

Religion's Power to Change Human Behavior

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Abstrak

Agama memang menjadi salah satu isu sensitif yang berkembang subur dalam tatanan sosial masyarakat tertentu. Peran agama di ranah sosial hingga kini masih terus diperdebatkan. Sebagian meyakini bahwa agama tidak memiliki peran signifikan dalam membangun kehidupan sosial, sementara sebagian lain percaya bahwa (nilai-nilai) agama berperan besar dalam membangun tatanan sosial ke arah yang lebih baik. Sebuah hal yang menarik jika melihat peran agama dalam ranah sosial. Sering kali perdebatan muncul oleh karena hal semacam itu. Bagi yang pertama, agama jelas identik dengan moralitas yang mana sangat jelas terlihat dari ajaran-ajaran agama itu sendiri. Bagi yang kedua, menjadi suatu pengetahuan umum bahwa agama dari segi ajarannya sangat berpengaruh besar dalam tatanan sosial dalam bermasyarakat. Oleh karena itu, perihal perspektif yang pertama (agama identik dengan moralitas), keyakinan tersebut memunculkan tesis lain yang berseberangan yaitu tidak beragama berarti tidak bermoral. Kedua tesis ini identik, saling berkorelasi, meski tidak sama. Artikel ini berupaya mendiskusikan keraguan-keraguan bahwa agama tidak memiliki peran dalam membangun moralitas sosial. Tentu saja artikel ini tidak akan mempertanyakan akan pentingnya nilai-nilai agama dalam kehidupan sosial, melainkan berangkat dari sebuah hipotesis bahwa bermoral atau tidaknya seseorang (manusia) tidak hanya berpijak pada ajaran-ajaran suatu agama. Itu berarti bahwa yang tidak beragama tidak secara langsung berarti tidak bermoral.

Kata kunci: Agama, Moralitas, Tatanan Sosial.

Introduction

The role of religion in social life is still debatable. In fact, some people believed that religion has no significant contribution in making better sphere of social life. According to them, religion have a rare of influence into the role of social change and life. They do not regard religion for having sort of contribution with people life especially in relation with social change. Of course, there are many aspects of religion which gives such order to the adherents in terms of doing the best for the society, for example values, teachings, and doctrines of religion, but we need to realize that the same with a coin sides that always has two different faces, contradicted from each sides, religion is somehow inspired violence in human life. People believe that the social conflicts happening around people are also caused by the doctrines of religion.¹ In this point, religion in people mind leads to two sides of effect: positive and negative.

Other people still believe that what happens in social life, for instance chaos, conflict, and disintegration, is not caused by religion. They conceived that the teachings of any religion order human beings to make something right for society. Religion, in their opinion, gives a great contribution to human being for doing morality. Religion precisely provides morality of human being and “forces” them not to do evil: religion equals morality.

The thesis “religion equals morality” derives then another thesis, i.e. “irreligion equals immorality”. Those two theses are correlative and identical; even they are not the same. Many of thinkers have discussed and observed to prove the truth of this thesis. They tried to prove that religion equals morality and so on. But, other thinkers have done the

¹ Otto Maduro has researched for six years, 1971-1977, at the Catholic University of Louvain, in Belgium, and a seventh year, 1977-1978, at the university of the Andes, Venezuela, to explore more about religion and social conflict using a Marxist analysis. The fruit of this research is a book titled *Religion and Social Conflicts*, published at the first time in 1982 in New York. At last, he indicates that “the potential for harmony embodied in a new worldview must await its transcendent harmonious promise at some time after justice is done.” See Otto Maduro, *Religion and Social Conflicts*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1982).

same thing to alleviate and break the truth of the thesis. According to the second group, religion is not always in the same line with morality.

In this article I want to discuss my wonder about the role of religion in developing social morality. In my opinion, morality and immorality of human beings is not only based on the teachings of religion. There are many aspects in human life which influence their behavior. We may not exclude the role of the conscience from this context. I agree that “irreligion does not, definitely, equal immorality”. The survey, held in Holland 1897-1909 and United States 1924-1934, proved that criminality and delinquency rate of persons without any religious affiliation happened to be lower than that of persons affiliated with the Catholic, Protestant², and Jewish religions.³ Perhaps, this survey is out of date, but the contemporary data also does not prove any difference.

