

# Is There A Moral Decay?

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One of the standard college dictionaries defines moral as "pertaining to or concerned with right conduct or the distinction between right or wrong. "After giving several other definitions it offers a number of synonyms including righteous, just, virtuous, and good.<sup>1</sup> Before we can determine whether there is a moral decay we have to ask what is right conduct, what is meant by right and wrong, and what determines whether a person is righteous, just, virtuous, and good. This is an impossible task, one that the editors of the dictionary avoided by defining everything in general terms. When someone says that there is moral decay, it might be clear to that person what he or she means, but it is not necessarily clear to anyone else. For example, the changing level of tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality might be one person's definition of moral decay and be interpreted by another person as an important moral step forward.

Though what exactly constitutes moral decay is debatable, one group traditionally has been singled out for criticism, namely young people, particularly the youthful challengers to the establishment. The difference in generational conduct has almost always been seen as threatening to tradition, and this view has been accentuated in our lifetime by the segregated status of the young from the old, and the growth of a commercial youth culture. Peer group pressure is much stronger on today's teenagers than it was in earlier times, if only because young people remain in school and do not usually enter the workplace in any serious way until much later in life. Still, even in long ago historical times, when the family pull was much stronger, there were wide ranging

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complaints about the young. We retain some memory from one ancient period of youthful "moral decay" by using the term sophomore for both second year high school and second year college students. The word, literally a wise fool, comes from the Greek and is a carryover from the time when the adolescents of fifth century Athens, led by the sophists, were challenging tradition. According to the records of the time, the elders lamented the decline in traditional values brought about by the sophists who taught the youths to make the bad cause look good, and the best cause look the worst. Yet, as we look back upon this period in Athenian history, it is often seen as the birthplace of western intellectual thought. What would have been the fate of western culture if such challenges had not risen?

The lamenters of moral decline, even those at the more liberal end of such criticism, tend to forget their own youthful exuberance. Even those of us who managed to keep alive the enthusiasm of our youthful causes often end up decrying the new generation for failing to recognize the good and truth which we ourselves have come to hold and cherish. One reason for their failure to do so is because, not infrequently, the achievements which we fought so hard to bring about, seem somehow either to be more flawed or not so important to the young as we thought they should have been. Somehow many of the problems we sought to deal with still exist but in different form.

The young for their part accept the fruits of victory without realizing how much it cost to accomplish what we did. Many feminists, for example, feel that the young women of today take too much for granted. This is a common complaint because, all too often, the children of those who made the most radical break with society, refuse to follow their parents into the utopian new world that they thought they had created. This happens even in religion. Look at what is happening to the Hare Krishnas, the

radical anti-establishment mystical movement of twenty years ago, which so challenged a generation of parents, that special cult de-programmers emerged as an occupational specialty. Just imagine how much the young converts to the movement felt they were rebelling against traditional ideology, against what they called "moral hypocrisy," so much so that a generation of young people turned their backs on traditional western values? Times do change, however, and the Los Angeles Times recently ran a story entitled "Krishna Youths at a Crossroads."<sup>2</sup> The essence of the story was that the children of these Krishna converts were turning away from their parents' religion. Though originally the members lived inside the temples, as families grew members had to move outside into the real world. Inevitably, the children of these converts fell into contact with the American youth culture and many of the young people, bitter at the limitations of the Krishna movement, have left. The essential difference is that the parents chose to be Hare Krishna while the upcoming generation were born into it and lack the commitment of their parents.

