

Religious or secular, morals share many values

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Where do our morals or ethics originate? What is the basis for statements about morality? How do we settle upon the moral values that arise in the course of everyday living? If we take a religious path, it will lead along routes different than if we choose a secular moral path. But if we are equally conscientious and caring in our pursuit of morality, both courses (religious and non-religious) frequently lead to many of the same conclusions.

Religious thinkers usually start with the idea that God exists and is the designer of the universe. God gives humans intelligence and responsibility for making correct moral choices. God has created humans with free will and God cares about human choices and finds it pleasing when these choices coincide with His plans for humanity. Religious adherents may ask, "What is God's plan for me?" Generally, religious followers seek advice on moral matters through prayer, contemplation, clerical advice, their religious scriptures, and support from fellow worshipers.

Religious approaches to morality work harmoniously when the various denominations agree upon God's directions to moral questions. But often, when religious answers differ, a variety of religions and denominations divide and sub-divide into differing religious groups. Each newly formed group offers new moral directions. For example, are same sex marriages morally acceptable to God? Are male and female clergy both equally acceptable to God? Are artificial birth control methods morally acceptable? The answers to these and many other moral questions vary among religious thinkers. If this were not the case, we would undoubtedly have fewer religions and fewer denominations. It is ironic that many religious followers claim that, if it were not for the advice of the one true God, humans would become divided on moral issues. Yet, this seems to happen frequently within religions just as it does outside religious thought.

On the other hand, the non-religious approach to morality is different. God is either very much in the background or not considered at all. The concept of morality is based on harmony within societies. Caring for others within each society is a valued moral precept. Trust and dependency on those perceived as part of one's own group of fellow humans is important and necessary. Free will, honesty, sharing common goals, and assisting those in need are ethical values within the *mores* of a cohesive society. Caring about the preservation of a supportive natural environment is also an important moral imperative. But the non-religious approach

also has its divisions and difficulties. Secular moral values change and shift from decade to decade according to scientific updates, recent political input, and emerging problems such as poverty, starvation, and other current issues. In this case, changes occur within the various secular social groupings. For example, the moral values of the rich and powerful may differ from those within the same group who are not so wealthy or powerful.

In order to work in harmony, secular morality requires members to be tolerant of those with different ethnic backgrounds, different abilities, and even different languages. More than that, it requires an acceptance of differences within and among social groups. In addition, it requires an answer as to how a society will know which moral values to accept and which ones to discard.

So non-religious societies, if they are to have valuable moral principles, will have to develop codes and sanctions that will work for them. These principles will tend to be pragmatic, open to change from time to time and be measured by the question, "Do our current moral codes still function well for everyone within this society?"

It is likely that, in the end, these two divides, religious morality and secular morality, will share many common values such as honesty, caring, responsibility, and trustworthiness. Recently, Pope Francis made some interesting comments about secular morality. I hope that I paraphrase his view fairly. He has stated that people's morality should be judged, not by their belief in God, or by their lack of belief, but by their actions. Perhaps the moral divide between caring religious people and caring secular people is not as great as it first appears.