I am not alone questioning the role of religious values in society. There are many people who do not believe in religion. Moreover, they step farther than me to say that religion is only the “illusion” and the “opium” of society.⁴

At last, sampling the fact that religiosity does not simultaneously mean a morality, at the end of this paper I want to talk specifically about the relationship between Muslims and morality. As Mohammad Abduh,

² To know more about the Protestant ethics and its influence for the society, specifically its correlation with the capitalism system, see Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

³ Collin Campbell, *Irreligion and Society*, in *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, (London: McMillan, 1971), 101.

⁴ Remember what Karl Marx wrote: “It (religion) is the *opium* of the people”. To know more Marx's idea about religion, see John Raines, *Marx on Religion*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002). In the book titled *Agama Itu Bukan Candu*, Eko P. Darmawan tried to explain deeply that there is a common misunderstanding around the people on reading Marx's idea. Basically, he writes, Marx wants to change the religious orientation among people: from Theo-centrism to be Anthro-centrism. Marx does not judge a religion as the *opium* (as the people understand it). See also Eko P. Darmawan, *Agama Itu Bukan Candu*, (Yogyakarta: Resist Book, 2005), 178-188.

a Muslim thinker, said, “I have seen Islam in the West without Muslims and I have seen Muslims in the East without Islam.” He implicitly means that religiosity of Muslim does not help them to be moralist, as the Islam ordered, better than those who do not adhere Islam.

Religion and Morality

Generally, religion is full of teachings of morality. There is no religion which suggests its adherents to do immoral acts or make evil things. Religion, believed as a corpus of values, doctrine and ritual acts, is the way of life which sacredly brings human beings from evilness to goodness. Religion is a morality itself. It is clearly stated, in Islamic tradition, that Prophet Mohammad was sent to teach a perfect morality for all human beings; Abraham dedicated his life struggling against the King Namruz, the symbol of authoritarianism; Moses struggled to look for freedom and liberation from tyranny of Pharaoh; and Jesus taught the people to spread away his teachings of mercy and love. These are the evidences of morality teachings in some Abrahamic religions.

Keep religion is a matter of personal belief, it does not mean that it can never settled by rational debate or social consensus. Some scholars have used the term “religion” for what they consider to be curious areas of observable human behavior, which requires an explanation. Others conceive that term “religion” is the outward behaviors that are inspired by the inner things they called “faith”. In this context, religious tends to the inner essence or what we call “morality”.⁵ Religion comes to manage human life by teaching how to make better behavior in society.

The decisive question arises here: when and how does religion possess the power to make people behave morally? William Sims tried to answer this by saying, “Part of the answer, we will find, is that individual faith can gain influence over a person’s life when he or she operates within the sustaining environment of a religious community or a

⁵ Christopher Partridge, *Introduction to World Religions*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2005), 12.

religious movement.”⁶ And religious teaching, in this context, is not only a rhetorical value. We may critically ask whether religious values have a real influence on reality without “wedding” with the political acts.

The power of religious values to change society depends very much upon the general capacity of religion to shape individual human behavior, and sociological research has found that this capacity is extremely variable.⁷ Actually, religious beliefs are not too salient in influencing human behavior⁸, but some people think that it must be salient through some political or social acts.

We cannot close our eyes from the facts and phenomena which show us different things; how the teachings of religion also play a role in many conflicts among society. People fall down into the conflict to defend a religion based on its doctrine and teaching. There are many religious conflicts happening in the world. The morality of religion cannot stop evil, wickedness, and crime. So, we question this morality: is it effective or just a teaching without meaning?

The relationship between religion and morality has many possibilities. Referring to Yinger, Collin Campbell mentions that there are four outlines of this relationship: morality as an inseparable part of religion; morality and religion separate and unrelated; morality and religion are identical; morality and religion closely related.⁹ Although Campbell does not explain more about these relationships, he wrote that Yinger finally concludes in his observation that “to the majority of adherents of the ‘world religions’ morality is an inseparable part of religion.’ Consequentially, immorality is an inseparable part of irreligion.

