Religion and Ethics

The relationship between religion and ethics or faith and ethics is a complex one. So complex that it’s the subject of entire courses, not to mention the innumerable books that have been written on the subject. In light of this, a short lecture on the topic cannot hope to even begin to do it justice. However, we can identify some important considerations that are worth exploring and that can serve as a beginning to your own study.

Before we begin, it’s important to keep in mind that our purpose in discussing this topic is not to prove or disprove the existence of God, nor to promote any specific religious tradition, but rather to discuss the role that theism (the belief in God) has played and can play in ethics. Regardless of our position on theism, we can still consider how it relates to ethics. That said, our context is Western society (and by that we mean the global West), which has been so influenced by Judeo-Christian values and philosophy that it is nearly impossible to separate the two. Just as our discussion of moral philosophy has focused on Western thinkers, so our main point of reference as we discuss religion is the Christian Tradition, which, in turn, arose from and was influenced by Judaism.

The Question of Socrates
We begin our discussion, however, more than 400 years before Christ with the Athenian philosopher Socrates. Socrates asks the question:

Does God love goodness because it is good, or is it good because God loves it?

Of course, Socrates’ context was ancient Greece, where they believed in many gods. So his original question was phrased a little differently, but the meaning is basically the same.

This is an important question, because it asks whether there is an independent standard for what is good or if good is determined by God.

To agree with the first part of the question (God loves goodness because it is good, or to put it another way “God commands something because it is good”) seems to assume that there is a moral standard for right and wrong that is separate from God – a standard that applies to both God and human beings.

To agree with the second part of the question (Goodness is good because God loves it, or to put it another way, “Something is good because God commands it”) assumes that it is God who determines what is morally right or wrong.

Divine Command Theory (DCT)
The Divine Command Theory (DCT) is one of many possible religious responses to the question of Socrates. The DCT agrees with the second part of the question, namely that it is God’s command that makes something morally right or wrong, but not the first. For the Divine Command Theorist, to perform the morally right action is to obey the command of God. They are one and the same.
If God requires a certain action, such as “honor your father and mother,” then this makes it a moral requirement. If God prohibits a certain action, such as “you shall not steal,” then to perform that action is morally wrong. If, however, an action is neither required nor prohibited by God, then it is considered morally permissible.

(For our discussion, please note that a theist is someone who believes in God, while an atheist is someone who does not believe in God. The prefix “a” means “no” or “not.”)

From a theistic perspective, the Divine Command Theory can be appealing because it appears to protect God’s sovereignty or position as the Supreme Being. Nothing, not even objective moral standards, hold a higher position of authority than he does.

However, for some theists and, of course, atheists, the Divine Command Theory presents some problems. Perhaps the most significant of these is that it appears to propose a situation where God can establish moral standards based on random choice or personal whim, rather than any particular reason. For example, opponents of the Divine Command Theory ask whether God could establish lying as a moral standard.

**The Independence Thesis**

In contrast to the Divine Command Theory, the independence thesis sees objective moral standards as existing independently from God’s commands. In other words, while God’s commands may be morally right, they are morally right not only because they are God’s commands, but because they agree with an objective moral standard that is separate from them.

Atheists would certainly agree with the independence thesis, because if one doesn’t believe in God, then, of course, one would not believe that moral standards are dependent upon him. However, the independence thesis is not inherently atheist. In other words, many theists also agree with the independence thesis.

While theists who agree with the thesis are saying that there are independent moral standards, they might also assert that due to God’s unlimited and complete knowledge (omniscience), he knows and understands these objective moral standards better than we do, and can, therefore, guide us to a fuller understanding of them through, for example, his Holy Scriptures and commands. In other words, one need not agree completely with the Divine Command Theory in order to be a theist.

**A False Dichotomy?**

The question posed by Socrates may present a false dichotomy (or false dilemma) in that it forces us to choose between two options, but these are not the only options available to us.