This has been a continual cry in American history, that the younger generation does not conform to the elders, made more poignant because so many of the settlers in the United States sought to establish utopian communities. Even in Puritan New England, established as a covenanted community for the faithful, the differing standards of a new generation led to the half way covenant, a dilution of the original, and much denounced by some as due to a decline in morals. When the faithful also decried the immoral tendencies of Harvard, and founded Yale as a substitute, Yalesoon went the way of Harvard. No generation of individuals as yet has found a way to ensure that the young believe as they did, even the modern massive police state. In fact, if anything, the problem of youthful irreverence for tradition has gotten worse, as society has become more urban and the isolation which allowed such groups as the Shakers or Mormons to develop is increasingly

difficult to find. Even Jim Jones and his group of dedicated believers found that they were not totally isolated in Guiana. With the massive information explosion, young people are exposed to all kinds of challenges to traditions, and inevitably many do challenge traditional assumptions of society although usually the majority do not. Still society changes and with it we are continually redefining what is a righteous man or woman or moral conduct.

The problem is that there are real problems in today's societies, and they do not respond to easy solutions. Complicating the fact is that changes in society have undermined many traditional ways of doing things. In the process it has contributed to the alienation which many feel, and which has led many to turn to drugs, alcohol, or other form of escape from reality. The change in the country's industrial base has meant that there are few high paying jobs for the uneducated or poorly educated, and the result has been to recreate greater divisions in society than existed in the immediate postwar period. One way the excluded can cope is to organize in gangs, to demand their share of the pot. Rather than dealing with root problems, we as a society deal with symptoms by building ever more jails, giving harsher criminal punishments, listing an increasing number of the young as uneducatable, and decrying the drop in moral standards.

Somehow, it is believed, that if we went back to the one room school house and the McGuffey reader which emphasized moral teachings, everything would be all right. Those advocating this tend to forget that the country was mainly agriculture at that time, that massive numbers of people never learned to read, and that a very small percentage of our population lived in urban areas. There is a kind of utopian wishful belief that sometime in the not too distant past, people lived together in peace and harmony and followed the same moral code. Anyone who reads American

history at all seriously can dismiss such ideas out of hand. In fact, most Americans of earlier generations looked to the future for their utopias, since so many knew they did not live in one. One reason the frontier kept moving was because of an effort to find a better life.

Another factor at work leading to charges of moral decay is the growing diversity of American culture. Massive immigration of Buddhists from Cambodia, Thailand, as well as elsewhere, the growth of Sikh and Hindu congregations, and the emergence of Islam as an important religious grouping have added a diversity to the United States that did not exist before. Internally the new tolerance has led to an reinvigoration of Native American groups who no longer try to merge into the European American culture but assert their rights as an indigenous people. Many of these groups, and there are many more than we have mentioned, tend to challenge some of the traditional reasoning for moral judgments.

The dominant Biblical ideals which supposedly drove American in the past are no longer there and this in itself is grounds for a cry of moral decay. In nearly 40 years of teaching courses in western civilization in a variety of colleges and universities, one of the authors of this paper has had fewer than a dozen or so students who had ever read the Bible or knew much more about it than they might have picked up from watching the Ten Commandments on television. More had read selected parts of it, even memorized a few verses, but most of them exhibited a kind of blank stare when questioned about incidents supposedly so dear to our "Christian heritage. "

Certainly the Ten Commandments are not a very good model for guiding conduct in today's world, if only because so few know what they say. But it is not certain they ever were a good guide

or why the Christians limit the commandments to ten, since there are all sorts of commandments by Jehovah to his people in the Bible which are ignored. This not to deny that the Ten Commandments do not furnish some guiding principles for us today: Honoring one's parents, not killing, and not stealing, not committing adultery, and not bearing false witness, are probably reasonable rules. But we as a society interpret them in our own way, and ignore those aspects which we do not find pertinent.

To literally observe the sabbath day and keep it holy by not laboring would bring down American society as would actually adopting the idea of not coveting what is not yours, including things that our neighbors have. How would advertising function without creating such desires? Society long ago interpreted the commandment prohibiting killing did not apply to warfare or to police officers or others who kill in the line of duty. Stealing has also become relative and much of international spying is based on violations of this commandment.<sup>3</sup>

Probably the lack of familiarity with the Bible is one of the occurrences that has led so many to decry the growing immorality, although it is the failure of the very churches to teach their members about the Bible they claim to revere which is the greatest failure in modern religious education. They cannot blame that on the secular schools.

