

SPECIFICALLY CHRISTIAN MORAL NORMS?

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- A. Five things might be thought to show that there are some specifically Christian moral norms, but in fact do not show this.
1. Sociologically, there is a Christian ethics, just as there is an Aristotelian ethics, a Marxist ethics, and so on. But a sociologically distinct Christian ethics could be (with the others) only a more or less adequate articulation of a moral truth accessible to all, though not equally well accessed by all.
 2. Many Christians maintain that fallen humankind needs Christian revelation to overcome moral confusion and know moral truth. But, even if Christian faith is a necessary means of knowing moral truth, there need be nothing specifically Christian about the moral truth known.
 3. Christians as Church members obviously have duties which people who are not Church members do not have. But such duties could follow from common norms, applied to the ecclesial community, just as the special duties of members of a garden club do not require that there be any specific moral norms applying to them.
 4. Christians believe that grace and faith provide them with fresh power and incentives to live morally good lives. But this does not show that the norms of moral goodness are any different for Christians than for non-Christians.
 5. There are certain specifically Christian attitudes, practices, and virtues. But (assuming that these are morally good) they could be characteristic of one style of morally good life among others, with no particular style required or excluded by any specific moral norms.
- B. I concede four points, without conceding that there are no specifically Christian moral norms.
1. According to the natural-law theory which I have tried to articulate and defend, moral norms depend upon basic human goods and fundamental moral principles. I don't claim that there are any specifically Christian basic human goods or fundamental moral principles. But other factors required to generate moral norms can be specifically Christian.
 2. Some moral norms are not specifically Christian. (I think there are negative moral absolutes, such as "It's always wrong to commit adultery," and I do not think these are specifically Christian.) But even if some norms are not specifically Christian, others can be.
 3. The norms I'll call specifically "Christian" might better be called "Judeo-Christian," since at least some of them began to emerge in the Old Testament. But I am considering the Old Testament to be Christian.
 4. People such as Socrates and the Buddha, who've not heard the Gospel, but are trying to live good lives in what they realize are the very bad conditions of this (as Christians see it, fallen) world, can come close to some specifically Christian moral norms. They come close insofar as they confront the human condition honestly, and try to respond to it with good will. They miss Christian norms (from the Christian point of view, fall short of them) insofar as they don't fully and accurately understand the human situation and so fail to develop an adequate moral strategy for dealing with it.

C. There are some specifically Christian moral norms.

1. What Christians accept as God's revelation (beginning in the Old Testament but completed only in Jesus) requires certain choices--and so makes moral demands--which presuppose that same revelation for their intelligibility.
2. Obvious examples are: "Believe God revealing," "Find, accept, and faithfully fulfill your personal vocation (Take up your cross and follow me)," and "Seek first the kingdom."
3. Some New Testament texts also direct Christians to act in such ways that their whole lives will prepare for or follow through upon sacramental acts (baptism, Eucharist) which are characteristically Christian.
4. For example: "Your light must shine in the sight of men, so that, seeing your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in heaven"; worship God "in a way that is worthy of thinking beings, by offering your living bodies as a holy sacrifice, truly pleasing to God"; and "Never say or do anything except in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."
5. There are many other specifically Christian norms, which are not so obviously distinctive. They have analogues apart from faith, and the same language can be used to express the Christian norms and their analogues.
6. For example: "Forgive as God has forgiven you," "Love your enemies," and "Be prepared for death (the Master's coming)."

D. For norms to be specifically Christian, they must depend essentially on faith. For them to be genuinely moral norms, they must indicate requirements of human fulfillment as such. Thus, there can be specifically Christian moral norms only insofar as properly human fulfillment depends essentially on faith.

1. Affirmative moral norms follow from (a) basic human goods and fundamental moral principles, together with (b) the definition of a kind of act (such that an act of that kind will serve at least some good and not violate any moral principle), and (c) a judgment that there is no morally acceptable alternative to doing an act of that kind.
2. What Christians accept as God's revelation proposes certain kinds of acts which could not be thought of apart from that revelation, or would be uninteresting apart from it, or both.
3. For example, the idea of accepting a personal vocation from God (to cooperate in carrying out a plan he has revealed) is intelligible only within the framework of revelation. The act of believing divine revelation is not just a case of believing somebody offering credible testimony, and it can be interesting only if one judges that there is a revelation.
4. Christian faith also gives an account of the fallen--and--redeemed human condition according to which human persons cannot live consistently morally good lives except by following Jesus. (This position in no way impugns the subjective moral uprightness of people such as Socrates and the Buddha who have striven to know what is right and act on their sincere convictions.) Thus, faith teaches that sometimes there is no morally acceptable alternative to doing something peculiarly Christian, and when that is the case, faith prescribes what must be done.

5. Following Jesus requires doing kinds of acts which one would not think of or which would not be live options except in cooperation with his work. His work is to overcome evil in the world insofar as possible, not for the sake of a this-worldly kingdom, but to prepare the material of the heavenly kingdom.
6. Jesus' work (and thus the whole of Christian life) is thus thought to be cooperation with God in carrying out his plan for human fulfillment. Human morally good acts become rational worship, which merits (because of his promise) God's re-creative act, beginning with Jesus' resurrection.
7. Specifically Christian moral norms prescribe actions which can be understood generically as morally good or, at least, permissible, apart from faith. For example, "Forgive as God has forgiven you" prescribes an act of building up the new covenant communion, but such forgiveness can be understood generically in terms of norms which require that revenge be avoided, no one be harmed, etc.

