

Morality: Opinion, Preference, or Imperative?

By Michael A. Schuler

April 6, 2008

Words from a Modern Prophet

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

from a speech delivered on April 4, 1967

Since I am a preacher by trade, I suppose it is not surprising that I have several reasons for bringing Vietnam into the field of my moral vision. There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I, and others, have been waging in America.

A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor—both black and white—through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the build-up in Vietnam, and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war. And I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demoniacal destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.

Another reason moves to an even deeper level of awareness, for it grows out of my experience in the ghettos of the North over the last three years—especially the last three summers. As I have walked among the desperate, rejected, and angry young men I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. I have tried to offer them my deepest compassion while maintaining my convictions that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action.

But they asked—and rightly so—what about Vietnam? They asked if our own nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government.

Here is the true meaning of value and compassion and nonviolence when it helps us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his

view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition.

Reflections

Friday marked the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was only 39 years old when he died. Although he did not initiate the civil rights movement, he came to embody it, and throughout the turbulent 1960s, he could accurately be described as the conscience of our nation.

Toward the end of his life, Dr. King's perspective broadened and his mission expanded because he was able to see ever more clearly the connections between racial prejudice, economic inequality, and American aggression abroad. In a speech delivered a year to the day before his death, King connected the dots between ghetto violence, poverty, and U.S. policy in Vietnam.

During the ensuing year, his critiques of American culture and prevailing attitudes increased in intensity, and as a result King suffered a significant loss of popularity. As long as he confined his comments to race relations and dedicated himself to the cause of racial healing, most people were willing to hear and to heed him. But when he began to expose the glaring inconsistencies between America's professed values and its actual behavior, sentiments shifted. King has opened a can of moral and ethical worms that people simply didn't have the courage to confront. Perhaps we still don't.

Forty years later, the issues King raised remain unsettled, the underlying moral questions unresolved. The problems he identified still sully the American dream and subvert the American promise. We continue to honor a great man's memory with holidays and street names, but we have been less than faithful to his legacy.

Like most Christians, Martin Luther King's moral perspective was based on the Bible—firmly grounded in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, which find their clearest expression in the fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters of the Gospel of Matthew. This section of scripture is commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount, and here Jesus instructs his followers to forgo violence, prac-

tice forgiveness and forbearance, cultivate a generous spirit, be less judgmental and more accepting, and treat the stranger with kindness.

As a serious reader of the Bible, Martin Luther King regarded these instructions as moral absolutes—eternal truths commanding our attention and guiding our conduct regardless of circumstance. The Bible is, after all, a record of God’s revelation, and the words of Jesus and the prophets bear the stamp of divine authority.

Like most people, Dr. King had to be somewhat selective in what he chose to emphasize. Many of the Bible’s harsher moral precepts were either ignored or dismissed because they so clearly contradict the inclusive, nonviolent, egalitarian aspects of Jesus’s teaching. The Bible is, of course, an unsystematic compendium of behavioral norms that lack internal consistency and often clash. Naturally, this presents a problem: if *all* the Bible’s moral pronouncements are believed to be cosmically sanctioned, how do we pick and choose?

Personally, I think Martin Luther King made excellent choices, and he remains noteworthy because, like Mahatma Gandhi, he understood the importance of aligning ends and means. No desirable moral outcome can be achieved without the application of morally-appropriate means. The expression, “in order to make an omelet you have to break a few eggs” may make sense in the kitchen, but it’s not a proper analogy for ethical reasoning. King wasn’t making omelets, he was stirring up justice, and that demanded not a callous but a more compassionate touch.

Most Westerners undoubtedly feel, as Dr. King did, that certain moral principles are *ever* and *always* valid. The original source of those principles could be God or nature, but in either case they could be said to possess transcendent value and are therefore indisputable. Adherence to such principles isn’t optional; it is clearly imperative. To willfully disregard such unimpeachable norms would be positively perverse on our part.

But while this understanding of morality is shared by a great many people, there are other theories worth considering—especially since this whole notion of a fixed and immutable moral code presents certain grave difficulties.

