

Moral Codes



Ten Commandments to Golden Rule

MORALITY SPLITS FROM RELIGION: EUROPEAN ENLIGHTENMENT, EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ♦

For many people, the terms "morality" and "religion" are vaguely related yet distinctly different ideas.

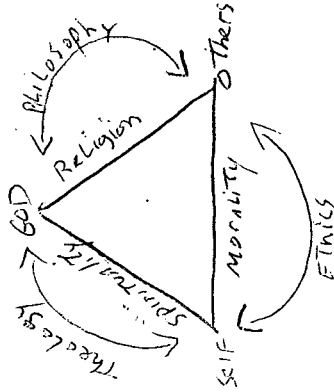
Morality, we like to say, pertains to an individual's conduct and his or her relationships with other people. *Morality* involves *relationships between human beings*. *Morality* is concerned with conduct in the here and now.

Religion involves the *relationship between human beings and God*, or transcendent reality. *Religion* is concerned with how conduct in the here and now will influence one's standing in the hereafter. Whereas a "religious" person believes in an afterlife, a "moral" person need not believe there is anything after death except bodily decay.

The truth is, this distinction between morality and religion, often said to be a blight on our times, is rather recent in origin. No more than three hundred years old. And it came about for a very simple reason.

Although the Greek philosophers debated these two ideas, the popular modern notion that religion and morality are separate phenomena is rooted in the Enlightenment of eighteenth-century Europe, the philosophical movement characterized by aggressive rationalism, high-spirited skepticism, a love of learning, and a doggedness in thinking things through. Faith suffered. Blind belief was ridiculed. Religion and morality parted ways in the popular mind of the times. An "enlightened" person could say, "Oh, I'm not at all religious, but I'm highly moral," a distinction that was unheard of in earlier times.

The split between morality and religion was precipitated, ironically, by religion. European thinkers, weary of centuries of religious strife and holy



wars—Crusades, Inquisitions, schisms, the sale of indulgences, hypocritical pontiffs, the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation—sought to elaborate ethical codes based not on divine revelation but on human reason, or at the very least on shared human sentiments.

By the early nineteenth century, it was possible to conceive of ways of thinking and acting morally that were not dependent upon religious revelation. Consequently, people began to question why throughout human history the ideas of religion and morality had been linked so closely.

Indeed, Sigmund Freud argued that religion must be abandoned because it undermines moral responsibility and encourages fantastical thinking and fanaticism: belief in miracles and in the superiority of one's own faith.

These views in our own century have been challenged most strongly by the comparative study of religions and their most revered moral codes. It is evident that all religions require strikingly similar codes of behavior. We'll examine the origins of religious precepts that mandate moral conduct—such as the Ten Commandments of Judaism; the Traditions of Muhammad in Islam; the Ten Precepts of Buddha; the Analects of Confucius; the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy in Christianity.

TEN COMMANDMENTS: PRE-OLD TESTAMENT PERIOD ♦

This decalogue ("ten words") of moral law, inscribed on two stone tablets, traditionally was given by God through Moses to his Chosen People for guidance in conducting their lives in accord with the demands of the Covenant God established with them as a divine gift.

In fact, the laws were *twice* written on stone on Mount Sinai. The first tablets Moses smashed upon witnessing his people lapse into the old pleasures of idolatry: "He came into camp and saw the calf, and the dancing, and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands and broke them" (Exod. 32:19). The second tablets were safely stored in the Ark of the Covenant (Exod. 40:18).

The Commandments appear in two places in the Hebrew Bible, in Exodus 20:1-14 and in Deuteronomy 5:6-18, and are alluded to or quoted in part in several other places, as well as in the New Testament. The differences between the Exodus and Deuteronomy listings are quite small, reflecting changes over time in the way the Israelites understood the code and applied it. Both the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy were written sometime between the years 1400 to 1200 B.C.E.

Jews, Roman Catholics, and Protestants enumerate the Ten Command-



Moses breaking the Tablets of the Law: "He saw the calf, and the dancing, and . . . he cast the tablets out of his hands."

ments in different ways. For Jews, the First Commandment is "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Christianity, on the other hand, has deleted all reference to Jewish history, pruning the laws to their basic fiat.

ORIGIN. For scholars, it is clear that the legal materials of the Hebrew Bible developed over centuries, reaching one codification in Moses' time. Clearly, much of the substance of the Ten Commandments is unique to Moses' period of history. This is particularly true of the requirement of "one day in seven for rest," the day of the Sabbath, and the shunning of idolatry, two ideas without precedent in the ancient Near Eastern world. These *moral* codes determined how Israelites were to conduct their *religious* life; morality and religion then going hand in hand.

It is interesting to contrast the Judeo-Christian Decalogue with the moral codes, given below, of other faiths. Notice in particular how many are "positive" statements (Thou shall) versus the number that are "negative" (Thou shall NOT); reprimand of this sort is psychologically a more effective deterrent, more indelibly etched in memory.

