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Being a Christian in an Immoral Society

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Morality refers to that code of conduct which governs the way people should behave in relation to one another. In this sense, morality is a social enterprise.¹ In our human society today where such immoral actions as crime and violence are so common that they are almost acceptable, one wonders whether it is worthwhile attempting to be moral at all. In Kenya, for instance, social evils such as rape, robbery, sexual promiscuity, and murder are common features of social life. Yet about seventy-five percent of the country's population claim to be followers of Christianity - a religion whose basic moral teaching is obedience to the ten commandments and love for one's fellow men. This paper aims at a critical analysis of the need for Christians to be moral while living in an immoral society; in biblical language, the need for Christians to live in the world without being of the world. Basing her discussion on personal experience and the experience and reflection of others, this writer presents

various rationales for why Christians ought to be moral.

The major question which the paper addresses is this: what rational justifications do Christians have for being moral in the context of our immoral society? Any attempt to answer this question implies agreement with Louis Pojman in his assertion that "...the choice of the moral point of view is not an arbitrary choice but a rational one."² Morality is not without rationality since rationality is part of human nature. Rationality is so natural to man that even when he refuses to apply reason at a particular time in his life he has a reason as to why not. Man³ is a thinking being who is aware that he/she is aware.

The first section of this paper presents various reasons why people ought to be moral with particular emphasis on Christians. Thereafter special attention is given to how Christians may remain moral in spite of the immorality of the society in which they live.

Why be Moral?

Generally, people should be moral because they are social beings. This means that people cannot live on their own. The helplessness of human babies, for instance, requires that they be born within a society if they are to survive at all. This social being of man calls for morality since:

The conditions for a satisfactory human life for people living in groups hardly obtain otherwise. The alternative would seem to be either a state of nature in which all or most of us would be worse off than we are, even if Hobbs is wrong in thinking that life in such a state would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"; or levithian civil state more totalitarian than any yet dreamed of.⁴

A description of what a state of nature would be is clearly presented by Pojman in his reflection on *Lord of the Flies*.⁵

According to a renowned moral philosopher who lived in the twentieth century, Immanuel Kant, morality "is a jewel that shines on its own light". By this, Kant seem to have meant that morality is desirable even where its

effects on social relationships are absent. This assertion is inadequate in view of the social enterprise of morality. Morality is so heavily dependent on social relationships that it is not possible to perceive it on its own. Morality shines only in its reflection on the relationship between human beings. If an individual person was to live in isolation from other people, it would not matter whether he/she were moral or not. Just as Bauer argues: "...outside society, people have no reason for following such rules, that is for being moral. In other words, outside society, the very distinction between right and wrong vanishes."

The Christian God is a God of order. Christians are bestowed with the responsibility of maintaining order as the guardians of God's creation. St. Paul the apostle, writing to the Corinthians on order in church noted "...God does not want us to be in disorder but in harmony and peace."⁶ This applies to all spheres of Christians living. Christian scriptures have a lot to say on orderliness in life, giving support for moral social living.

People should be moral because they are naturally egoistic and it is to their own advantage that they be moral. Let me explain. For me to pursue my interests, it is necessary that there be some order in society. Although some immoral actions appear to be in my

self-interest, they may not really be so. For instance, it may appear to be in my interest to cheat in my final year undergraduate degree coursework examination since I will then pass without working hard. But since there is a possibility of being caught cheating in the examinations the result of which would be suspension or even expulsion, cheating may not be to my interest at all. The implication of this argument is that "...it may be in one's interest not to follow one's interest at times."⁷ It is with this in mind that it may be argued that it is always, in the end, to our own interest that we have a sense of moral obligations.⁸ In other words, we act moral because under any other conditions our desires would on the whole be less gratified.⁹

Nevertheless, egoism is not sufficient justification for being moral. This is because sometimes we may be sure of getting away with an immoral act.¹⁰ For instance, supposing I was sure of cheating in examinations without getting caught? Or take another example: supposing I was alone and I found a dead person with a million shillings in his pocket. If I could take the money without anybody getting to know about it would I be morally justified?

Christian ethics become valid here because that morality may not be reduced to egoism. God made man in

His own image.¹¹ This points at the dignity of man which he/she ought to preserve at all times. This calls for man to be moral all the time, irrespective of whether others are moral or not.

Man also possesses a sense of duty. It is generally agreed that killing another person is morally wrong. But supposing I am attacked by a murderer who threatens to kill me. If I have a gun and I shoot him before he kills me, would I be morally justified? I will be in the right because I will have acted in self-defence. I will not only have acted in self-interest but also from a sense of duty: I have a moral obligation to defend myself just as much as I would any innocent bystander. To do otherwise would be to commit suicide. In such a case, it is contrary to reason to refrain from shooting the man.

