

The Good Samaritan: The Role of Religion in One's Morality

By Kamla Javier

In Luke Chapter 10, Verses 25-37 of the New Testament, the parable of the Good Samaritan was told by Jesus himself. In the story, a Jew was robbed, beaten almost to death, and left on the road. A Jewish priest passes by the poor Jew but did not offer him any help; so did the Levite. It was the Samaritan who attended to the needs of the Jew, brought him to a nearby inn, asked the keeper to continue looking after the injured man, and shouldered the expenses. (NIV Luke 10.25-37) The most interesting part of this story is that historically, Jews and Samaritans had a hostile relationship, even going to each other's temples and vandalizing them. The Samaritans were practically condemned by the Jews, while Levites and Jews shared a good relationship. The reason why this parable has appealed to the emotions of many people is that although the Samaritan had no reason to stop and help the injured man, he still did. The story teaches us that kindness and moral goodness might come from the most unexpected people, and those from whom we assumed aid – they may not deliver after all.

Morality is one of those ideologies that cannot be quantitatively weighed and is highly judged on a case by case basis. In "The Moral Instinct", cognitive psychologist and linguist Steven Pinker discussed multiple aspects of morality including its roots and varieties. Pinker briefly stated that moral goodness is "justif[ied] with our religions." True enough, religion seems to be an essential identification tool that people use to distinguish themselves with. Moreover, moral sense is a heavy burden to carry on its own and that's why "the concept of morality would have to be bigger than any of us and outside all of us" (Pinker 2). However, if one does not associate himself with any religion – such as atheists, agnostics and those who are simply unaffiliated – does he then possess less morality than a theist? Since Pinker did not dive deeper on this aspect, I am going to challenge the notion that morality is justified by one's religion and by doing so, I will also imply that a lack of religion doesn't warrant immoral behavior either.

But what is morality? In its most basic definition, it is the distinction between good and bad, right and wrong. From there, it varies from person to person depending on their culture, tradition, upbringing, experiences and of course, religion. There is no one-size-fits-all definition that exists for morality. However, out of all those listed, religion and morality intertwine the most. In fact, religion has hugely impacted our sense of moral compass that "it is impossible to know what morality would look like without religion. It would require a visit to a human culture that is not now and never was religious" (Waal qtd in Bloom 187). Paul Bloom in his paper "Religion, Morality, Evolution" discussed the connections and origins of morality and religion. With the close link between the two, it is not hard to see that a negative perception towards atheists (those who deny the existence of a god), agnostics (those who say there's no way of telling if there is at least one or not) and the unaffiliated (those who simply don't want to be associated with any religion) would come naturally.

When we think about serial killing, incest, and necrobustiality, we also think of hate and lust. How can religious people – whose central dogma revolves around love, karma and the like – commit such acts? One answer that people resort to is that immoral acts are carried out by non-believers. In "Is Everything



Permitted? People Intuitively Judge Immorality as Representative of Atheists”, a study done by Will M. Gervais, a psychology professor at the University of Kentucky, situations similar to those above were presented and participants were asked to identify the religion –including the option that “[name of the character] doesn’t believe in God”- of the person involved. Results showed that in all three situations, participants selected the person to be an atheist and even atheists themselves identified the lead character to be also an atheist. There seems to be a perception that non-believers are more inclined to behave immorally. As Will mentioned, “to an observer who thinks that religion enables people to inhibit immoral behavior, learning that an agent engages in immoral behavior may be sufficient to lead the observer to intuitively infer that the agent is not religious” (Will 1). Simply, religiosity can exude trust while lack of it can exude distrust and disgust; in an even more unfortunate philosophy, it is vice versa where a trusted person is assumed to be religious and a distrusted person is assumed to be non-religious.