1. I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt NOT have strange gods before Me.
2. Thou shalt NOT take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.
4. Honor thy father and thy mother.
5. Thou shalt NOT kill.
6. Thou shalt NOT commit adultery.
7. Thou shalt NOT steal.
8. Thou shalt NOT bear false witness against thy neighbor.

9. Thou shalt NOT covet thy neighbor's wife.
10. Thou shalt NOT covet thy neighbor's goods.

The Commandments warned Israelites against conduct that would be ruinous to their survival as a community. Judaism, unlike Christianity, has always emphasized most strongly *this* life as opposed to life in the hereafter.

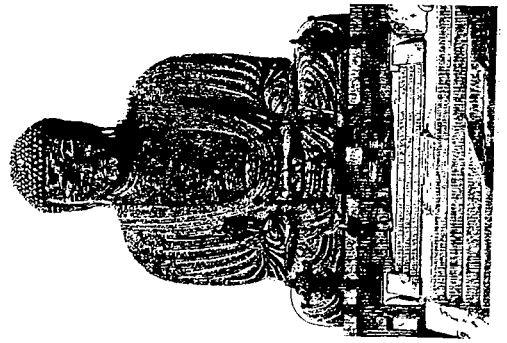
TEN PRECEPTS OF BUDDHA: SIXTH CENTURY B.C.E. ♦

In Buddhism, morality (*sila*) involves correct speech, correct actions, and correct livelihood. Moral conduct is a stage of development that leads an individual along the Eightfold Path of spiritual progress, culminating in wisdom or enlightenment.

Time is cyclical; reincarnation is unavoidable if a Buddhist has not become fully enlightened the first time around. Following the moral code eliminates the distractions to enlightenment. Ideally, the goal of a Buddhist is to extinguish the flame of human desire, achieve detachment from the self, such that rebirth does not occur, and the ultimate Nirvana is attained.

The Ten Precepts, or *dasas-sila*, recast in Judeo-Christian format for the sake of comparison:

1. Thou shalt NOT take another's life.
2. Thou shalt NOT take that which is not given.
3. Thou shalt NOT engage in sexual misconduct.
4. Thou shalt NOT engage in false speech.



Buddha. Buddhism has Ten Precepts—like the Ten Commandments.

5. Thou shalt NOT use intoxicants.
6. Thou shalt NOT eat after midday.
7. Thou shalt shun worldly amusements.
8. Thou shalt NOT adorn with ornaments and perfumes.
9. Thou shalt NOT sleep on high or luxurious beds.
10. Thou shalt NOT accept gold or silver.

The first five Precepts, the *panca-sila*, are to be observed by monks and laymen alike. As for number three, sexual misconduct is anything less than celibacy for a monk, and anything less than the accepted social norm, such as adultery, for everyone else. Normally, all Ten Precepts are followed only by Buddhist monks and nuns.

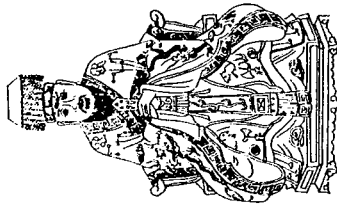
THE ANALECTS OF CONFUCIUS: FIFTH CENTURY B.C.E. TO FIRST CENTURY C.E. ♦

The word "analects" means "selected sayings." These moral precepts were supposedly composed by Confucius himself, who was born around 551 B.C.E. and died in 479 B.C.E. However, Chinese scholars debate the authenticity of that claim the way Western scholars argue over the validity of Jesus' words in the Gospels, and Socrates' words in the dialogues of Plato. It is likely that these "selected sayings," *Lun yü* in Chinese, which occupy four books, came together gradually, over several hundred years.

The numerous Analects cover all the basic ethical concepts of Confucius. They discuss the importance of "benevolence," *jen*, toward one's fellow man. They lay out the concept of the "holy man" (the West's equivalent of saint), *chün-tzu*; the requirements to get into "Heaven," *T-ien*; as well as "proper conduct" in daily life, *li*.

Interestingly, the "sayings" are quite specific in that all phases of a person's life must be in perfect harmony with "names" that identify that particular aspect of life; for example, a marriage must be true to the word "marriage" and not be expanded to encompass such things as concubinage. This is the principle of *cheng ming*, or "adjustment to names." A couple cannot have an "open" marriage, or "modern" marriage; adjectives only taint the original purity of the concept of the noun.

The Analect closest to the Judeo-Christian "Honor thy father and thy mother" is the *hsiao*, or precept of "filial piety." *Hsiao* does not mean merely providing for one's elderly parents, for "even dogs and horses do that," said Confucius; filial piety is inseparable from a deep and genuine lifelong respect of children for their parents.