⁶ William Sims Bainbridge, *The Sociology of Religious Movement*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 269.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Some scholars strictly state that “religious morality in its purest form has nothing to do with the problem of social justice. Pure religious idealism does not concern itself with the social problem.” Read Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society, A Study in Ethics and Politics*, (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 263.

⁹ Partridge, *Introduction to World Religions*, 97.

I think, what Yinger stated is very normative perspective. Religion which he, to represent the adherents, talked about is in the meaning of norms and values. It will be different if we look at the phenomenon of religion. As mentioned above, this phenomenon is observed and proved by the survey which Sorokin did in Holland and United States.

Morality and Immorality

Morality is the basic principle of building society. A good society depends on social conceptions of morality. Perhaps, this sounds too hyperbolic. But I think it is true when we agree that morality is “*What befit or does not befit persons as persons.*”¹⁰ This term can also refer to behavior that enhances and respects the value of the good earth. Or we can define morality as the “concept of human ethics which pertains to matters of good and evil (also referred to as ‘right or wrong’, used within three contexts: individual conscience; systems of principles and judgments).”¹¹

In another way, we may interpret “moral” as *human* in the *ought to* or *normative sense*. The word “human” can be interpreted in two meanings: normatively (*what humanity ought to be*) or descriptively (*what it is observed to be*). Here, the word “human” is the synonym of “moral”. When we say that rape is immoral, it means that this is inhuman activity; it is not what human ought to do.¹²

Again, there are two terms correlated with morality: “*Non-moral*” and immorality. Non-moral is the *scene* which we cannot judge it as a good or bad. For example, a chemical formula by itself is non-moral realm. We could judge it as a good or bad only if it was conducted with human act or interest.¹³ This term is not totally opposite with “moral”,

¹⁰ Daniel C. Maquire and A. Nicholas Fargnoli, *On Moral Ground, the Art/Science of Ethics*, (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 08.

¹¹ See www.wikipedia.org.

¹² Maquire and Fargnoli, *On Moral Ground, the Art/Science of Ethics*, 09.

¹³ In the philosophy of science, we cannot judge things as a good or bad in the first step of philosophy, i.e. ontological step. In this step, science is free of value. But in two

although both are different. The second term is “immorality” which is totally opposite with morality that means a condition which people refer it as a wrong, an evil. In religious society, immorality can be taught from the doctrine of their religion. They believe that religion has involved all teachings and values of morality and immorality.

Actually, it is not easy to judge someone as a morally bad or good person. Perhaps, we may define a morally good person as someone who routinely does what is right for the right reason, and a morally bad person as someone who does what is right for the wrong reason, or does what is bad for the right reason.¹⁴

Based on the statement above, we must require two judgments in judging someone as a morally bad person. *First*, we must know whether what he is doing is an immoral action, and *second* we must know about his motives, intentions, feelings, and attitude. But, it is important to note that judging someone as a morally bad or good person is very difficult. Even we are close to someone often we do not know about his motives or intentions. We can judge the actions as a right or wrong, but we must often refrain from judging them to be good or bad.¹⁵

Perhaps, it is easier to talk about morality when it is only conducted to one person. But, we should also be reminded that morality has two aspects in the realm of society: individual morality and social morality.¹⁶ We need a different approach to observe and learn from these

others step, i.e. epistemological and axiological step, science is value-laden, when the human conduct is involved.

¹⁴ Thomas F. Wall, *Thinking Critically About Moral Problems*, (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2003), 68-69.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The moral core of an individual is the extent to which that person will apply his or her notions of morality. It is centered on the individual and can be extended to include other people or groups. The individual sees these others within the moral core as deserving to be treated in the same way the individual personally wants to be treated... And Public morality refers to moral and ethical standards enforced in a society, by law or police work or social pressure, and applied to public life, to the content of the media, and to conduct in public places. A famous remark of Mrs Patrick Campbell, that she didn't care what people did as long as they 'didn't frighten the horses' shows that in

two kinds of morality. Individual morality (a personal experience) has little effect to change society, while social morality (a collective experience) has a significance impact to the social life. But, we can learn from personal experience as well as from collective experience. The capacity for moral discovery is as unique to the group as it is to the individual. Each has a history that offers a different emphasis on moral experience and each must be tempered by the other.