Then, what if the same moral act is done by both a theist and an atheist? Or better yet, what if the same immoral act is done by both a theist and an atheist? The study “The Social Cost of Atheism: How Perceived Religiosity Influences Moral Appraisal” by Jennifer Wright and Ryan Nichols, professors of psychology and philosophy from College of Charleston and Cal State Fullerton respectively, sought after public opinion on these questions. By presenting participants different situations that deal with infidelity and charity, results show that “a non-religious person behaving immorally was regarded as less anomalous - and behaving morally as more anomalous - than a religious person” (Nichols and Wright 110). Doing the wrong thing is righteously an atheist’s actions, but when the atheist does good, it is not quite right either. Furthermore, because such behavior is considered expected, atheists are thought to be less remorseful compared to their religious counterparts. Some people think that since atheists reject the idea of God, they must also reject His teachings and therefore *sinning* is in accordance with their lack of religiosity.

As mentioned above, if a religion prohibits a certain act, then whoever commits the act is a sinner and therefore the person is also immoral and non-religious. However, controversial issues that concern morality such as gay marriage and abortion on which the Christian church has a clear stance on, atheists and agnostics show minimal contrasting views compared to other religions. In a research done by the Pew Research Center, “American Religious Groups Vary Widely in Their Views of Abortion”, data on abortion was aggregated. They collected people’s responses whether they are for or against abortion. The research included 25 religious affiliations including atheists and agnostics. The overall data presented that 87% of atheists and agnostics are for the legalization of abortion (Masci). Meanwhile, Christian denominations such as Catholic and mainline Protestant show only 48% and 35% support respectively. Catholics and Protestants may have a lesser percentage as the church’s stand on pro-life is well known. But, if atheists’ and agnostics’ stance on the issue is a sin to the church which makes them less of a moral being because of their lack of belief in a punishing God, or because they support the murder that is abortion, then non-Christian religions such as Judaism, Islam and Buddhism, wouldn’t show support - 83%, 55%, and 82% support respectively. (Masci) There is obviously a negative connotation towards non-believers. However, another research, “Changing Attitudes on Gay Marriage”, also from the Pew Research Center showcased a different kind of perspective. The data assess whether or not people from varying backgrounds are for or against gay marriage. The findings show that there is less than 20% gap between atheists and Catholics that are in support of gay marriage. (Pew Research

Center) This gap has been consistent throughout a decade or so and tells us that they don't share the exact same opinion statistically, but there isn't much difference either. These controversial issues may be largely judged from a religious perspective but at the same time, the two sets of statistics prove that a non-believer's perspective doesn't differ extremely to that of a believer's.

Stance on social issues doesn't indicate one's religiosity but still, some people think that without religion, morality is not possible. Consequently, they are skeptical about atheists and the like "because people intuitively assume that atheists in some way lack a perceived necessary component of morality: religious belief" (Will 2). If that is the case, then religion is a condition of morality. But the argument is invalid as there exists exceptions, such as the good Samaritan. So, why then are theists dubious about non-believers?

First, is the idea of not following any rules that have definite rights and wrongs, such as the Ten Commandments and the Noble Eightfold Path, seems as if atheists and agnostics don't live by an order that guides their moral compass. Will suggested that people are "uncertain regarding whether or not atheists know which acts are immoral" (Will 7). But, second, it is also a possibility that non-believers do know the distinction between moral and immoral behaviors but lack "an external motivational structure incentivizing morality (e.g., heaven) and disincentivizing immorality (e.g., hell)" (Will 7). Third, the idea that atheists, agnostics, and the like do not believe in a supreme being that watches over their actions and so, doesn't encourage them to do good or even more so, doesn't inhibit them to commit immoral acts. Bloom said that "the increased generosity that one finds when people are exposed to religious primes is sometimes attributed to the notion of a supernatural watcher" (Bloom 194). But, if these three points are the reasons why people choose to be virtuous, a reconsideration of what morality really means is needed.

