



## Morality versus Godliness

There is much talk these days about something called “Judaean-Christian values.” This is the name that is invariably assigned to the morality to which America is supposed to have traditionally subscribed. America, we are told, is a “Judaean-Christian” nation, a nation “founded” upon “Judaean-Christian principles” or “ideals.”



Now, it is, of course, true that there is an especially close relationship between Judaism and Christianity. The latter spun out of the former. The first Christians were Jews, and the Man whom the Christian world — approximately one-third of the planet’s population — recognizes as the incarnation of God Almighty was *a Jew*. To those writings that Jews regard as sacred Christians attach the same importance. In fact, though he doesn’t often think of himself in exactly these terms, if pushed, the Christian would be the first to acknowledge that he is indeed a Jew, but a *perfected Jew*, a Jew who lived to witness the coming of the Messiah — *the Christ*.

Yet for all of these similarities, the expression “Judean-Christian morality” is, ultimately, a fiction that does an injustice to both Judaism and Christianity.

The “values,” “principles,” or “ideals” encompassed by “Judaean-Christian morality” are to the traditions from which they have been abstracted what a portrait is to the whole life of the person of whom it is a depiction. The values, principles, and ideals of “Judean-Christian morality” stand in relation to the faiths from which they’ve been distilled as the principles of a grammar stand in relation to the living language to which they belong. Just as a portrait and a grammar derive their value from their usefulness in summarizing the vastly more intricate phenomena to which they owe their being, so too are “the principles” of any morality nothing more or less than bloodless, lifeless abstractions, static abridgements of the living tradition of which they are CliffsNotes.

Strictly speaking, neither Judaism nor Christianity is a “morality” at all. Both are *religions*. It is true that from these religions we can extract principles, values, and ideals. It is even true that we can, with some justice, gather them up and label them “morality.” But what we *cannot* do is think of them *solely* in terms of morality, or think that this label is anything other than a term of convenience, a term with all of the short-hand value and literal truth as the expression, “the sun rises.” The sun does not literally rise. Nor can it literally be said that Judaism and Christianity are “systems” of morality.

The principles, ideals, and values of Judaism and Christianity are intelligible only because of the unmistakably *theological* context within which they take their place. In short, if we insist on speaking of Judaism and Christianity as “systems” at all, we should be clear that they are systems, not of morality, but of religion. Their principles assume meaning only because they are carefully situated within a narrative of which no less a being than God Himself is at the center. It is for the purpose of shaping themselves into the kind of person who will love self, neighbor, and God *for God’s sake* that their adherents are expected to observe “the principles,” affirm “the values,” and pursue “the ideals” of these two great religious traditions.

Once these principles, ideals, and values become disembodied, as it were, once they are boiled down into a doctrine of “natural rights,” say, or some fixed set of principles alleged to be “self-evident” or



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“innate” or demanded by “human nature” or “Reason,” they lose their identity and, with it, their power to inspire and motivate.

Now, the concept of “Judaean-Christian” morality is even more of a distortion than the concepts of “Jewish *morality*” and “Christian *morality*.” Judaism and Christianity are both religious traditions, but there is a very real respect in which we can say that they affirm different deities.

With a few exceptions here and there, Christians the world over essentially agree on the *triune* nature of God. That is, in stark contrast to Jews, Christians believe that God is Three Divine Persons — God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. To Jewish ears, this doctrine of the Blessed Trinity can only smack of the worst of sins, the sin of *idolatry*, for to non-Christians of all faiths it appears to be an affirmation of *polytheism*. And Judaism is noted for nothing if not its fierce monotheism.

Christianity, of course, is *not* a version of polytheism. It is as monotheistic as Judaism. But Christians have arrived at their peculiar conception of God because of another that they embrace, one in the absence of which Christianity would not be the religion that it is. From this doctrine Jews and other theists recoil in sheer horror. It is called the Incarnation. Inasmuch as it embodies the conviction that, not *this* or *that* “god,” but the one and only *God* of all that is, from sheer love, chose to become *a human being*, it is truly unique.

Yet this isn’t all.

It isn’t just that God became a man. According to the story of the Incarnation, God became a man who, for the sake of the human race, both bore unimaginable *suffering* as well as the most humiliating of *deaths*. To put it mildly, the God of Christianity strikes non-Christians as insufficiently transcendental. To put it more bluntly, such a God comes across as scandalously [immanent](#).

But the God of Christianity *is* the Person of Jesus of Nazareth.

The God that Christians worship entered human history and, as the prologue to John’s Gospel states, “dwelt among us.” Like that of any other human being, Jesus’ identity was the product of the historical and cultural circumstances in which He lived. This He appears to have known better than anyone, for in order to thrust His significance upon His contemporaries, Jesus carefully — masterfully — weaved His image from the various threads of His own Jewish tradition. Unlike, say, Muhammad, who gathered together a series of allegedly divinely inspired orders and commands devoid of any narrative framework, Jesus saw to it that His life, or at least His public ministry, was nothing less than a dramatic reenactment of the collective self-understanding of His (Jewish) people. Yet it was also something more than this, for in *reenacting the past*, He also *revised* popular conceptions of it. And in doing the latter, there is a real sense in which He *recreated the present* and *re-envisioned possibilities for the future*.

Jesus is what in another idiom we may describe as a “moral exemplar.” For Christians, it would be said that he is a moral exemplar *par excellence*. Here is a man who *immersed* Himself in the tradition within which He was born and reared. Jesus wasn’t content in achieving mere *fluency* in His tradition; He successfully sought *connoisseurship* in it. Jesus made no ringing affirmations of such abstract notions as “human dignity,” “rational nature,” “personhood,” and “human nature,” much less “self-evident” “human rights.” He knew that human flourishing could occur only within the concrete context of tradition — His tradition, the *theological* tradition of Judaism. It was this tradition that Jesus sought to reshape and fulfill in His own Person, but ultimately in His passion, death, and resurrection from the dead.

For Christians, then, “morality” is not essentially, or even primarily, a matter of observing “principles,”



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pursuing abstract ideals (like Equality or Justice), or following rules and commands. “Morality” consists in the emulation of a person, or a Person. Jesus is indeed *the* exemplar of stellar conduct for Christians. But the conduct in question is not, strictly speaking, moral conduct; it is *godly* conduct. Christians (and Jews) aspire toward godliness. The religious are concerned with *religiosity*, not “morality.”

“Morality,” especially when it is a morality of abstract universal “principles” and “ideals,” is “the desiccated relic,” as one philosopher once put it, the residual fragments, of a tradition.

More specifically, it is, at least in the West, the traces of a religious tradition.



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