

37 Isn't Christianity just a branch of morality?

Isn't Christianity just a branch of morality? When people say 'she's a real Christian' they're very often applauding someone's morality. In particular Christ's teaching about loving one's neighbour is frequently used as a yardstick for measuring the authenticity of a Christian.

At the same time some people are getting put off Christianity today because they see it as a negative moral crusade challenging any liberalisation of the law to permit things like abortion, euthanasia or homosexual marriage.

It's good that people are impacted by Christian morality one way or another but it's not true that Christianity's a branch of morality. For us the demands of morality come second to the revelation of grace and mercy given in Jesus Christ.

What distinguishes Christianity is something that goes beyond morality as such - something utterly transcendent. To welcome the Christian revelation is to welcome *grace*. It's to see and recognise God in Christ as one who's more concerned to give people what they need than what they deserve. This is why Saint Augustine could say to God *give me the grace to do what you command and command what you will!*

People's actions derive from their values and their values derive from their vision. The vision Jesus gives is a transformative vision. It helps people both to see the way things *can* be and to change things to *get* to that better place.

Christians as individuals may be less or more moral than Sikhs, Muslims or atheists. Since each individual by nature varies in their capacity for goodness, it's impossible for us to judge how important a factor grace is in their lives. It is, however, the openness to divine help given for living from beyond the human situation that's the prime distinctive in morality as understood by Christians. This grace, or help, is linked to distinctive belief and worship.

There but for the grace of God go I one Christian believer said to another as they watched a criminal being taken to the scaffold. Christians value God's grace or help as the most precious ingredient of our lives helping us not just do good but do *very good* things led by the Holy Spirit!

If your eyes are opened to a vision of God before you in this world and the next you lose selfcentredness. The early Christians won a name for themselves through caring for people with infectious diseases. Because they knew death wasn't the end for them, they didn't fear to care for the sick at a cost to themselves. This is one way hospitals came into being.

The impetus for doing good in Christianity comes from God, not from self. Christian faith is more about receiving a vision and motivation for the moral life than obedience to a moral code as such, though both come into play.

When you read the core moral code of the Sermon on the Mount you find a daunting challenge. Who's *not* daunted by what Jesus says there about loving and forgiving from the heart? Turning the other cheek when insulted? Loving not just those who love you but those who hate you?

Jesus wants the best out of us and he sets a high standard. He not only taught the best but he died and rose so that the Spirit would come and help us *do* the best!

Life in the Spirit is life that goes *with* the grain of our nature though, and not entirely against it. We're called to do the best we can with the lives we live, helped along by God. The best isn't meant to be the enemy of the good. Christian morality is the art of the possible, steering often towards the least evil as much as the greater good.

Isn't Christianity just a branch of morality? Yes, Jesus came to us with a moral challenge but what's most precious about Christian faith is the wherewithal Jesus brings us to rise to this challenge – I mean the Holy Spirit.

To live as a Christian is not so much a *Thou shalt not* religion as a *Thou shalt* not religion! Our faith makes clear to us our dignity. It helps us both value ourselves and forget ourselves in the service of others. In this state of illumination we find it hard to countenance unforgiveness and contempt for the weak.

When people see Christianity as a sort of super-morality they're rightly put off. They're bound to see it as a recipe for failure until they catch the good news of a God who offers us help to become what we're meant to be.

This isn't burdensome. It's a real liberation!