Where did this idea come from in the first place? John Gray traces it back to Socrates, whose ruminations in the fifth-century B.C. led him to argue for the ultimacy of certain values. There is, Socrates believed, a “super-good” that nothing can

destroy, and that trumps all other human priorities and preferences. According to Gray, Christianity adopted this rather novel Greek idea and applied it to the moral teachings of Scripture as a whole. He writes:

The idea that God’s laws apply equally to everyone is a Christian invention.... Now there is but one law binding everyone, which means that every way of life but one must be wrong.

Interestingly, the term “morality” itself doesn’t imply the sort of immutable, universal standard that we’ve come to associate with it. Our English word comes from the Latin *moris*, which means a way, a habit, a manner, or a fashion. A moral system, Richard Holloway writes, “is the way a particular community chooses to organize its personal and group relations.” Etymologically, then, morals could be said to reflect cultural preferences rather than eternal verities.

A moral system, Richard Holloway writes, “is the way a particular community chooses to organize its personal and group relations.”

That *is* the way “morality” was understood prior to Socrates and before Christianity popularized his metaphysical theories. Like today’s post-modernists, the ancients recognized that habits, fashions, and mores were bound to differ from culture to culture, country to country, and, for the most part, they respected those differences. “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Indeed, when the Greeks attempted to hellenize the Middle East in the second century B.C., they encountered fierce opposition. It was one thing to physically conquer a people but quite another to attempt morally and culturally to *convert* them.

Today, of course, those who regard moral principles as somewhat *less* than absolute and who show respect for cultural differences are accused of moral relativism. Most people seem to feel that unless God is credited as the author and enforcer of our morality, the world will go to hell in a handbasket.

Interestingly, many civilizations have done rather well without this assumption. While accepting that morality fluctuates and typically varies from place to place, these cultures have focused on *virtues* rather than hard-and-fast rules or abstract principles. Ultimately the “good” is achieved not through slavish obedience to a clearly-defined moral code but by the cultivation of personal qual-

ities that serve oneself and the community well. "Nature does not give a man virtue." the Roman philosopher Seneca said, "The process of becoming a good man is an *art*."

This down-to-earth approach to ethics and morality is more typical of Eastern than of Western thought. Like Seneca, The Taoists of ancient China rejected the idea that ethics was a matter of identifying and applying a few key, cosmic principles. It was, rather, a life-skill to be developed. The core of ethics is "the knack of knowing what to do" by virtue of close, dispassionate observation. Medical and moral reasoning are analogous. Every situation, every social illness requires close discernment and a creative response. One practices meditation and cultivates certain virtues, in order to respond appropriately as circumstances warrant.

Buddhist ethics lean in much the same direction. Here special emphasis is placed on a set of precepts known as the *Paramitas*. According to Roshi Robert Aitken, former head Abbot of the Diamond Sangha in Honolulu,

The Paramitas are inspirations, not fixed rules and ... absolute adherence to any one of them is death. You can't treat them in a completely strict way, but at the same time you can't be wishy-washy. So the Precepts are koans for us.

If we truly believe that one morality is intrinsically superior to all others, we become judgmental, lose the capacity to empathize, and have little motivation to understand the perspective of others.

Aitken and others who reject the idea of a fixed moral code wish to avoid the self-righteousness the often accompanies such a position. If we truly believe that one morality is intrinsically superior to all others, we become judgmental, lose the capacity to empathize, and have little motivation to understand the perspective of others.

If, on the other hand, we treat ethical problems as riddles to be solved—koans, if you will—we are more likely to look deeply and respond compassionately.

Pema Chodren, a Buddhist nun in the Shambhala tradition, invites us to cultivate a mind that is "ready and inquisitive," that is not satisfied with "biased or limited views." "Our practice is to work with the ... flexible mind of prajna," she writes,

... seeing things without "shoulds" and "should nots".... The spiritual warrior trains

in the discipline of not causing harm, knowing that the way to do this skillfully will change with the circumstances. When we practice discipline with flexibility, we become less moralistic and more tolerant.

