

Wednesday, April 01, 2009

Was Jesus a "Great Moral Teacher"?

Like the uninventive refrain on an over-enthusiastic toothpaste jingle, we've all heard it so many times: "Jesus was a great moral teacher." It is repeated over and over, most gleefully of course by Christians, with the most uncritical zeal one can summon for a bad idea.

Statements like the following are not unusual in Christian cheerleading sources about Jesus:

Almost all scholars acknowledge that Jesus was a great moral teacher. In fact, his brilliant insight into human morality is an accomplishment recognized even by those of other religions.... Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has been called the most superlative teaching of human ethics ever uttered by an individual. In fact, much of what we know today as "equal rights" actually is the result of Jesus' teaching. ([Great Moral Teacher?](#))

Similarly, [another site](#) states:

Many non-Christians have no problem believing that Jesus actually existed and that He must have been a very moral person and a great teacher (since He has had such an impact on the world even after 1900 years).

Then, in [a paper](#) which explicitly acknowledges the *deontological* nature of Christian morality (some Christians I've encountered have actually denied this!), we have Christian apologist J.P. Moreland, who writes:

It has long been recognized that, irrespective of one's religious views about Jesus of Nazareth, He is one of the world's leading ethical thinkers and teachers. Indeed, as late as the second world war, most moral thinkers in the West – secular or not – did their best to show that their moral theories yielded results in keeping with the ethics of Jesus.

Christians like to tell everyone else how impressed they are with the moral teachings attributed to Jesus in the New Testament. They have to be: it's part of "giving God the glory." So regardless of whether or not they have any better understanding of morality, they are compelled by virtue of their confessional investment to give wholesale praise to the moral teachings in the New Testament, especially those found in the gospel narratives attributed to Jesus, because that is one of the things that they as Christians are called to do: anything Jesus says and does is supposed to receive the highest accolades, regardless of what it might be. It may very well be the case that some Christians really do think the moral teachings attributed to Jesus in the New Testament are spectacular in some way. However, it seems that the praise given to the actions and statements attributed to Jesus in the gospel narratives, is not due to any special insight they might contain or judgment which motivated them, but bestowed at any rate because of their alleged source: Jesus. If Jesus says it, it must be the highest *because* Jesus said it. This is at odds with a sober understanding of moral principles, which recognizes their worth *regardless* of who might have first formulated them.

Another noteworthy point, made clear in the quote from Moreland above, is that Christians very often like to extend their enthusiasm for the teachings attributed to Jesus to non-Christians. Not only Christians praise Jesus' moral teachings, but so does everyone else. Many would have us believe this. An appeal to numbers is usually never far from even the most robust defenses of Christianity. (How often do we hear about what the "majority of scholars" in "peer-reviewed journals" think of some particular claim in question?) The concern at this point is to "puff up" the bandwagon of support in order to make any individual detractor feel insignificant and overwhelmed by the tide of opposition. It's all part of the tactic of arguing from intimidation.

Of course, it may very well be the case that some non-Christians may repeat the claim that "Jesus was a great moral teacher." It is ironic that Christians would be so interested in pointing to non-Christian approval of the teachings attributed to Jesus in the New Testament. Many Christian apologists (see for instance [this blog](#) are on a mission to show the world just how stupid "unbelievers" are (and this coming from people who [worship a contradiction](#)). It is readily conceded that many non-Christians have little understanding of what constitutes sound morality as well. In fact, the few that I've run into who endorse the moral teachings attributed to Jesus in the New

Testament seem to be just as unknowledgeable on the issues of morality as Christians. It may just be that they're simply repeating this refrain uncritically, as many Christians do, without having critically examined the issues, without giving a good look at the teachings attributed to Jesus in the New Testament. Then again, most self-identifying non-Christians whom I've encountered seem to have at least some criticisms of the moral teachings put into Jesus' mouth in the gospels. Critical literature both in print and throughout the internet universe abounds in varying degrees of discriminating examinations of many New Testament teachings, including moral teachings said to have come from Jesus. So it is misleading to give the impression that *everyone* - both Christian and non-Christian - thinks that Jesus was a superb instructor on issues pertaining to morality.

