

A man's ethical behavior should be based effectually on sympathy, education, and social ties and needs; no religious basis is necessary. Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hope of reward after death."

- Albert Einstein.

One of the commonest misconceptions among religious people and common folk is that religion of some sort is necessary for one to be a moral being. A close relative of mine— a formally well-educated guy mind you- knowing I am a non-believer recently asked me if I don't believe in 'pav pin,' which in the Sinhalese language meant bad and good moral behavior. Some religionists tend to pigeon-hole a non-believer as an evil or weird person while some others think he is an anarchist, nihilist or good-for-nothing. On the contrary, one can be a good human being without any religious base whatever. It is possible to

dantly clear that all these qualities have no necessary linkage with the metaphysical assertions of religion. In other words, one can follow such a path of humane behavior without any belief in a heaven, a hell or a creator, or even any acceptance of a samsara.

There is a great deal of evidence that suggests that we humans come into this world with an inborn moral sense. A concern about others and empathy towards others is a quality not alien to the human make-up. Putting it in another way, we humans have the basis for morality ingrained in us. Our morality is rooted in our biology. Ask yourself the question: "If I see a child fallen by the wayside bleeding and crying will I not try to help the fellow? Will I ignore and go my own way?" Your reply will be a definite "no." Is such a response due to any religious dictate? Certainly not. It emerges from your breast as a natural response of one human to another. This quality of ours reflects a form of

religion constitute a command that if violated carries penal results at after-life. Now, it is not difficult to convince ourselves that any moral principle adhered to under threat like this cannot be taken as truly ethical in import. Authentic moral behavior is something derived from voluntary choice and not



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is antiquated and based on the obnoxious idea of male superiority. I am certainly not advocating lax behavior but merely trying to emphasize the need for reckoning the complexity of human and social life in our moral codes- a need not recognized in the absolutist ethics of religious codes.

Furthermore, when religion employs a strategy of specific enunciation of rules of conduct one is likely to overcome changing situations that do not cover the few specific rules that are 'divinely' enunciated for all time. Why, for instance is there no commandment for the honoring of human rights to free thought and free expression? If something so specific like the Sabbath Day is mentioned why not about treating people equally- especially the sexes? How about animal rights or the rights to a clean environment? The Buddha to his credit did emphasize the previous two rights. In fact the Noble Eightfold Path was not a specific set of rules; they were generally expressed guidelines. However, the general applicability had to depend on the definition of what precisely is "Right" in Right Understanding or Right Livelihood etc. thus begging the whole moral question.

These are valid issues that religious morality must face. My personal preference is to state one fundamental source- principle for moral conduct that can be appropriately applied to varying circumstances in a consistent and maintainable manner. The dictum of Confucius who lived during the same time as the Buddha in the sixth century is most suitable. "Do not do unto others," Confucius said, "what you do not want done to yourself." This principle has the advantage of appealing to common sense and to our sense of equity. The Buddha said something similar independently of Confucius when he invoked his audience to put themselves into others' position. In modern times, one of the greatest of philosophers, Emmanuel Kant, put this principle across very profoundly when he stated that one should act in the way that such action should sustain universal application.

In his book *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins refers to the 'spirit of the times' ('Moral Zeitgeist,' he names it). Dawkins points out how values change over time reflecting the spirit of the times. This in turn impacts on society's judgment about issues of moral conduct. Dawkins gives the example of slavery which was accepted during one time and even the Christian Church didn't object to that. Both the victims and enforcers of slavery accepted the institution which is regarded as abominable today. This is an important consideration when discussing ethics and in formulating codes of conduct. Human rights issues are paramount these days while they weren't issues a few decades ago. The Moral Zeitgeist factor makes it more difficult to codify rules of conduct in specific terms for all-time obedience. In the above approach we discover a moral code of conduct for non-religious persons devoid of questionable theology. It is said that God gave the Ten Commandments inscribed on stone tablets to

Moses on the Mount Sinai. Moral conduct can only be guided by general principles of the kind we have set out. They cannot be set in stone for all time.