For example, the religious context of Socrates was ancient Greece, which held that there were many gods who amounted to little more than “super-powered” humans. A survey of Greek mythology reveals gods who regularly engaged in the same immoral behaviors as their human counterparts. Apart from their having more power, there was little difference, and they certainly weren’t presented as models of moral goodness. The Judeo-Christian understanding of God is radically different.
The question asked by Socrates assumes that “the Good” is something separate from God. It either gains its value from God’s choice of it, or it stands apart from God, as its own standard. In either case, it still exists as separate from God.

However, the Christian Tradition understands God not just as the creator of the universe and human beings, but actually the Source of all that is – he is understood as being itself – nothing exists apart from him. See, for example, Acts 17:16-31, and especially verse 28, which says, “For in Him [God] we live and move and have our being.” If this is the case, then asking whether something is good because God approves of it or if he approves of it, because it’s good in itself would make no logical sense, because both options assume the Good is something that exists on its own, apart from God. Rather, God Himself is “the Good.” In other words, there can be no “Good,” let alone anyone to acknowledge it, apart from God, since nothing exists apart from God, as he is the source of all being or existence. Again, to clarify, it’s not that God’s commandments are “good” or even that he is “good” (as if “good” were an adjective apart from God – something that could describe God), rather he is the Good. This is one example of how the question asked by Socrates isn’t one that necessarily needs to be answered, or, if it does, the answer could be “neither,” depending on your view.

The Relationship Between Religion and Ethics
But what about the relationship between religion and ethics?

Is faith or religion a requirement for ethical thought?
Leo Tolstoy believed that attempting to separate morality from religion would be like ripping a flower from its roots and then shoving it, rootless, into the ground somewhere else. Obviously, the flower would shrivel and die without its root system.

While it’s up to you to judge the quality and acceptability of ethical theories, such as Kantianism, utilitarianism, ethical egoism, and virtue ethics, it’s undeniable that each of these is a true ethical system that is built on a foundation other than religious faith. So, it clearly is possible to think ethically without constructing one’s system on religious teachings (or doctrines).

Does this present a problem for theists? Not necessarily. It may be helpful, here, to remind you of the distinction made by Thomas Aquinas, who held that although God is the source of morality, he built into human beings the ability to discern right from wrong through their ability to reason. Thus, according to Aquinas, a person need not believe in God to be able to discover moral truth. This is one way that a theist can believe that morality is founded in God, on the one hand, while on the other hand, also believe that it’s possible for human beings to construct ethical theories and distinguish between right and wrong without believing that God exists.

It seems clear that religion is not a requirement for ethical thought.

Is faith or religion a hindrance to ethical thought?
There are those who believe that not only is religion not a requirement for ethical thought, but that it has no place in ethics, whatsoever – that it’s a hindrance to ethical thought and the human quest for the Good, and should be abandoned.
The British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) believed that religion has made almost no useful contributions to human civilization, but rather has caused only immense suffering. Philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) saw religion as producing an inferior morality. Occasionally, people like Hume, Russell, or, more recently, Richard Dawkins, will attempt to discredit religion with accusations such as these (Dawkins, for example, has argued that religion actually promotes immorality). However, such assertions seem grossly, and perhaps even intentionally uninformed. They ignore the many tremendous benefits that religious faith has produced in Western society. For example, the earliest universities were established by the Christian church. Likewise, hospitals were founded and funded by Christian religious groups. Even the modern “weekend” of Saturday and Sunday that most people in the West enjoy today came from the influence of Judaism and Christianity, seeking to set apart the Jewish Sabbath and the Lord’s Day as days of worship and rest. This hardly sounds like something that has produced no good or promotes immorality. And these are just a few examples.

It’s important to keep in mind that extreme examples of people who do violence in the name of a cause or who misrepresent a cause by their actions can be found in any group, including religious groups. The same could be said of atheism, if, for example, we judge it based on the horrible cruelties enacted by the Soviet Union, an atheist state, on its own citizens under the rule of Joseph Stalin. No group wants to be judged based on its extremes. Instead, we need to examine the whole, in order to make a sound judgment as to something’s quality or value.