But what do people really mean when the claim immorality is increasing. Obviously some of the "religious" critics are concerned about the failure of individuals to attend church. The fear generated by this failure runs deeper than popular statistics would indicate. This is because traditionally polls indicate that 90% of the people believe in God and 40% attend church services in any given week. More recent studies have challenged such statistics arguing that people have not been honest with the

pollsters, and that somewhere about 20% of Protestants show up on a church service on any given Sunday and 28% of the Catholics.<sup>4</sup> We do not believe that church attendance is a sign of higher morality. We do believe, however, that the decline in church attendance certainly acts as a motivating factor for many religious professionals to equate the lack of such attendance with moral failure.

Several kinds of behaviors also lead to cries of immorality. Sexual behavior is a notable example and both homosexuality and "sexual promiscuity" draw a lot of fire. How the critics include sexual promiscuity in their condemnation of a new moral failure with the examples of David and Bathsheba or Solomon and his thousand wives and concubines is hard for us to imagine, but they do. Certainly there is less Biblical justification of homosexuality, but there is little hostility in the Bible to it, and most of what passes for hostility is not so much Biblical as due to erroneous translations. Still our attitudes on various sexual activities are changing, and we think this is good.

Also condemned as immoral by many commentators is the high rate of divorce, yet early Christian apostles even urged devoted members to leave their spouses and cleave unto the Gospel if their spouses did not believe. Divorce is not new, it has just been democratized in American society, and much of the hypocrisy about the need to disguise the failure of a marriage has been discarded. Remember also that the double standard, sanctioned even by the highly moral St. Augustine, has been weakened by the growth of what might be called feminine power. What has happened, however, is not that couples are more likely to be unfaithful to one another, but that both sides are free to find alternatives and it is this which has led to increased divorce. In fact in much of our contact with recent divorcees, we find it is usually the woman who has initiated it, and sex per se often has

little to do with it. Women have options other than the traditional marriage, and increasingly want to explore them. This means that we are in a cultural lag, in which the role of women in marriage relationships has changed radically, but in which the male oriented society goes on the assumption that the wife is the mother who stays at home with the children and does as her husband says. This ideal never corresponded very closely with reality and certainly does not do so now, yet society has not adopted effective ways of giving support to the working couple with children by establishing enough nurseries, more effective help for latch key children, or other services. It has almost totally failed to deal with the single parent of either sex. Society is changing but some of our assumptions about marriage and the family are not changing very fast. In fact, much of the discourse on immorality today is a thinly disguised attack on the changing role of women. It is, for example, at the heart of the hysteria over child abuse. Children, it is implied, would not be abused if mothers were on their guard. Such an argument ignores the fact that child abuse is less now than any time in history by all measurable guides such as infant mortality, crippling of children, or even the willingness of the societal protective organizations to consider it exists, something they long denied.

Sometimes the changes we are making in society lead to problems in themselves. For example, we have raised the age of consent (to 18 in most states, and 21 in some, at least in the case of alcohol consumption). We tend to forget that a few short years ago girls in the majority of states could be married at 13 or 14, that few people went further than the eighth grade in schooling, and that many people were earning their own way in their teens. One of the authors of this paper made more money than his father when he was 16, entered college at that age, had five quarters of attendance before he went into the army, and married a week after he turned 19. The other author, abandoned by her parents,



