

Critical Issue Analysis: Is Religion Essential for a Moral Society?

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The critical issue that I chose to analyze concerns whether religion is essential to a moral society. Of all the pressing issues that confront the 21st century world, religion may not be on the top of every person's list. However, at the root of every problem lies religion and ethics. One can argue that a lack of religion or ethics would be the root of any given problem. Yet, the abuse of religion has caused the death, destruction, and oppression of countless people throughout history. With this premise in mind, I chose to read two articles. The first essay was titled "*Religion Is Not Essential to a Moral Society*", written by Dave Matson. The thesis statement within that article is, "*Morality was born in efficient communal living, and that is where we must initially seek its meaning.*" The second essay that I read was titled "*Religion Is Essential to a Moral Society*", written by Philip Yancey. The thesis statement for that article is "*The very concept of morality is undergoing a profound change, led in part by the advance guard of a new science called 'evolutionary psychology'.*" I assumed that I would be polarized toward one argument or the other after reading the articles. This analysis will show why I could not agree with either argument.

Two Facts Presented by Each Side of the Debate

The authors did not rely heavily on factual evidence to support their arguments. In fact, I found it difficult to locate two specific facts from either author. However, I do agree that the following statements are at least based on fact. "*That US Courts today decide cases based on logical interpretations of human law apart from religion*" (Yancey, 2000). I believe this statement is true; our judiciary system is based on interpreting the law and finding verdict accordingly. "*There is no significant example of a society successfully having moral structures without*

reinforcement by religion” (Yancey). I have to agree with this determination; I have not been able to produce any significant examples of morally successful societies without at least one strong religious entity.

“*The evil of an act lies in its consequences - not in who does it*” (Matson, 2000). The author was making a point that no matter who commits an act that harms others, the act is essentially evil.

“*People cannot live together and do as they please*” (Matson). This statement can be considered fact because any culture, large or small, cannot survive if members of that group acted on every whim. Human desire, when allowed to freely reign, can have very detrimental effects on the subjects of that desire. Rape, murder, torture, and covetous are all very real manifestations of the darker side of humanity.

Two Opinions Presented by Each Side of the Debate

A recurring opinion that Yancey made in his essay referred to the necessity of a higher authority. His belief that without God man cannot be moral, is the main argument throughout his work.

“*Unless people can locate a source of moral authority instead of human sentiment, we will always be subject to dangerous moral consensus*” (Yancey). This statement was made in context to Hitler murdering the Jewish people in Germany and to Aristotle defending slavery. Another main theme that Yancey relied on was the proverbial “*slippery slope.*” The essay was full of scenarios ranging from slavery to molestation of children to demonstrate that morality can only be within a religious framework. “*Without a higher authority to rely on, moral outrage cannot exist*” (Yancey). Thus, stated repeatedly that morality cannot be manifest from human intellect and can only be determined by God.

“The basic needs of all societies are quite similar inasmuch as the basic human needs are similar” (Matson). The author’s opinion and the essence of his argument are that humans are naturally moral and that societies all have basic ethical requirements. A sociological group will deteriorate if revenge, rape, and theft are not constrained by law. *“Animal communities, each according to their particular needs, must also obey moral laws and conventions in order to function efficiently”* (Matson). This opinion cannot be deemed as fact because the assumption is made that animals comprehend morals. The actions of an animal caring for offspring or adhering to a group can also be considered as survival instinct. There are documented cases of patients reviving after an extensive coma who seem to react to stimuli but, in fact have irreversible damage to their cerebral hemispheres, which regulate consciousness, self-awareness, and personality. Hence, when an action appears as moral or ethical it is not necessarily so.

The Problems of Matson’s Arguments Against the Need for Religion in a Moral Society.

The notion that animals follow moral laws and conventions is not justified by scientific evidence. One would need to be able to communicate with an animal group to study the psychology behind the actions of that group. The author’s attempt to quantify human and animal behavior as one and the same weakens the argument against the need for religion. Matson stated that *“even though the boundaries are a bit fuzzy, morality is absolute”* (Matson). Because morals and ethics have several factors that determine right from wrong, morality cannot be absolute. In fact, as with virtually every known thing, the subject is not just black and white; there are several shades of gray.

Matson states that morality is not a commandment of God, then asserts that God chooses freely of moral rules that work. Even when an argument involves questions of religion, faith, and

belief one cannot assume the thought process of a deity, which is unsubstantiated. Guesses, assumptions, opinions, and theses should not be professed as factual when discussing theological concepts. A more accurate analysis of dogma would be a comparison against other religions and philosophies and the supporting religious texts. Matson makes the claim that we can judge God for immoral decisions. This is an inflammatory statement, possibly to provoke an emotional response and weaken any counter-arguments. An argument should stay logical and informed. Likewise, Matson also declares that giving God a free pass from judgment because God is a higher form of life renders God as weak. This is also a hostile statement, most likely to prompt an emotional response and throw an opponent off-balance.