In spite of the availability of damning exposés of Christian morality on the internet and elsewhere, the assumption that Jesus was a "great moral teacher" is almost always taken for granted among Christians. This assumption is often made for the purposes of shadowboxing against the view that he was *only* a great moral teacher, yet still very much only a man, as opposed to a deity incarnated as Christians believe. Christians like this kind of argument, inspired by CS Lewis who gives it a central place in his "moral argument," because defending the claim that the moral views which are attributed to Jesus in the New Testament is a much more difficult task. It's easier to take the assumption that his moral views were superior to anything else in the moral marketplace for granted, and argue from that basis that he actually was "God incarnate."

Rather than go through all the teachings which the New Testament does attribute to Jesus one by one and evaluate their worth, I take a different approach. Since Jesus is claimed to be this "great moral teacher," the bar has already been set. The concern at this point is to see if the teachings attributed to Jesus meet it. This approach is valid because the meaning of the concept of "moral teaching" is broader than just what we'll find in the teachings attributed to Jesus (as should be evident when someone says one set of moral teachings is better than another), and there have been hundreds of other moral teachings throughout history, before and since the days of the early Christians. So the proper approach at this point is to understand what *should* be present in those teachings, given the lofty touting Christians repeat, and then to see if those teachings actually include what should be there, given the repeated high praise they've received. So I have prepared a short list of key questions that should be asked of *any* moral treatise whose original framer is said to be "great."

They are as follows:

- 1) What is the proper definition of the concept 'morality'?
- 2) What is the purpose of morality?
- 3) Does man need morality?
- 4) If he does, why does he need it?
- 5) What is the relationship between morality and *values*?
- 6) What exactly does Jesus say about *values*?
- 7) Does Jesus tell us what values *are*?
- 8) Does he tell us whether or not values are *important*?
- 9) If he says they are important, to whom are they important and why?
- 10) Does Jesus teach us how to *identify* those values which we should pursue?
- 11) Does Jesus teach us the proper way to go about *obtaining* those values which are important?
- 12) Should we protect those values which we have achieved?
- 13) What if one person has one set of values, and another person has a different set of values? What is Jesus' teaching for overcoming such conflicts?

These are questions I would ask in regard to *anyone* said to be the source of “superlative teaching of human ethics ever uttered by an individual.” Jesus is touted as such by Christians. So I ask Christians to address these questions, and give specific citations to support their answers.

For instance, a Christian might contend that my questions 10) and 11) are answered by verses like Matthew 6:33 (which reads “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you”). That would be a start. But then we would need to ask how “the kingdom of God” could qualify a real value to anyone when it is accessible apparently only by *imagining* it? Why would one think it’s important? How does one go about achieving it? How does seeking “the kingdom of God” first result in all these other things being “added unto you”? Etc.

So simply citing an isolated verse here and there in answer to these questions is probably not in itself going to be sufficient to justify the claim that one is a “superlative” teacher of ethics or authority on morality. Once those answers have been submitted, they need to be examined for their relevance and validity. Unfortunately, I do not see where these questions are addressed in the New Testament, the wellspring in which we find moral teachings attributed to Jesus. In fact, there seems to be a conspicuous lack of rigor on Jesus’ part, if we go by what the New Testament says. For instance, I do not see where statements attributed to Jesus provide any definition to the concept ‘morality’ (the word ‘morality’ does not even seem to show up on a [keyword search](#) of the New Testament to begin with!). Wouldn’t he know what morality is? Each moral code tends to define the concept a little differently, but Jesus apparently chose to withhold what his system might mean by this frequently used term.