supported herself as a teenager with the help of a grandmother, managed to get to college through the Cadet Nurse Core, and married when she graduated. Granted many of these things were not the norm even when we were growing up, but they were at a slightly earlier generation. What we have done is increase schooling, increase dependency, and at the same time prolong a period of childhood. We recognize that the key to success in today's world is education, but we are asking young people to defer gratification at a period when their hormones are at their strongest. In fact, in our eagerness to protect children, we make it ever more difficult for them to associate with any adults except teachers and their parents until they finally graduate from college. Humanists especially have to be realistic, in pointing out the problems of today, and indicating root causes rather than adopting the pious view that all ills are due to moral decay. This is because many those who decry the "immorality" see Humanism itself as the root cause. We tend to forget that we have openly challenged the whole basis of western morals, namely a God given moral code which points out in absolute terms what is right and wrong. Even the Hare Krishna at least believed in a divine being. The seriousness of our challenge is evidenced by the attack on Humanism and secularism by the whole organized pentecostal-fundamentalist movement. To them, of course, organized Humanism, which they equate with secularism, is the cause of all the troubles in today's world, and when they talk about moral decline they are talking about us. It is, in fact, the Humanist willingness to accept the concept of what some have called situational ethics which probably is at the base of the charge of moral decay so prevalent today.

We wish that we as Humanists could claim responsibility for all of the things attributed to us by our opponents, but realistically it is the changes in society which are far more responsible than the organizational activities of the various Humanist groups. We

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should all worry less about a growth of immorality which is not a relevant issue, and talk about real issues such as lack of employment opportunities for a large segment of young people who did not go to college as well as many who did. We need also to remember that it is part of the rhetoric of American fundamentalist and pentecostal groups to decry the sins of the secular world. To be saved, one has to reach the brink of degradation before it is possible to realize that only through dependence on a greater power, Jesus, that salvation is possible. This tradition is deeply ingrained in the American society and has spread from the fundamentalist and pentecostal churches to "secular" oriented groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous through the various twelve step programs.

The result has been a continual emphasis by many in society on the helplessness of the individual, the need to repent of sins, the need to put society on a high moral standard. We should recognize that the alleged decline in morals is simply part of a litany of evils which is part of the American religious tradition. What we as Humanists cannot do is subscribe to this litany. We need to work at root causes rather than simplistic ones, and not expect that a utopia will result tomorrow.

In sum, we do not believe there has been a decline in morality, although there has been a change in what is defined as moral by large segments of our society. This change is continuing and it will continue as we redefine our society. What we need to do is recognize the need for a redefinition and discuss openly what this should be. Should we keep silent about sexual issues? We would argue we should not. We need to attack the hypocrisy which still exists out there and which does not accept reality. Should we deny that violence exists? No. But we should also recognize that the United States is one of the most violent societies around. Why? Capitalism at heart is based on looking out for oneself rather than society as a whole, and though Adam Smith

seemed to imply that selfishness was ultimately the way to altruism, this is simply a misreading of Smith. We need to remove our rose colored glasses in order to see that there are basic problems unique to American society which we need to examine and deal with and that our own rhetoric about the glories of the American way is not conducive to solving the so called moral problems of the day.

We could go on, of course, but we would still conclude that there has not been a moral decay but rather only mounting evidence that we need to deal with the problems which have resulted from a changing society. As disparities between groups increase, it becomes easier for those in power to sit in moral judgments on those who do not hold such power, whether the powerless are young people or minorities with a different skin color, or those who profess atheism, or somehow are different from the establishment. Although it is part of a long American tradition to decry the growing lack of moral standards, we should not accept this claim literally. It is simply a smokescreen in a hunt for simplistic answers.

<sup>1</sup> American College Dictionary (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 790.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis McLellan, "Krishna Youths at a Crossroad," Los Angeles Times (Nov. 26, 1993), pp. 1,A40.

<sup>3</sup> I am following the list in Deuteronomy, 5, and not the various other lists of commandments which Moses was said to have received from God and which appear in Genesis and elsewhere.

<sup>4</sup> This is based on a survey published in the December (1993) issue of the American Sociological Review and conducted by a team of sociologists headed by C. Kirk Hadawy of the United Church of Christ. Results were summarized in Newsweek, Nov. 29, 1993, pp. 80 ff.