I have never been a fan of the anthropological concept of God as a man in the clouds acting human. Matson either purposely or incidentally confuses the issue about his own beliefs regarding God's place in the universe. A better argument could have been made by contemplating the pure logic or the possible motives of a higher form of life and the ramifications of any godly action for humanity. When Matson states that God has no claim to morality because God needlessly torments lower-life forms, the author sheds logic and displays his disdain for church doctrine. The motivations for the essay become clear when the author reveals his personal feelings about religion. Had Matson explored this aspect of his reasoning within the essay with supporting evidence, the argument would be stronger.

The Problems of Yancey's Argument for the Need of Religion in a Moral Society

Yancey declares that there is a complete rejection of moral sources, unprecedented in human history. On the contrary, human history is replete with an apparent rejection of morality, even after the establishment of Christian doctrine. There are in fact, many instances of brutality and

suffering inflicted for a stated morality, such as the Inquisition and the Salem Witch Trials. I do not believe that today's society rejects moral sources anymore than say the Roman Empire or Sodom and Gomorrah.

The author asserts that Christianity brought an end to slavery. The first point one can make is that American slave owners were Christians but that is not an argument that Christianity promotes slavery. Conversely, Christian values and natural moral codes intertwine because most people have an understanding of right from wrong, which Christian dogma tries to instill. This does not prove that it was Christianity that put an end to slavery. In fact, to the Northern states the Civil War was more about maintaining all the States as a union than about freeing slaves. Yancey proclaims that slavery and the oppression of women are based on an embryonic form of Darwinism. Both Slavery and oppression are as old as religion itself. Several Biblical scholars have hypothesized that early church doctrine promoted woman suffrage, class distinction, and subjugation. The scholars point to the male-dominated Church hierarchies, the editing and interpretations of scripture, the depiction of biblical women as sub-ordinate to men, and the continuation of those doctrines today.

Yancey claims that Aristotle's defense of slavery and elitism is word-for-word translations of evolutionary psychology, without giving any logical basis. The author did not provide corresponding documentation that supports his allegation. One is left only with Yancey's myopic conclusion asserted as fact. Quoting Aristotle and an evolutionary psychologist, who makes the same case for slavery and elitism, would strengthen the author's allegation.

A recurring argument that Yancey makes is that without higher moral authority, all moral arguments and moral outrage are incoherent. This contention disregards the basic premise that

we are born with a conscience and that most abhorrent behavior, such as bigotry, is learned.

Yancey's arguments imply either that we are not born with moral understanding, or that we are but do not know what to do with that understanding. Either way, Yancey insists that humans can only look to God for moral authority. People are born with intellect, conscience, and spirituality. In the absence of religion, myth, or law people would still be able to make moral judgements since humankind had morals that created spiritual pursuits and social order. However, even this statement can be reduced to the chicken and the egg argument; did man develop morals from religion and law or did early man create religions and law because of inherent moral codes?

Yancey claims that the symptoms of societal ills are because of a lack of design or purpose. On the contrary, there seems to be a noticeably clear purpose within our society for material gain. The new morality of elitism and neo-feudalism makes clear that morality can be subjective to cultural influence and direction. That does not make the current form of Capitalism and Democracy just. Within every Dark Age there are many people who adhere to a deeper sense of righteousness. There are many factors that contribute to the societal ills that we face including class warfare, dis-information, and a perversion of religious doctrine. Yancey asserts that no successful society survived without religion. Innate human spirituality has influenced every culture because men and women have an underlying understanding that life is more than immediate concerns and desires. In fact, every society that had any morals used or co-existed with religion to instill those morals. Every culture had Gods and myths that explained natural phenomena and answered deeper questions like "*How did the world begin*" and "*what happens to our spirits when we die.*"

One of the factors that weaken Yancey's arguments is his repeated use of the proverbial "*slippery slope*." In one example the author alleges that his gay friend believes that same-sex marriage would lead to the legalization of polygamy, incest, and rape. In another example, the author claims that sex for any other reason than procreation leads to abhorrent sexual practices. Although, I cannot speak to Yancey's claim of a gay friend that detests the idea of same-sex marriage, I have spoken with several homosexual couples who wish to have the same rights and privileges of heterosexual couples. Discrimination is the subjection of a group of people to a sub-standard citizenry and set of laws. I question the continued argument and implication that freedom of religion is freedom of bigotry, which Yancey put forth in his friend's scenario. Likewise, there are many married couples in America and across the globe who do not or cannot procreate but enjoy a healthy sex life. To a person who believes that sex should only be for procreation, a husband having a vasectomy and still making love to his wife is considered profane behavior. Thus, the notion of abhorrent sexual behavior is subjective. One can assume that forced sex or rape, child molestation, incest, and bestiality are almost universally deemed as immoral.