I sat down with Professor Gary Zabel, a philosophy professor teaching Moral and Social Problems at UMass Boston, and talked about religion, morality, and atheism. Professor Zabel was a Catholic until his adolescent years when he decided to not affiliate himself with any religion. When I asked him if morality is possible without religion he said that religion has certainly influenced the lifestyle of its believers, even for himself as he still carries the teachings of his Catholic family, however, "doing something because an authority told you to do so is not morality but fear" (Zabel). Professor Zabel makes an important point; the fear of not obliging, or the fear of punishment is not what morality is. If we justify our moral goodness because it is what a supreme entity commands, then we follow blindly out of mere obedience. Morality should be done out of so much more than a plain reward after a good deed; it shouldn't be excluded to people who don't share the same beliefs, and certainly, it shouldn't exclude one's self, "you cannot make yourself an exception. You have to consider yourself as one among many" (Zabel). Professor Zabel admitted that he follows the basic principle, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Furthermore, morality can be as great as what the good Samaritan exemplified – going out of his way to help a Jew, but that fact didn't even matter anymore; he only saw an injured man that badly needed help. If the renegade Samaritan aided the beaten Jew, then non-believers can also do good. If the priest and the Levite ignored the beaten Jew, theists can also be immoral.



Atheism and agnosticism don't have to be perceived poorly. Alain de Botton, a philosopher and author who gave a talk on one of TED's conferences, discussed a new kind of atheism – "Atheism 2.0". De Botton admitted that the secular life is not perfect and believes it is nonsense to completely reject religion and not benefit from any of its good characteristics. For example, religion has sermons while secular life has lectures and differentiates in a way that a sermon's goal is to change lives while a lecture's goal is to give information (de Botton). Between the two, it is the lesson from sermons that have a lasting impression on its listener because the messages are emphasized over and over again (de Botton). Another example is art; in the secular world, art is for art's sake, while in the religious world, art is used as a tool to reinforce divine figures and concepts (de Botton). There are many more aspects of life that religion does better than the secular world because the way their ideologies are delivered is a "highly effective mechanism" and that is exactly why there is nothing wrong with picking and mixing the best parts of religions even when one doesn't believe in the entity (de Botton). Atheists do not have to live a "less meaningful life" as people would assume (Nichols and Wright 95). In truth, science is completely incompetent in the emotional realm; it doesn't tackle morality and that's why people turn to religion for their faith. Anything that gets more complicated, such as evolutionism, is often not favored when an all-powerful and omnipresent God exists out there. But, religion isn't only about deities – it also revolves aspects in which the secular world can always learn from.

The relationship between religion and morality is indeed, a strong one. However, the notion that religion is requisite in order to tell right from wrong and do good instead of bad, is misinterpreting the beauty of morality. After all, the difference between an atheist and a Christian is only one God when compared to other religions that believe in many more. It is not to dismiss, however, that religion is irrelevant. Religion has an undeniable and immense impact on anyone that chooses to believe in it, but even without having to suppose the existence of a God, "religions are so subtle, so complicated, so intelligent in many ways that they are not fit to be abandoned to the religious alone, they're for all of us" (de Botton).

Kamla is an Economics major currently living in Boston, Massachusetts. Kamla's essay, created for her Composition II course, began as an exploration of morality. She set out to examine the stereotypes against non-believers in order to better understand the development of the moral compass and the role religion plays in morality. She writes: "In this day and age where all kinds of people can freely express their opinion, both hurtful and helpful, I also wish to communicate my own beliefs through a logical presentation of information." Kamla wanted to voice a position that is accepting of all people and "hopefully open a new perspective towards those who distrust non-believers," since her own initial belief was that religion must play the largest role in one's moral compass, as was the case for her. While writing this paper, however, she concluded "that there is so much more to morality than just a given set of actions." When not in class, Kamla enjoys watching movies -- she enjoys a love-hate relationship with the horror and thriller genres. She is also a fan of mystery and fantasy movies and loves a good plot twist.



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