As for ‘value’, the concept is sometimes used (see for instance [here](#)), but it is neither defined nor explained in terms of a developed theory, suggesting that it is simply taken for granted that “everyone knows” what ‘value’ means. But the history of western civilization, with institutionalized sacrifice, slavery, tyranny, coercion and fraud, much of it in the name of Christianity, is (to say the least) hard to reconcile with this flippant presumption. In regard to my question about the *purpose* of morality, what does Jesus have to say? What precisely does Jesus say the *purpose* of morality is? I find no *explicit* answer to this question in the New Testament, but I suppose Christians might attempt to eek out a response to this question from certain bible verses. What I’ve typically seen on this score is the citation of yet another commandment, and as such it presumes one’s motivation to do things that are said to be “moral” on the Christian account. In the case of Matthew 6:33, for instance, why should anyone have any interest in “seek[ing]... the kingdom of God” in the first place? Is it because, if one does so, “all these things shall be added unto you”? In other words, is “seek[ing]... the kingdom of God” a shortcut to achieving other things beyond it that one might want, or *value*? If so, it seems that Christianity is teaching that there *are* shortcuts in morality. Is that really so? Do Christians really think that “seek[ing]... the kingdom of God” is just a means to acquiring something else? Is it not supposed to be an ultimate end?

Although Jesus apparently does not address the question of what morality even is, does he address the question of whether or not any human individual has a *need* for morality? And if so, *why* he might need it? A great portion of the New Testament’s moral teachings focus on behavior in the context of interpersonal relationships. But would a man all alone on a desert island have a need for morality according to Jesus’ teachings? Although these questions strike me as wholly rudimentary to an informed understanding of morality, I cannot find where they might be addressed in an intelligent manner in any of the speeches attributed to Jesus in the New Testament (or elsewhere in the bible, for that matter). It seems that Jesus has a tendency to base his moral precepts on *threats*, as opposed to a penetrating understanding of the nature of morality and any individual’s need for it. If you disobey, you will meet with doom, because you have disobeyed what you’ve been commanded to do. This is not the same thing as warning someone not to touch a hot stove or light a match near an open gas tank. In such cases, we are pointing out the causal consequences of an action which would likely result in injury or even death. Rather, what the bible presents as a moral code essentially reads, “obey, or else!” and holds up a stick. The concern is not for one’s safety, but for keeping him in line with an invisible magic being’s *desires*.

Now although the Christian believer’s cognitive starting point, according to the bible itself, is *fear* (cf. Prov. 1:7), threats causing fear do not tell the whole story of Christian morality. Fear is not enough. Something else is needed, and Christian morality (if it is taken seriously) supplies it. Instead of a code of values which guides a man’s choices and actions (see [here](#)), the moral teachings found in the New Testament consist of *psychological sanctions*. Consider the following point made by George H. Smith:

A physical sanction, if successful, causes the emotion of *fear*. A psychological sanction, if successful,

causes the emotion of *guilt*. A man motivated by fear may still retain an element of rebelliousness, of determination to strike back given the opportunity. A man motivated by guilt, however, is a man with a broken spirit; he will obey the rules without question. A guilt-ridden man is the perfect subject for religious morality, and this is why psychological sanctions have been extremely effective in accomplishing their purpose. (*Atheism: The Case Against God*, p. 301)

To support the psychological sanctions which inform their morality, Christians need to stress the notion of *sin*, which is the wellspring of guilt in the Christian mind. Christians are people who take the notion of sin against their god seriously, and are consequently crippled with guilt. This guilt can be powerful enough to motivate a man to obey *any* commandment. And the moral teachings of the New Testament are designed to exploit this to its fullest. Guilt, then, is the precondition of Christian morality. Without it, it's just a bunch of silly injunctions serving as a primitive worldview's version of morality.

The conclusion at this point is already obvious: when someone, Christian or otherwise, makes a statement to the effect that Jesus was a "great moral teacher," such a statement can only suggest that the individual making it does not have a good grasp of morality. Jesus did not define basic terms; he did not explain why morality is important or why one would have any need for it; he did not clarify what values are or why they have moral significance; he did not explain how one should go about identifying those values he might need or the actions needed to achieve them. All this is at best taken for granted (since it is clear from several of Jesus' injunctions that one sacrifice his values, that one has already achieved them somehow), but is undercut by the underlay of psychological sanctions, fear and guilt which serve as the precondition for his moral system. At the same time, many Christians look at various non-Christian worldviews and apparently find only moral relativism and moral nihilism. It is true that many non-Christians have been influenced by the moral vacuity of Christianity. That this might surprise Christians is baffling. It shouldn't surprise them, since Christianity has influenced so much in western civilization. So a distorted view of morality is what can be expected to find in a worldview which has borrowed in some way from Christianity. However, Christian apologists typically like to characterize defective moral views held by non-Christians as a logical outcome of their *atheism*, as if atheism itself were a worldview with its own fundamentals and positions on such matters. This is a smearing ploy, and the apologist invokes it ultimately to make him feel better in his mystical delusions, which he nurtures in order to assuage his deep-seated guilt.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Morality](#)

