

Religious Ethical Systems

Christian Ethics

Christianity is one of the world's major religions and has also had a huge effect on Western culture and government. Christians believe in God and also in the teachings of Jesus who they regard as being an aspect of God. The main basis of the Christian ethical system is the bible and specifically the 10 Commandments in the part of the bible called "The Old Testament". The "Old Testament" is the part of the Bible that is shared with Judaism and which also influenced Islam. On the other hand Christianity also derives an ethical viewpoint from the teachings of Jesus. Jesus' teachings are contained in the part of the Bible known as the "New Testament". Jesus' teachings are not exactly the same as the 10 Commandments and have a different emphasis.

The 10 Commandments are Divine Command ethics. In other words they derive from laws set down by God. They are also meant to be objective and universal. Ethics from Jesus' teachings are similar to the 10 Commandments in that they teach obedience to God but they also stress virtues as well as the famous ethical principle known as the Golden Rule (see below).

Christianity has split many times into different versions. Depending on what kind of Christianity a person practices they may have different ethical views. Some Christians are pacifists others are not for example.

Islamic Ethics

Islamic ethics derive from the Islamic holy book known as the Koran. Koran is to be taken as the word of Allah (the Islamic name for the same God as in the Jewish and Christian faiths). Because Islam derives from a common root with Christianity there are many similarities but Islam further emphasises the Divine Command aspect of ethics. Islam teaches that a person should surrender to God's will. Whereas Christianity ditched many Old Testament rules beyond the 10 Commandments, Islam maintained and reinforced many of them. Consequently Islam has strict rules on the preparation of food, drinking alcohol and other aspects of life. Consequently Islam also emphasises the importance of duty more than Christianity.

Like Christianity Islamic ethics are meant to be objective and largely universal although some rules only apply if you are actually a Muslim.

Buddhist Ethics

The teachings of Buddha are very virtue centred and although the ethics derive from a religion they are not Divine Command ethics. Buddhism emphasises balance and harmony: with an avoidance of dangerous extremes. Buddhism also stresses the various ways in which you can acquire virtues via what is known as the Eightfold Path (Right Views, Right Thoughts, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration).

Although Buddhism does not have commandments like Judaism or Christianity there are 5 precepts which are similar to commandments but are more like maxims or moral guidelines.

It is hard to classify Buddhist ethical beliefs using the terms objective, subjective, universal and relative. This is in part because Buddhism has a very different view of the world with much of what might be regarded as reality being a distraction or illusion.

Buddhism does specifically reject hedonism as a view of ethics. It is people's obsession with the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain that distracts them from finding inner peace and freedom from rebirth.

Confucian Ethics

Confucius, (or KONGFUZI or K'UNG FU-TZU) was a Chinese philosopher who lived sometime between 550 BCE and 480BCE. Although not a religious figure he has had a similar influence on China and Chinese communities as Jesus and Mohammed have had in other parts of the world.

Confucius taught an ethical system that combined a view based on both virtues and duty. Confucius' ethics had five virtues; kindness, uprightness, decorum, wisdom, and faithfulness. He also believed that people had duties towards their family and parents (living and dead) as well as duties towards the state.

The Golden Rule

The Golden Rule is a moral maxim that has been phrased and rephrased many times and from many ethical systems. There are many versions for example:

"Do as you would be done by"

"Love your neighbour as yourself"

Versions of the Golden Rule can be found in the sayings of Jesus, the teachings of Confucius as well as in the writings of notable figures in Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism. Some people have suggested that the Golden Rule is the only possible universal ethical rule because it builds into itself a degree of relativism and subjectivity.