

## The Divine Love for Israel: Contemporary Moral Implications?

Some debate has centered around the validity of characterizing ethics as “Christian.” The question raised is whether a religion can legitimately provide the basis for an ethical theory—religious beliefs can demand certain actions and be misconstrued as unified ethical theories. Some critics assert that Christianity cannot be the basis for an ethical theory because it is exclusive in that membership necessitates a shared belief system. Others argue that there is no relevance for a Christian ethical theory because Christianity itself is a supernatural experience. Proponents of Christian ethics have argued that Christians use their confessional faith as life’s moral compass and so ethics governing individual Christians are inherently Christian. In this latter analysis Christian ethics are set apart by the manner of personal motivation. Christians are called to a pure and holy life (Leviticus 19:2) and thus are motivated out of something akin to duty. There is more at work under the surface, however, explaining the classification of Christian Ethics as a distinct ethical theory.

A brief look through the history of Christianity shows the progression of development, helping to clarify the values which coalesce into a coherent ethical theory. This rich tradition begins in the Old Testament and carries on through the New Testament. Specific themes can be seen throughout the Old and New Testaments, with the early literature informing the later literature. Because so much of the New Testament proceeds from what is written in the Old Testament, it is necessary to explore the Bible in its entirety to fully grasp Christian ethics.

Throughout the Bible there is evidence of a loving God who is committed to His people, Israel. Israel has been adopted by Yahweh and delivered from the slavery of Egypt. Thus commences the divine story of redemption in Exodus. After delivering Israel, Yahweh spells out a series of commandments. The best known in this series are the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21); surprisingly many other instructions were given to the faithful community. Leviticus details the proper offerings for different sins, the requirements for being considered clean and foods permissible for consumption, among other things. Collectively, these are termed the Decalogue and serve as the foundation for common belief in Yahweh. These commands were not followed because Yahweh was a tyrant and demanded praise. Instead, the praise and worship followed from the loving kindness first shown by Yahweh through the deliverance of Israel from bondage.

Later in the Old Testament we see a different guiding force emerge through the wisdom literature. This collection of writings was contributed during Israel’s monarchy—Political influences

incurred the inclusion of secular wisdom literature, but always with a twist. The proverbs, especially, are focused on how to lead a “good” life and thus are fundamentally concerned with ethics. Proverbs begins: “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insights; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life...” (Proverbs 1:1-3). These maxims are usually broad and consist of both encouragement and discouragement. Collectively the wisdom literature informs the faithful community of the proper way to live, delineating right and wrong.

Some would say that Christian ethics are, therefore, simply a list of rules, a series of DO and DO NOT commands. The story does not stop here, however, because Israel could not follow the commands given by Yahweh. Christians believe that no matter how hard any individual tries to fulfill these commandments, he/she is unable to attain perfection. To remedy this circular situation the Lord provided a means for redemption: Restoration of mankind came through Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus’ life, documented in the New Testament, both enlightens and reinterprets the entirety of the Old Testament writings. In the Christian faith, Jesus is the incarnation of God; through his death and resurrection sin was conquered, offering the extension of grace to humankind. This grace parallels the deliverance of Israel and serves as the basis for Christian morality.

Christian belief holds that everyone who is searching for truth through faith is given grace through a personal experience with the Lord. Some theorists argue that such an experience requires morality from the individual—in essence that Christians have no choice except morality *because* of their faith. Others approach it slightly differently, arguing that morality is engendered because the individual submits to the kingdom of God, a kingdom he/she has joined by confession. In this model, acceptance to join the kingdom of God translates into a refining fire which presses into the individual.

How does this refinement occur? Guidance is found in the Holy Scriptures which chronicle Israel’s journey, Jesus’ life and ministry and the early New Testament churches. While insight can emerge from any part of the canon, Christians turn specifically to the example of Jesus. This following is based in Scripture, as Jesus commands his disciples to “follow [him]” (Matthew 4:19).

Jesus has become the lens through which Christians examine the world. Throughout the Gospel he is seen teaching the people through parables. His teachings saw the reversal of many societal norms including the association with sinners, tax collectors, and the unclean. New Testament morality is motivated by a universal love. When asked the greatest commandment Jesus replies, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest

commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (Matthew 22:37-39). This answer may be surprising for some familiar with the Old Testament, but it is a foundation for Christian Ethics. Christian morality is motivated through love for both God and others.

This and further studies on Jesus’ actions in the Gospels will reveal that interpretation of the Decalogue is important in the Christian walk. The mode of interpretation is key— the faithful must seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance for such revelations. It is at this juncture that we can depart from considering Christianity just a set of rules and regulations. Christians “are interested in the virtues or conduct that would best express fidelity to God for their own communities; [their] circumstances may be different and may demand different responses [than those explicitly addressed in the Bible]” (Cahill, 1980).

As presented in this paper, the rich history of Christianity and the complexity behind the moral motivation of Christians places Christian ethics in a unique place among other ethical models.

[Theorists generally disagree about the] relative adequacy of teleological and deontological models of moral agency, evaluation, and discourse [in relation to Christian ethics.]... The merit of the former in Christian ethics is that it stresses activity and creativity in moral agency, and affirms “virtue” as habitual orientation to the morally commendable goal...The merit of the deontological model is that it affirms gratitude and obedience to God in Christian agency, and envisions the moral life as one of continual responsiveness to grace. (Cahill, 1980)

With many people operating from this framework, Christian ethics retain the potential to continue to change the landscape of our country—Billions of people still ask: “What would Jesus Do?” (figure cited from Adherents.com)

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