posted by [Bahnsen Burner](#) at [6:00 AM](#)

2 Comments:

[Dr Funkenstein](#) said...

One of the other interesting things about Christianity is that, being promoted as a monotheistic religion, Jesus is supposedly the same person/entity as Yahweh in the OT (never mind that noone seems to be able to properly explain the Trinity beyond 'it's a mystery, but believe it anyway!') - so if genocide, infanticide, arbitrary allocation of who various laws apply to and so on are considered immoral, Jesus does these things out in abundance prior to the NT.

Of course, theists counter this with 'ah, but if you don't have some absolute moral standard for comparison, who are you to judge God's actions?' Even if saying for argument that on atheism there is no absolute moral standard (even in principle), it's a straightforward admission that Jesus' 'great moral teachings' are just arbitrary commands that have changed on a divine whim - moral arbitrariness being exactly one thing that they accuse atheism of promoting! Which does then make me wonder why they make so much noise about the moral virtues of Jesus and adherence to theism in general...

There's also the fact that 'the bible' (and I use the term advisedly, since there is no 'the bible' in reality) and Jesus' words can be and have been used to justify just about any viewpoint you care to mention, no matter how

contradictory (eg capitalism vs socialism, pro slavery vs anti slavery, even feminist views despite the obviously patriarchal thought that is contained in it!)

Slightly off topic, but you may be interested in Triablogue's latest offering against Richard Carrier regarding the evidence for miracles - Steve Hays presents various stories 'confirming' experiences of the supernatural/paranormal etc

Of course, when controlled conditions are present, or something genuinely unfeasible is prayed for these instances of 'miracles' have the tendency to go AWOL...

As Steve himself has said to me, apparently some of my examples of what I would consider a genuine miracle place 'an unreasonable burden of proof' on theism and the like (I gave as examples the recovery of all pancreatic cancer patients tomorrow as opposed to the usual 5% or so that survive the 5 year point, making the twin towers and those that died in them reappear fully formed or making my TV turn into an apple)! Quite astonishing that given the virtually unlimited abilities of the imaginary, that Steve should be concerned that any request for concrete examples should cross some sort of arbitrary boundary in terms of plausibility or likelihood - after all if we want to believe in 'unmistakable answers to prayer' as he calls them, shouldn't they be like my examples and be quite distinguishable from natural occurrences that simply have a low likelihood or subjective anecdotes that anyone can make up (or experience in a particular frame of mind)!

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[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Dr. Funk: "Jesus doles these things out in abundance prior to the NT."

Right. Christians are always trying to validate Jesus' divinity by appealing to "fulfilled" OT prophecies, but beyond that it's almost as if the OT had no further use, save for anecdotal features like the first chapters of Genesis, Noah and the flood, Abraham and Moses. Much of the OT seems to have been overlooked or forgotten, out of sight, out of mind. How often do you find Christians elaborating on the book of Nehemiah or II Samuel? But if Jesus is the same thing as the god of the OT, then yes, the same being (on Christianity's premises) delivered the "moral" content of the OT as well, including the genocide, infanticide, etc. which you mention (and don't forget slave laws!). It's interesting how Christians compartmentalize these two aspects of the OT in relation to Jesus: prophecy is something to emphasize, but the OT immorality is something to de-emphasize.

Dr. Funk: "Of course, theists counter this with 'ah, but if you don't have some absolute moral standard for comparison, who are you to judge God's actions?'"