Similarly, P. H. Nowell-Smith asserted that religion produces individuals who only follow rules for their own sake without understanding the purpose of morality, which is human flourishing. However, Jesus (upon whose life and work the entire Christian faith is founded) once broke the religious “rules” not to work on the Sabbath, in order to heal someone (Mark 3:1-5), and said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Clearly, religion is not about mindlessly following rules without understanding their purpose, even if some have misinterpreted it that way.

Ethicist James Rachels argued that religion removes human autonomy and individual thought, because it requires worship of another being. However, the core teaching of Christianity calls for one to love God with one’s whole mind, and promotes intelligent thinking. Some of the most creative and innovative minds of Western civilization were Christians. Modern genetic research, for example, arose, in part, from the work of the German monk Mendel.

Others often argue that religious people disagree, citing the many denominations within Christianity, as an example, and concluding that, therefore, there must not be any truth to it. However, this makes little sense, based on at least two points. First, just because there is disagreement on a topic does not prove that there is no truth about the topic – only that there is disagreement.

Second, it is obvious that people disagree on the interpretation of certain biblical passages. Within Christendom, there have been disagreements that have led to the formation of new denominations. However, anyone who studies the history of the Christian Church will find that while each denomination develops its own tradition (lowercase “t”), the Christian Tradition (uppercase “T”), which is commonly understood as “those things which have been held by nearly all Christians at all times and in all places”
has remained remarkably consistent for more than 1,500 years in regard to the major, core, or essential features of the faith. In other words, the number and significance of the disagreements regarding interpretation are much less than some might have us believe.

While there are always extremes and misrepresentations that can be identified to discredit any ideas, including religion, an examination of history and the core teachings, at least of the Judeo-Christian Tradition (and many would assert that this is the case for other world religions, as well), shows that rather than religion being necessarily damaging to morality, it actually has great potential to promote altruism and other forms of moral behavior, accepted by most as morally beneficial for individuals, as well as societies.

**Can faith or religion enhance the moral life?**

There are a number of ways in which religious faith can be understood to benefit ethical thought and living. Faith in a loving God can be a strong motivator toward moral behavior that reflects that love toward others. The belief that good will ultimately triumph over evil and that people will be judged according to their moral actions can also help people to continue striving toward the Good, even in the face of significant obstacles. If God indeed created human beings in His own image, as held by the Judeo-Christian Tradition, then all people are created equal, which is a substantial foundation for belief in the equal value and ethical treatment of all human beings.

While, we discussed the Divine Command Theory earlier, many other ethical models can be found within the Judeo-Christian Tradition, as well as in other religious traditions, a fact which provides a wide variety of options for individuals to consider. For example, a form of virtue ethics can be found in Galatians 5:22-23, which presents its own list of virtues, “The fruit of the Holy Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Later, Augustine (A.D. 354-430) saw ethics as based on the foundation of love. If we are motivated by love, then our actions will reflect that, producing good in the world. Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) saw the fulfillment of human purpose and human reason as centerpieces of the ethical life. The ethical theories of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and others among the Protestant Reformers add further diversity to the range of Christian ethics. And there are many well-respected contemporary contributions from thinkers, such as Stanley Hauerwas and Stanley Grenz. This richness and variety can inform the thinking, even of atheist ethicists, looking for fresh ideas and concepts to apply in other contexts.

The most significant way that religion can enhance moral philosophy may present itself when we move beyond simply attempting to identify the morally right action (as theories such as utilitarianism and Kantianism attempt to do) to asking why we so often fail to perform the morally right action, even when we believe we have identified it. The Christian Tradition, for example, proposes answers to this question that is common to all human beings, as well as resources to address it. After all, what good is knowing the morally right path, if one doesn’t follow it?
Conclusion
We can conclude from our examination of the relationship between religion and ethics, that religion or theism is not required for ethical thinking. In fact, we see numerous prominent ethical theories that are not intentionally based upon religious thinking (e.g., utilitarianism, ethical egoism). However, that said, we have seen that religious faith has the potential to considerably enhance the moral life to the extent that it remains true to the best aspects of its traditions, is motivated by love, and avoids extremes that misrepresent its core.