

Religions can be improved by humanism

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Morality is a system of conduct and beliefs designed to guide people in the customs, taboos, and mores of society. While the moral codes of one society may differ from those of another, there is considerable overlap in the moral ideals of most societies. For example, compassion, caring, trustworthiness, and honesty are common moral values, while murder, deceit, greediness, and violence are moral taboos in most societies.

Many philosophers and moral thinkers use the terms morality and ethics almost interchangeably. For those who use the terms differently, moral principles arise from the everyday working out of situations which result in harmony within a society. For example, honesty is good because it works out best in most situations. In that sense, honesty is practical and socially useful.

On the other hand, ethics takes a slightly more cerebral approach in determining which principles are the best ones to follow. Ethics attempts to seek out broad principles such as truth, justice, equity, and fairness, while morals are more concerned with codes and rules that result in an harmonious society. Thus the ethical principles of Aristotle and Plato differ in their emphasis from the moral imperatives of Immanuel Kant. However, in the end, these differences may be more matters of approach than of substance.

Kant's moral system emphasizes duty, responsibility, and obligation, a view that ties in well with the moral codes of traditional religions, which also emphasize duties, guilt, sanctions, and rewards. Religious believers, rather than concentrating on a strictly cerebral quest for higher ethical principles, are often encouraged to look to God through scriptures or prayers to guide them in finding good morals.

On the other hand, Kant's secular "categorical imperative" directed people to act in such a manner that their actions could become universal moral principles. For example, when considering whether or not an action is morally good, one should also consider whether it would work out successfully if other people were to act in the same way. That is, could the action being considered become a widely held universal type of action? Should I cheat on my income tax? Not if such an action would not work well in a broader universal sense.

Kant's philosophy, though secular, resembles the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" — which can be found within many of the world's major religions.

A secular view of morals can be found in philosophies such as Utilitarianism, Pragmatism, and Humanism. The goal of these three philosophies is to bring about the greatest harmony, the greatest happiness or the greatest good for society. The emphasis here is to arrive at good morals by observing and practising those actions that will result in a benefit to society.

Humanists believe that, while sacred scriptures can guide people in moral principles, these scriptures can also sometimes be divisive and destructive, such as justifying holy wars, rejection of blood transfusions in saving lives, or the belief that God favours one religious or ethnic group over another.

So while sacred scriptures are a guide to moral behaviour, we need also to be aware that too literal or too narrow an interpretation of scriptures can sometimes result in immoral behaviour. A more nuanced view of scriptures may help to set us on a better moral path.

One of the great gifts we have as human beings is our ability to reflect upon our human condition and use our freedom to make choices about our actions. The wise use of freedom also carries responsibilities, which we share with others. Humanists take this moral responsibility conscientiously. We have an obligation to consider how our actions and choices affect the planet and humankind.

Such problems as global warming, pollution, poverty, starvation, homelessness, and the spread of HIV are moral problems that can be understood and addressed through scientific knowledge and a caring attitude toward people of all races and religions. A good start in following moral principles is the recognition that the problems others have are also our problems.

Religions, whether Christianity, Islam, Judaism or others, can be improved by including rather than excluding humanist thoughts. We are all in this search for moral and ethical principles together.