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Do you need to be religious to be good?

It is often said that God is necessary for morality, or, at the very least, is required to make sense of it. Following traditional logic, the proposition, "if a person is religious, s/he is good," would of course mean, when inverted, that "if a person is not religious, s/he is not good." In this essay, however, I seek to disprove this notion. As an agnostic, I have frequently grappled with this question, and it is my personal belief that any person, regardless of their theological background, can act in a fundamentally good manner towards others. It is a naive assumption that without God, "anything goes."

The term "fundamentally good" is used to refer to an act which benefits only the receiver. Some may claim that those who are not religious act in a manner akin to "reciprocal altruism;" that is, they have an attitude of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." This may superficially look as though the people are acting kindly, but it would be wrong to call them "good" as they have the wrong motive. Yet every day we as humans perform many acts of kindness without ever expecting anything in return: we give emotional support if someone is visibly distressed, we donate money to charity. Taking a slightly more extreme example, if I were to come across a stranger in the street who was, perhaps, suffering from a heart attack, I would undoubtedly help them to the best of my ability, without expecting any recognition. This is not because I am motivated by the word of God, but rather is due to an internalised sense of right and wrong. It simply feels right to help others in this way; to neglect someone in their time of need would be shameful.

Furthermore, many faiths disagree on certain ethical issues, and many values which some may consider to be key to our modern society – equal rights regardless of sex or sexual orientation – have been acquired despite religion. So if divine intervention has not revealed these values to us, what exactly has? As society has progressed, so too has our understanding of ethics and morality, and we have become better for it. Visionaries throughout history, motivated by their own beliefs of right and wrong, have defined our current way of thinking. As an illustration of this point, morality may well be subjective, but the vast majority of people would agree that religion should not be used to justify

homophobic attacks, as witnessed in parts of the 20th century. Rather, it should, as it has more recently started to, take a more progressive and "liberal" stance with the ultimate goal of improving the livelihood of all people, regardless of their background.

There is, of course, a strong case that religion encourages people to be good to others, and, as Immanuel Kant philosophised, a God is necessary to enforce moral standards. The "Golden Rule," or "ethic of reciprocity," for Christianity is often attributed to Jesus of Nazareth: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them" (Matthew 7:12). Almost all religions encourage their followers to treat others well, and to think not of the rewards they might receive, but only of the internal joy one gets from performing kind acts and witnessing the results. Indeed, another quote reads, "When thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth" (Matthew 6:13). There may even be a case that people who are religious are less likely to commit more heinous crimes, such as murder. However, I am still of the opinion that we are born with certain fundamental values. They can not be taught by religion.

In conclusion, whilst religion can be of great benefit to people, offering them practical support when they need it most, I do not believe that it is a prerequisite for morality. We, as an intelligent race, are born with the innate ability to empathise with others, and with a strong desire to help people, even if our efforts go unrecognised or unrewarded. Indeed, many values which are fundamental principles of our modern society were not acquired because of religion, but rather due to visionaries who had the courage to fight organised religion and the state for what they believed in. Do we need to be religious to be good? Absolutely not.