Daniel C, Maquire wrote:

“In presenting individual experience and group experience, the point to be made for ethics is this: all individuals and groups are distinct sources of ethical experience, but what is unique and original in their knowing potential is not necessarily adequate. We should always systematically seek to learn from the social sources of moral insight (group experience) and from individual experience. Ethics must blend a respect for personalized original insight with sensitivity to what is contained in the common fund of cultural and ethical traditions. It must be critical of what is flawed in either individual or group experience and receptive of what is sound.”¹⁷

When he was writing about individual and social morality in his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Reinhold Niebuhr uses the term “ethics” and “politics”. According to him, “Ethics is in the inner life of the individual, and politics is in the necessities of men’s social life”. Later he emphasizes that the highest moral ideal on social perspectives is justice, while on personal perspectives is unselfishness.

We should know that these two moral perspectives are mutually inclusive. The opposition between them is not absolute. But, it is not easy to harmonize them. As Niebuhr said, “It was revealed that the

some sense even high tolerance expects a *public* limitation on behavior (sexual conduct is implied here). At the opposite extreme a theocracy may equate public morality with religious instruction, and give both the equal force of law (taken from www.wikipedia.org).

¹⁷ Daniel C. Maquire and A. Nicholas Fagnoli, *On Moral Ground, the Art/Science of Ethics*, (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 121-122.

highest moral insights and achievements of the individual conscience are both relevant and necessary to the life of society.”¹⁸

I think it is interesting to know that Neibuhr tends to call a personal morality as “religious morality” and social morality as “political morality”. It shows that religion, in his perspective, has no great influence to change a social behavior. It may be useful to increase individual attitude, but it does not play a role in social field. In the wider social context, the morality which can influence social behavior is politics. We may conclude that political morality is antithesis to religious morality.

Here, Neibuhr offers a rational morality to be an intermediary between religious and political morality. What he wants is relatively similar with the Sweetman’s thesis of the role of religion on public reason and John Rawls’ idea in general.

Evaluating Human Behavior

One of the difficulties involved in the relationship between religion and morality is the problem of determining what are the standards used to evaluate moral and immoral activity; in personal or social actions. As it is mentioned above, we have difficulties to judge any action as moral and immoral. Minimally, in the individual morality, we need two observations before considering them moral or immoral: the action itself and the motive behind it. In social morality, or say group experience, we need to distinguish between moral and criminal behavior. According to Collin Campbell, criminal behavior is easy to determine simply because there are agreed social definitions of crimes, while moral behavior become difficult to define because there may not be general social agreement on what are moral acts.¹⁹

¹⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society, A Study in Ethics and Politics* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 257.

¹⁹ Collin Campbell, *Irreligion and Society*, in *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, (London: McMillan, 1971), 103.

Campbell is truly right. It is easy to know about the social criminal codes, but it is difficult to define social moral codes. As he wrote,

“Measurement of the degree of immorality of various groups in society thus becomes a very slippery exercise in which there is a real danger of projecting the morality of a dominant ethnic or class group onto a nonconforming minority and hence ‘defining’ immorality into existence. Even where all groups in society are agreed on the acts which are to be regarded as immoral, they may attach a very different emphasis to the degree of immorality involved.”²⁰

To evaluate morality and immorality in social life, we may also use the standards of religious teachings, values, and doctrines. Of course, people who do not conceive to any religion will not accept these standards. Using the only religious perspectives will exclude other sources of morality, and we should remember that the foundation of all morality is the experience of the value of the persons and their environment. It is not only the authority of religion to talk about morality. But, as Brendan Sweetman said, “We may not exclude the role of religious argument in the public debates”.²¹

It is important to differentiate between believers (of religion) and non-religious person in this context, because, as we formerly described, there are two consequences of the moral/immoral acts: felt mainly by the individual or by others. We can call them personal and social consequences. The example of the first category is gambling, smoking, drinking, etc. And the second is stealing, cheating, aggression towards others, etc. Both have the certain implication and should be given a sanction.

It is a common law in the world that everything has to have any regard or punishment. Morality is identical with regard as immorality with punishment. One question arises here: what is the standard to judge

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ See Brendan Sweetman, *Why Politics Need Religion, The Place of religious Arguments in the Public Square*, (Illinois: Inter Vacity Press, 2006), 119.

things moral or immoral and what kind of sanctions will be given as a punishment?