Right. This is simply a deflection tactic. It does nothing to address the matter in question. It tells us how quickly Christians are willing to disown the moral primitivism of the OT without letting on that they're disowning it. It's an attempt to redirect the focus of discussion elsewhere, away from the content of the bible - specifically, what it teaches - and shift the burden onto the critic at the same time.

What Christians taking this approach fail to understand is the fact that *chosen* actions, regardless of who the actor is, are open to moral evaluation. Essentially they're telling us not to practice moral judgment, that moral judgment is wrong. Anyone who tells you to suspend moral judgment is someone who is opposed to morality as such.

Dr. Funk: "Even if saying for argument that on atheism there is no absolute moral standard (even in principle), it's a straightforward admission that Jesus' 'great moral teachings' are just arbitrary commands that have changed on a divine whim - moral arbitrariness being exactly one thing that they accuse atheism of promoting!"

Right again. It morphs from deflection to projection: the point at this time is to accuse the critic of the very faults which infest their worldview. The concern is to discredit critics in the most effortless manner possible. Notice that in doing this, the apologist is not teaching anything substantive about his position at this time. He's imparting nothing of value, giving no instruction on how to formulate and/or apply rational principles which can be used inter-disciplinarily. He's all about hiding behind something and making anyone who doesn't believe these fantasies feel small.

Dr. Funk: “Which does then make me wonder why they make so much noise about the moral virtues of Jesus and adherence to theism in general...”

It’s all part of the pretense. Without claiming the moral high-ground (even falsely, as they do), their attempts to shame people wouldn’t have much bite. When you question their premises, there’s no bite at all. The whole pretense just deflates like a popped balloon.

Dr. Funk: “There’s also the fact that ‘the bible’ (and I use the term advisedly, since there is no ‘the bible’ in reality) and Jesus’ words can be and have been used to justify just about any viewpoint you care to mention, no matter how contradictory (eg capitalism vs socialism, pro slavery vs anti slavery, even feminist views despite the obviously patriarchal thought that is contained in it!)”

Yep! It’s amazing how many differing positions the bible supports. There’s a biblical perspective to suit all mystical tastes.

As to miracles...

I haven’t devoted any blogs specifically to a discussion of miracles. Not yet anyhow. However, I think it should be pretty clear to anyone who is familiar with my approach to atheology how I would deal with miracles. The notion of miracles assumes the primacy of consciousness, and for this reason alone it is to be rejected. We have a rational principle - as opposed to mere probability estimates, or “I’ve never seen a miracle” - by which we can summarily and surely dismiss such silly notions.

Don’t ever be fooled by the believer’s feigned exterior: the prayer-miracle tension in Christianity causes him much anxiety. He’ll likely try to hide this with volumes and volumes of citations and quotes from “authorities” who have endorsed the notion throughout history. But in the end this is all smoke and mirrors. On the one hand, he insists on the validity of prayer and miracles as rational beliefs. On the other, he knows he needs to shield them from any opportunity to fail. Take for example Aaron Kinney’s blog [Operation: Pray Dawson’s Way to 20/20 Vision](#). In this blog, Aaron called upon Christians to pray for my ailing eyesight to be restored. Every year I need to get stronger and stronger glasses. Aaron posted this blog back in August of 2006. In March of 2008 (a year ago now) my eye doctor upped me to progressives! Nearsightedness, astigmatism, the beginnings of macular degeneration... they’re all happening at once. It should be a snap for the creator of the universe to cure my worsening vision, don’t you think? And what an opportunity for the Christian god to display its glory, no? Curiously, no Christians seemed very eager to pray for my vision to be cured. In the comments section of that blog, one Christian said that he had been praying for me, but was pretty cagey about what he was praying for. I can only suppose Christians are so afraid they’re god is going to fail (or the “answer” to their prayers will be “No!”) that they suddenly become all shy about praying in the first place. Other Christians might say something like “God doesn’t do parlor tricks.” But this kind of defense reduces the miracle cures we read about in the gospels to mere “parlor tricks,” doesn’t it?

How sad! Aren’t you glad these aren’t your problems?

Regards,
Dawson

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