E. Some reasons why this solution has been overlooked.

1. Human acts often are classified in ways which ignore or abstract from Christian specifications. When such act descriptions are adequate to allow moral evaluation, it is easy to assume that further specifications are accidental to morality, especially if they do not change the moral characterization of the act. For example, since feeding the hungry is considered morally good, the specification of Christian almsgiving to feeding Christ in the hungry is regarded as extrinsic to the "moral" act.
2. Catholic moral theology (from about 1600 to 1960) tended to be minimalistic (focusing on negative precepts); it left everything specifically Christian to "spiritual" theology. So specifically Christian moral norms were not recognized as moral norms but considered to be maxims for a quasi-art of pursuing "holiness."
3. In his Summa theologiae, 1-2, q. 108, art. 2, St. Thomas answers the question: Whether the new law sufficiently directs exterior acts? This article has been misinterpreted by ignoring the focus on exterior acts and the context of comparison between the new law and the old (mosaic) law. Thomas answers that although Christian faith adds doctrinal elements, such as the teaching on the Trinity, no new moral precepts are needed, and that Christians are guided in virtuous works by natural reason. This answer has been treated as decisive for the modern question about specifically Christian moral norms, which Thomas did not exactly ask.
4. The specifically Christian has been reduced by some (Karl Rahner, Josef Fuchs) to supernatural principles (grace, charity) from which (as transcendent to the moral) no moral norms can follow. These same authors think that the moral requirements for actions bearing upon the supernatural are implicit in human nature as such (and so they claim that all humans are "anonymously" Christian, whether they consciously believe in Jesus or not). On this view, the moral ("categorical") content of a good Christian's life is no different from the content of the life of any upright nonbeliever.
5. Although influenced by German idealism, this view has much in common with earlier modern Catholic moral theology. That theology treated heaven and hell as if they were sanctions imposed on behavior lacking any intrinsic relationship to those "places" where one might be "sent." It overlooked the human goodness of the object of Christian hope (resurrection life in a heavenly communion with perfect peace and friendship) and the specification of Christian acts by an intrinsic (not merely instrumental) relationship to such human fulfillment. (For example, it didn't see that in having and raising children, Christian parents can be peopling the everlasting kingdom, which is doing something specifically different from what parents without faith can do.)

- F. The principle that one may not do evil that good may come (the end does not justify the means) is not specifically Christian. Therefore, the absolute moral norms which are entailed by this principle are not specifically Christian.
1. Christian faith does demand absolute reverence for all persons and all the goods which constitute their fulfillment: "Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour; that is why it is the answer to every one of the commandments." For example, apart from exceptions thought to be divinely sanctioned, until quite recently Christians always regarded it as immoral to choose to impede the coming to be or hasten the passing away of any person.
 2. However, the principle that one may not do evil that good may come is a specification of the basic principle of morality, which requires that the will be in accord with the ideal of integral human fulfillment--the flourishing of all human persons in all the basic human goods. Choosing to destroy, damage, or impede some instantiation of a basic human good for the sake of another is playing favorites among goods.
 3. The ethical-theoretical alternative to the principle is some sort of consequentialism (or proportionalism), according to which one should act to maximize benefits or minimize harms. But (as I've argued at length on other occasions) every such theory is incoherent, because moral norms govern choices, and where choices are needed (and possible), the benefits and harms which are anticipated cannot be rationally commensurated. Thus, apparently rational grounds for choosing to do evil that good may come are really mere rationalizations of choices to pursue goals more desirable only emotionally, not rationally.
- G. Nevertheless, consistent adherence to the moral absolutes this principle generates is likely to seem unreasonable to anyone without Christian faith. Thus, the principle, while not specifically Christian, tends in fact to be peculiarly Christian.
1. People need a moral framework for life in this world, and decent people without faith (e.g., Cicero) usually have looked to their civic society to provide that framework. Thus, people generally invest their society with practical ultimacy, and when its survival is at stake, think all necessary means are justified.
 2. For example, if the common good requires it, the innocent may be killed: "You fail to see that it is better for one man to die for the people, than for the whole nation to be destroyed." Similarly, many who otherwise reject choices to kill the innocent and who think that nuclear deterrence necessarily involves a choice to kill the innocent nevertheless try to justify the deterrent's threats of city-swapping and final retaliation, considering them a lesser evil than submitting to Soviet domination.
 3. In the post-Christian world, people generally have a ghost of the Christian hope for a perfect human community (to be realized without God and in this world). Every plan for fulfilling this hope (e.g., Marxism, western secular humanism) seems to those who adopt it to justify the use of every necessary means.
 4. Christian faith reinforces for those who accept it the reasonableness of rejecting the principle that evil may not be done that good may come, for it makes a sharp distinction between human responsibility and God's responsibility. Human persons are not responsible for the overall greater good or lesser evil, for only God knows what they are and can bring them about. Faith requires only that one cooperate with God by faithfully fulfilling one's personal vocation, according to which one will serve others when possible, refrain from any choice which would violate a person, and wait for God's re-creative act which alone will make good human efforts finally fruitful in human well-being.