According to Joseph Butler, "There is a principle of reflection in men, by which they distinguish between, approve and disapprove their own actions." This is the reflective principle of conscience. He held that it cannot be refuted that all men are endowed with conscience. While it cannot be empirically proved that all men have conscience, this cannot be refuted. How else would one explain why people confess to certain immoral actions when nobody would have suspected them? Conscience enables man to wish to be moral all the time. To one great

thinker, Socrates, being moral makes us be in harmony with our inner soul, while immorality corrupts the inner soul; virtue purifies it.¹²

Christians should be moral because they profess and believe in a religion which emphasizes love as the highest virtue. It is the duty of every religious man to act morally towards his fellow men since for all who believe in God, man has a transcendental perspective. Reinhold Niebuhr discussed this perspective thus:

...your neighbour is a son of God and God may be served by serving him, "What ye have done unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done unto me".¹³

Religions demand that man subjects his individual will to the divine will. It is the divine will that we love our neighbours as we love ourselves. The desire to subject individual will to the divine will is, it seems to me, strengthened by the millennial hope which prevails in various religious traditions. In Christianity, for example, the idea that those who lead immoral lives on earth will be punished eternally in hell while those who lead moral lives will be rewarded in heaven is advanced. I do appreciate that this argument does not hold any weight for those who do not believe in God and in life after

death. Personally, I believe in both and wish to promote a way of playing it safe as proposed by Pascal's famous Wager. Pascal argued that the only safe course for man is to believe in God. If there is no God, it won't make any difference once he (man) dies. But if there is God, then he will be in safe hands.

Finally, it seems that people ought to be moral because other people are moral to at least some extent. If others are completely immoral, nobody would have any reason to be moral. Pojman enumerates four related purposes of morality, namely,

- i) to keep society from falling apart.
- ii) to eliminate human suffering.
- iii) to promote human flourishing
- iv) to solve conflicts of interests in just ways.¹⁴

If I were the only one who were moral, none of the above functions would pertain. In the end all men would be in conflict with each other, in which case my being moral would serve no purpose. As long as the society is moral to any significant degree, people should be moral.

In the world today, a significant population are Christians. If only these could all behave morally, everyone else would have little reason not to also be moral. The human race would flourish with minimal suffering and conflicts of interests would be solved in just ways.

How to be Moral

The sole source of guidance on Christian living is the Bible. The whole biblical teaching may be summed up in one single rule "Love your Neighbour as you love yourself." In our world where even the common form of decency is lacking, it may be difficult to apply this maxim but this does not make it impossible.

First and foremost, Christians ought to reconsider their role in their society as the 'salt of the earth'. The true Christian should not join the world's bandwagon in whatever circumstances because in so doing he/she fails in his/her role model as an example to others. Jesus Christ lived in a society that was no less corrupt than our own. The hypocrisy exhibited by the Pharisees, the lawlessness displayed by the Zealots as well as the harsh and cruel rule of the Roman emperors have parallels in our world. Like Jesus, Christians are called to correct this by rebuking hypocrisy, initiating civil obedience and condemning cruel leadership. Jesus presents a perfect example to Christians in our immoral society. Moral action is therefore the first and most important duty of Christians in their societies. A priest in my local church is never tired of preaching love. He says if you want to see God, look at your

neighbour. This implies that all are made in the image of God and to love God is to love one's neighbour. As has been noted, this is the whole of a Christian's moral duty. With the proportion of Christians so high in our population as we have today, if this maxim of love was to be followed, there would be a lot more peace and security in the world. With love for one's neighbour, one would not burn his house, steal his cattle, fail to pay one's share of the taxes, harm his children, rob him in the dark or even rape his wife. Thus the very first duty of every Christian on being moral is to love one's neighbour.

Conclusion

We are living in a world whose moral fibres have decayed to an extent that it is threatened with collapse. Human suffering resulting from human greed has reached an enormous proportion. Nobody seems to be moral any more and human society is falling apart. But there is hope for the human race.

This paper has discussed the role of Christians in the restoration of moral righteousness in our societies. The use of reason in justifying moral living has also been discussed. Christianity is not opposed to secular reasoning though not necessarily in agreement.

The major conclusion drawn out of this presentation is that there is need for change in social behaviour for the survival of the human race.¹⁵ The task of restoring moral living lies heavily on Christians by the use of reason; other people may then realize their call to be moral. The writer calls for a diligent search for wisdom to direct all to engaging in healthy human relationships. This alone is however inadequate, thus the call for divine intervention through prayer.

Notes

1 William Frakena, Ethics (New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India Private Ltd., 1988), 5-9.

2 Louis Pojman, Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1990), 173.

3 In this context, the term 'man' is used in the generic sense; that is, to mean both men and women. It is thus used throughout the paper unless otherwise stated.

4 Frakena, Ethics, 114.

5 Pojman, Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong, 10-12.

6 See: 1 Corinthians 14:33

7 Cited in Pojman, Ethics, 13.

8 Cited by Ethel M. Albert, Theodore C. Denise and Sheldon P. Peterfreund, Great Traditions in

Ethics, 5th edition (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1984), 358.

9 Ibid., 357.

10 Ibid., 355.

11 See: Gen. 1:26f.

12 Cited by Ethel M. Albert et al in Great Traditions in Ethics, 176.

13 Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society

(New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1932), 58.

14 Pojman, Ethics, 13.

15 Cited in Paul Erlich, The Population Bomb: Population Control or Race to Oblivion? (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), 197-198.