There are two kinds of punishments in this context: social punishment and supra-social punishment.²² Social punishment is based on the law or agreement which generally accepted by people in a certain society, and supra-social punishment is based on religious teaching as a punishment from the sacred or God. Usually, the first punishment is given to evaluate acts of crimes done by human beings, even the second is given to evaluate acts of individual crimes.

In any religions, the supra-social sanction is a commonly discussed topic, especially in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. It was relatively able to change human behavior and influence their attitude. But over the twentieth century, these beliefs have been in decline and thus their role as sanctions on behavior have also diminished. People tend to do something without considering the supra-social consequences; rather they tend to do them based on social agreement.²³ Religiosity does not mean morality any more.

Indonesian state, for example, is well known as the biggest Muslim country. It means that Indonesian people are religious. But, the international statistic poll stated that Indonesia is the most corrupt country in the world. So, where does the role of religious morality hide then? Sweden is not religious country, but it can prove to be “moral” country without “religion”. Saudi Arabia is the biggest symbols of Muslim country because of the city of Mecca and Medina but the

²² McIver and Page have emphasized that since religion implies a relation between men and some higher power, it normally invokes a sanction which can be called “supra social”, whether It be primitive ghost fear or present wrath of God or the penalties of an afterlife or torture in hell or merely the sense of being out of tune with the ‘infinite’ when it supposed laws are disobeyed. See Collin Campbell, *Irreligion and Society*, in *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, (London: McMillan, 1971), 105.

²³ Of course, there are still many people believe in supra-social punishment, especially a conservative religious believer. They still have fears of being an immoral person and thus enter Hell, and tried to follow moral doctrines, hoping to be the occupant of Heaven.

government and social life there do not express the morality of religion.²⁴ All of these show us the opposite of the former thesis that: irreligion does mean absolutely immorality.

Conclusion

At last, I want to say that morality is not only based on religious teachings or values. It means that irreligion does not also directly mean immorality. The previous description of phenomenon has shown us the evidence of it. I, personally, believe that religion is the best teacher of morality, especially personal/individual morality. But in fact the adherents of a religion may not prove this. They do not practice the essence of religious values, i.e. morality. As Niebuhr said:

“If we contemplate the conflict between religious and political morality it may be well to recall that the religious ideal in its purest form has nothing to do with the problem of social justice. It makes disinterestedness an absolute ideal without reference to social consequences. It justifies the ideal in term of the integrity and beauty of the human spirit.... Pure religious idealism does not concern itself with the social problem.”²⁵

However, religion may also have an “advisory function”, helping a person to decide what to do in ambiguous circumstances where each available course seems to have an advantages and disadvantages.²⁶ Religious doctrines can “order” the adherent to be a moral person, but these cannot force them to do so. But, here, we are not talking about the normative religion because morality is not a fictive reality. Morality, in this context, means acts, attitudes, and behaviors which have a big influences and changes in social life. Perhaps, some will say that there is a miscommunication (wicked interaction) between religious teachings and the adherents. They may be right, but they may be not. This

²⁴ If we deeply look at the life style of Saudi people, we will find many acts of them which are not in the line with morality of religion, e.g. prostitution. What I want to emphasize here is that religiosity does not consequently produce a morality.

²⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 263.

²⁶ Bainbridge, *The Sociology of Religious Movement*, 279.

assumption will precisely make religion responsible to all human's disadvantages circumstances: religion will be judged unable to control the acts of its adherents.

In Islamic tradition, for example, what Mohammad Abduh said, "There is Islam in the West without any Muslims and there is no Islam in the East with number of Muslims", is true. Some of so-called Muslim Countries cannot express the substantial teaching of Islamic morality, while there are many non-Muslim people which show a morality on their daily life. Religion is not a warranty to create a morally religious society.

In China, an officially atheistic country, people can express their morality without any dependence to the religion. They have a certain standard of morality based on their own experience. They develop their economic, political, and social system by using the accepted consensus as a law and way of life.

Morality is the conscience of human beings, so we can improve our morality by developing our humanity.

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