Additionally, Yancey proclaims that marriage is senseless in a morally neutral society. This statement implies that marriage is only a religious ceremony thereby negating same-sex marriage, as most religions will not accept homosexuality as natural. A marriage is a covenant between two people. The interjection of religious connotation to marriage is optional. When two people of differing doctrines marry, the couple must decide what type of ceremony to perform if any. In a society based on equality and freedom of religion we must all respect each other's choices and beliefs.

The Propaganda Techniques Used by Each Author

As I pointed out in the problems with Yancey's argument, the author used the slippery slope technique constantly. Rather, one should provide possible solutions to each problem posed. If same-sex marriage will usher in legalization of polygamy, incest, or rape the law should clearly state that marriage is between two people only. Likewise, most people consider incest to be distasteful and wrong. Why not ensure that federal legislature states incest, like rape, is a crime? Yancey twice belittled opposing views by calling them the "*Alice in Wonderland world of untethered ethics*". This tactic, along with taking quotes out of context and applying them to his "*opposition*" was fallacious.

Matson starts off logically, but halfway through his essay his disdain for church doctrine distorts his message. From that point there was a lack of logical analysis. The essay was laden with assumptions, conjecture, and some disjointed similes. Using animal behavior to prove that morals are natural degrades the argument that human beings are spiritually or intellectually superior to animals. The references seem to lean towards a Darwinian sense of naturalism. While this can lend some anthropological support to his argument, Matson should also include references from other religions and scientific fields, such as psychology. The author attacks Christian doctrines and beliefs, for example "*We may consign to oblivion the claim, so often heard, that the Bible sets the standard for morality*" (Matson). While evidenced by the statement, "*the Japanese, for example, are a highly moral people despite being unfamiliar with the Bible*" (Matson), his arguments denigrated his debate when he questions God, rather than the concepts behind the faiths.

The Credibility and Credentials of Each Author

Yancey has written several theological books and earned his graduate degree in English and Communication. His writings draw from his personal experiences of finding faith after leaving the church. Dave Matson is a writer and an editor for the Oak Hill Free Press. His works argue against religious doctrines such as creationism and the origins of morality. Although neither author is a Biblical or sociological scholar, they are contemporaries as they use personal knowledge and insight to pose philosophical questions to affirm individual belief.

Which Author Appeared to be the Most Empirical When Presenting His Thesis?

Both authors struck me as being very empirical. Although they cited outside sources, those sources were non-evidentiary in nature; quotes from other writers taken out of context or researched with apparent bias.

The Biases of the Authors

I believe both writers are biased. Their writing seems to reflect personal agendas for and against the church. Yancey repeatedly assails secular thought as inferior to the will of God, while Matson's contempt for Christian doctrine belies his arguments. Yancey should acknowledge that although religious doctrine is hostile towards secular intellect, both ideologies have their strengths and weaknesses. In this way, Yancey could paint religious doctrine as intellectually spiritual in much the same way as Buddhism. Matson should avoid displaying complete contempt for church doctrine and the questioning of God. If he instead maintains his rational rebuttal of every claim made by religions, his thesis will challenge those doctrines more effectively. Fundamentalist claims will crumble from scrutiny if reason and intellect are pragmatically applied.

In conclusion, neither argument convinced me one way or the other. Spirituality stems from an underlying human need to connect to the world beyond immediate perception. As a species, each of us believes that there is more to reality than what we see, hear, and taste. This basic human condition of intellect and contemplation has compelled us since the dawn of civilization to seek answers about the world and beyond. Each culture created religion, myths, and gods, which gave answers to mysteries and laws to socialize us. Because of this, no culture has been without religion in one form or another. There is no precedent in which to base a thesis in either direction. Humans are born with conscience and morals, but also desire and intellect. The basic tenet of any religion is faith; otherwise, there would be tangible proof of God's existence. Mankind was given the right to choose right from wrong and the intelligence to justify and debate those choices. Is religion necessary for a moral society? Probably not, but there is no social experiment to prove otherwise. We are left only with a drive to contemplate the possibilities and dream of a universal truth.

References

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