehensive services, programming, groups, readings, models, and so forth that can regularly impart and support ethical principles and guidelines to their members. The secular community just doesn't seem to have the organizational structure to do so. There are some exceptions, of course. For example, the Boy Scouts is technically a secular organization not affiliated with one particular religious tradition that offers a clear set of ethical principles that tend to use a virtue approach to ethics (e.g., Scouts are loyal, courteous, kind, thrifty, reverent, . . .). Perhaps self-help groups based on the Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) model do the same. While not affiliated with any particular religious tradition, the 12 steps of AA are spiritually focused, with numerous references to God and His will. AA offers ethical

principles that highlight virtues such as honesty, integrity, and responsibility. So it appears that one doesn't have to be religious or spiritual to be ethical, but it might help to have the organizational structure that religion offers to encourage and reinforce ethical principles and behavior.

Religious engagement and practice encourages "clean living." Religious people are less likely to engage in criminal behavior, marital infidelity, alcoholism, or unprotected sexual activity as well as being more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors such as volunteerism and charity (for reviews, see notes 11–13). Thus, those who tend to report being spiritual, religious, or both tend to behave themselves better.

Conclusion

Religion and spirituality encourage ethical behavior in their sacred scripture readings, in their models or exemplars for behavior (not only well-known religious figures such as saints and founding members of religious traditions but also among religious elders, pastors, teachers, and congregants). Research suggests that religion- and spirituality-minded people behave better than those not affiliated with a religious or spiritual tradition or institution. Religious people tend to be better citizens by engaging in charity and volunteerism and not engaging in criminal and anti-social behavior that might harm others.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, if what might be required of us is to "love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8), then ethical behavior and a better world should result. And if compassion is indeed the core of all of the major religious traditions, according to scholars,¹ then the world can be a better place if these ideals are upheld by those who claim to be religious and spiritual.

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