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HOW A NON-RELIGIOUS PERSON CAN BE A BETTER MORAL BEING



argue further that religion can in fact defile moral goals.

Religions have always claimed a monopoly about what they call 'moral knowledge' or ethics. The Gospel gives the Ten Commandments that a person must follow if he or she is to even dream of entering into heaven. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are greatly influenced by the Ten Commandments. Hindus have twenty ethical guidelines called yamas and niyamas, "restraints and observances." These "do's" and "don'ts" are found in the 6,000 to 8,000-year-old Vedas, mankind's oldest body of scripture, and in other holy texts expounding the path of yoga. The Buddha introduced the Noble Eightfold Path while popular Buddhism required the use of the ritual pansil (five precepts) based on that code. In this way, there is no doubt that all religions have embedded in them certain specified moral codes of conduct.

The problem with conduct codes from religion, however, is that one must take them with the rest of the body of 'revealed' or handed down knowledge which is unpalatable and non-digestible when put under rational scrutiny. They are linked to religio-metaphysical claims like a creator God, a Brahma, or a samsara. A non-believer finds no evidence for such para-natural realities.

Moral conduct is all about living as good men and women. I believe that the foundation of human goodness is compassion and consideration toward others. It is opposed to totally selfish behavior. From this core centered as a reference point specific codes can be constructed. Underlying the requirement of compassion and consideration lie the ability to empathize with others' situations. One cannot be truly moral without empathy. Now, it is abundantly

biological conditioning that is adaptive in the evolutionary sense in that such a kind of empathy is vital for the survival of the species. Man is a social animal and is partly built that way for survival. In this way, religion is rather irrelevant to actual moral conduct.

Richard Dawkins, the eminent Oxford evolutionary biologist, in his first book misleadingly titled "The Selfish Gene" has brought out the altruism innate in the human species. He develops this thesis also in his more recent publication, "The Greatest Show on Earth." As David Lewis Williams states, "We did not evolve from incorrigibly selfish antecedents into a self-centered, innately aggressive species that needed an injection of religion to keep it in line and stop it from destroying itself. On the contrary the animal kingdom exhibits instances of what we may call altruism. Whether or not the creatures themselves think of their actions as altruistic. Darwin himself pointed out in 'The Descent of Man' that collaborative and self-sacrificing behavior was present in numerous species" ('Conceiving God,' David Lewis Williams).

David Lewis Williams also refers to Frans De Wal, Professor of Primate Behavior at Emory University, as citing research on the neural basis for moral judgment. "Neuro imaging has shown that moral judgment involves a number of brain areas, some very ancient in the evolutionary line," adds Davis Lewis Williams. What these scholars say is that while survival of the fittest was operative that was only part of the story. "There was also cooperation, empathy and reciprocity... the topic of altruism is more a matter of biology than theology."

Going on this line of argument you and I are all sort of wired with a basic moral capability on which foundation an explicit guidance for our conduct with each other can be constructed.

On the other hand, the moral codes dictated by

from external compulsion or external inducement.

There is another problem about religious morality, namely that they are codes stated in absolute terms and do not reckon the need for flexibility in interpretation. For instance, we are told not to lie but isn't it all right to lie if that is the only way to save a life? Isn't it all right to lie on a tentative basis for the greater good? The Buddhist panathipatha enjoins us not to take lives. This is a desirable thing but yet it has limitations when stated in absolute terms like this. If the lives of the lower orders like rats etc were not taken for experimentation purposes scientists would not have made the huge medical progress they have achieved today for the greater benefit of all human and non-human animals. We are enjoined not to consume alcohol. How about the fact that alcohols like red wine are recommended for good health? Besides, what's wrong if it is consumed moderately to keep your spirits tuned up during social conversation or when you are in the blues? Again, we are told not to commit adultery. Here again, what is the difference between adultery and the prevalence of sexual relations in a socially accepted polygamous or polyandrous family? Isn't this all a socially constructed ethos? The issue is certainly a valid concern for discourse. Unfortunately, Sharia law doesn't leave an opening for any such debating when it orders the stoning of a woman accused of sexual filippancy. On the other hand, males are free to play about at will. Most of the body of Sharia Law