

You Are Confident About Right and Wrong. But Why?

(updated 8/17/21)

Even as religion has become less prevalent in American society, a sense of justice and moral imperative has not waned and indeed may be growing stronger. It has become increasingly unacceptable in American society to hold racist beliefs, to act lasciviously toward women, or to express hatred for marginalized groups of all kinds. In fact, such actions may result in not just personal scorn but also public denunciation.

It used to be that religion provided a basis for the moral values and duties felt by many Americans. But now, the society is less religious while retaining its moral certainty. Maybe we never needed religion in the first place. Perhaps humanity's cultural evolution or a modern philosophical system is all that is necessary to discover *the* objective set of moral values and duties. Lucky us, that we live at precisely the right time and place to have stumbled upon the one true morality!

Actually, it seems unlikely that after millennia, with a staggering diversity of cultures and practices in human history, 21st-century western society has finally found the one true morality. It is much more likely that the prevailing norms in our society will continue to evolve and that present moral values and duties will be viewed by future societies with the same contempt and horror felt toward the brutality and inhumanity of the past.

Perhaps, then, morality is subjective. Each culture determines its own set of moral codes. What is moral for the Vikings in the 10th century or for an indigenous group in Papua New Guinea may be immoral in our own context. If this is the case, it seems strange to press our own moral beliefs onto others. It also seems to be at odds with deeply held beliefs about the absolute immorality of certain acts; for instance, the sexual abuse of children. Subjective morality is a difficult position to defend and to consistently live out in a cross-cultural setting.

So either morality is relative, in which case it seems unjustified to press our moral intuitions upon others; or morality is objective, in which case we must ponder why.

This is where Jesus can solve the problem. You may recoil at the suggestion of religion – much less Christianity – because you identify it with politics or hate. But not only does it offer a firm moral foundation, it does so in a way that makes love fundamental and provides a vision of humanity – called the kingdom of God – that sets up Jesus as the king and in so doing decouples itself from traditional power structures that we observe in the world. The version of Christianity that clamors for political power in order to enact its will upon the larger society – we should all be suspicious of that, since Jesus taught the following:

- “Love the Lord your God ... and ... love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:34-40). These are the great commandments that form the moral foundation of the Christian faith;
- “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight” (John 18:36). Jesus specifically taught that people associated with his kingdom would not use the weapons of political nation-states;
- “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you” (Matthew 5:44). Jesus taught his followers to respond to hate with love;
- “Do not exercise power as the world does, by lording it over those under you, but instead lead by serving” (Matthew 20:25-28). Jesus turns the dynamics of power on their head. Authority is exercised to serve others, even at one’s own expense, rather than to exploit others selfishly.

Following Jesus requires an uncommon way of thinking and living where the first are last (Matthew 20:16), the weak are made strong (2 Corinthians 12:9), and the undeserving receive grace (Ephesians 2:8-9); indeed, his has been called the upside-down kingdom. (Read Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 to learn about the nature of that kingdom.) As king, he requires your full allegiance, and some of his teachings are guaranteed to rub you the wrong way. Entering the kingdom of God means giving up yourself – your self-determination and your moral intuitions – and yielding them to Christ. Though it may be a painful process, the payoff is reconciliation with God and membership in the new humanity as one whose soul is united with Christ. And, you have a sure moral foundation.

Why believe Jesus? Because he died and came back to life just as he predicted. If there’s anyone whose moral beliefs and teachings demand your attention, it’s his.

If you’d like to discuss more about the upside-down kingdom of God, please contact Byran Smucker at absmucker@gmail.com.