So where does this leave us? Are ethics and morality purely a matter of perspective, their "truth-value" circumstantial rather than constant? How are we to know which virtues to cultivate, what rules of thumb to apply? Are there any universals whatsoever to which we might appeal?

Actually, there are. 2500 years ago Confucius was asked by a follower for one word that could serve as a guiding principle for the conduct of life, and he replied, "It is the word *shu*. Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you."

This is, of course, a variation on the Golden Rule, other versions of which can be found in each of the world's great religions. Now, what the Golden Rule really points to is *reciprocity*—a behavioral characteristic that we appear to share not only with other cultures but with our primate cousins.

In his close observations of chimpanzees, capuchins, and bonobos, the primatologist Franz de Waal has noted that they all seem to understand the principle of exchange and willingly share food and playthings with other members of the troop. Indeed, de Waal noticed that chimps who were greedy and less prone to share often suffered loss of social status. From reciprocity moral principles like justice and fairness arose in more advanced human communities.

According to the philosopher Peter Singer, reciprocity is one of the "few moral ideas that can claim to have universal moral acceptance."

But the principle of reciprocity won't work in practice unless at least one other value is present: trust. There must be some assurance that others will honor their part of a bargain if I honor mine. When both parties prove to be trustworthy, everybody wins. One can hardly imagine living in a society or a household bereft of trust—where commitments mean nothing and everyone ruthlessly seeks to maximize their own interests. These two ideas—trust and reciprocity—are the basic building blocks of a healthy social and moral system.

In addition to reciprocity, Franz de Waal has noticed that certain primates also display genuine empathy, not only for their own kin but for members of other species. The gorilla Koko, for instance, adopted and cared tenderly for several different cats in her lifetime. Such evidence (and there is a good

deal more) suggests to John Gray that “empathy with other living things” is also part of our natural endowment and “is the ultimate source of human ethics.” Altruism and benevolence are further elaborations of this primal sentiment.

The point of the forgoing is that morality is neither an entirely relative, culturally variable phenomenon about which no definitive or universal statements can be made, nor is it a set of divinely

Our ideas about morality and virtue are an outgrowth of wholly natural tendencies that have proven socially useful.

sanctioned principles requiring blind obedience. Our ideas about morality and virtue are, rather, an outgrowth of wholly natural tendencies that have proven socially useful.

Yes, humans share with their primate cousins cer-

tain aggressive and selfish tendencies. But there are also the sentiments of reciprocity and empathy, which, when properly cultivated, become more and more prominent in the individual’s personality. These beneficent qualities are not something “we must struggle to create *against* the grain of human nature,” Matt Ridley insists. They are the “instinctive and useful lubricant that is part of our nature.”

But just because generalized traits like justice and compassion are natural to our species doesn’t mean their expression is inevitable. Indeed, many forces in modern society actively inhibit their development. There is the powerful ethos of competition in Western culture that feeds the flames of

greed and envy and persuades people of the need to get ahead at all costs. There is continual exploitation by politicians of people’s fear—fear of immigrants, fear of terrorists, fear of crime—that brings to the fore our basest and most self-protective instincts. Even our sacred scriptures display a brutal and callous God who practices genocide against his enemies. This hardly is good role-modeling.

Psychologists like Robert Kagan tell us that human beings pass through various stages of moral development, gradually becoming more tolerant, compassionate, insightful, flexible, and inclusive. Building on our natural endowment, most of us are capable of become fully-functioning moral beings.

But rather than assisting that process, too often the institutions we’ve created—corporations, political parties, schools, even churches—seem determined to keep us greedy, needy, and afraid. As a result, people’s moral development is often seriously stunted. Human beings should be able to “create inclusive, life-affirming societies that work for all,” David Korten assures us, but only if we are willing, like Dr. King, to challenge the predominant values, reorient our institutions, and commit ourselves to the mindful cultivation of a few essential virtues.

That is our challenge, precisely the sort of challenge Unitarian Universalist faith communities are designed to meet. Our task is to bring out the best in people. While UU’s are frankly agnostic about angels in heaven, we would like to think an angel is waiting patiently to be released from every human soul.