Confucius, political and ethical philosopher.

1. Do NOT set up another god with God.
2. Be good to your parents, look after them with kindness and love.
3. Give to your relatives what is their due.
4. Do NOT be niggardly, nor so extravagant that you may later feel reprehensive and constrained.
5. Do NOT abandon your children out of fear of poverty.
6. Do NOT go near fornication, for it is an immoral and evil way.
7. Do NOT take a life, which God has forbidden, except in just cause.
8. Do NOT touch the property of others, except for bettering it.
9. Do NOT follow that of which you have no knowledge.
10. Do NOT strut about the land with insolence.

THE GOLDEN RULE: ALL FAITHS, ANTIQUITY ♦

The Hebrew Book of Leviticus, written between the years 1400 to 1200 B.C.E., served as a handbook for the ancient priests of Israel. Much of it is devoted to specific regulations concerning offerings, sacrifices, ritual purity, ordination, feasts, and festivals. But one line has withstood the passage of time: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Lev. 19:18).

In rabbinic Judaism, it was recast as a negative statement by the sage Hillel: "Do NOT do unto others, what is hateful to you."

The origin of the Christian Golden Rule is Matthew 7:12 (King James Version): "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them."

The origin of the Chinese Golden Rule is the Analects of Confucius 12:2: "Do NOT do to others what you would not like yourself." The sage goes on to say: "Then there will be no feelings of opposition to you, whether it is the affairs of a state that you are handling or the affairs of a family."

The origin of the Golden Rule in Buddhism is the *Dhammapada*, 10:129-30: "Having made oneself the example, one should neither slay nor cause to slay." The text goes on to clarify the maxim: "As I am, so are other beings; thus let one not strike another, nor get another struck [by someone else]. That is the meaning."

The Golden Rule is so simple, so universal, and unfortunately so underused. To apply it in everyday life, round the world, would solve most problems. Treat others the way you want to be treated yourself.

The tone and format of the Analects can be appreciated in the opening lines of the First Book:

1. To learn, and in proper time to repeat what one has learned, is that not after all a pleasure?
That friends should come to one from afar, is this not after all a delight?
To remain unsoured even though one's merits are unrecognized by others, is that not after all what is expected of a gentleman?
2. Those who in private life behave well toward their parents and elder brothers, in public life seldom show a disposition to resist the authority of their superiors.

DECALOGUE OF THE KORAN: ISLAM, SEVENTH CENTURY C.E. ♦

Also called the Traditions of Muhammad, Islam's Decalogue, or Ten Laws, are, like the Hebrew Ten Commandments (in Exodus), found in Sacred Scripture: Koran, 17:22-39.

The chapter in which they're listed, number 17, is titled "The Children of Israel." The text makes clear that God "gave Moses the Book, and made it a guidance for the children of Israel" (17:2). However, God or Allah, through the intercession of the archangel Gabriel, revealed additional Sacred Scripture to Muhammad, starting in the year 610 C.E., and ending shortly before the Prophet's death. Thus, it should not be surprising that the Decalogue in Islam is very close to the Hebrew Ten Commandments.

Extracted from the Koran's long text and arranged with the negative emphasized for the sake of comparison:



"Visit the sick"—a corporal work of mercy.

**CORPORAL AND SPIRITUAL WORKS OF MERCY:
CHRISTIANITY, MIDDLE AGES ♦**

Roman Catholicism, reaching back to medieval times, has assembled two lists of moral actions that affect the bodies and souls of the faithful. (For the Eight Beatitudes of Jesus Christ, see Beatitudes.)

During the Middle Ages, when these lists were codified, they were often the subject of paintings and sculptures, many still extant. In today's frenetic and self-centered world, these simple precepts that are more than a thousand years old have undiminished relevance.

The corporal works of mercy that fortify one's body:

1. Feed the hungry.
2. Give drink to the thirsty.
3. Clothe the naked.
4. Visit the imprisoned.
5. Shelter the homeless.
6. Visit the sick.
7. Bury the dead.

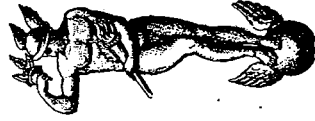
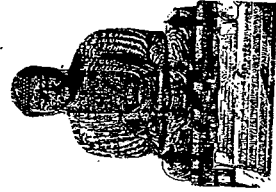
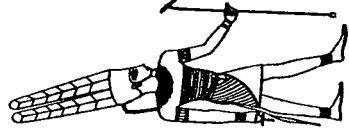
The spiritual works of mercy that strengthen one's soul:

1. Admonish the sinner.
2. Instruct the ignorant.
3. Counsel the doubtful.
4. Comfort the sorrowful.
5. Bear wrongs patiently.
6. Forgive all injuries.
7. Pray for the living and the dead.

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