

# Is There a Specifically Christian Morality?\*

Dr. Soosai Arokiasamy S.J.

**The title of the paper as a query raises a number of related questions:**

Is religion necessary for being moral? Can there be religion without morality? Can morality be totally independent of religion? Is religion a matter of morality? Do Christians accept morality as revealed? If religion and morality are related, what is the contribution of religion to morality, at what level and in what sense the contribution of religion to morality and in what sense not? This latter question can be differently stated: If religion is related to morality and if it makes contribution to morality and moral living, how does one describe the specificity of this contribution? In this essay, we focus mainly on this question.

**To answer the question: Is there is a specifically Christian morality, I first follow the argument and reasoning of Joseph Fuchs. 1**

Following Fuchs, one could make a distinction between morality at the level of particular categorical imperatives based on right reason (recta ratio) and the nature of human person and morality at the transcendental level of fundamental motivations, intentionality which could include basic attitudes, dispositions, relationships, virtues and principles that inform and shape human life as a whole. One can see here the influence of transcendental anthropology of Karl Rahner. Fuchs maintains and most moral theologians hold that morality at the first level is human, not specifically Christian but basically human. At this level one cannot strictly speak of Christian morality, and for that matter Hindu morality or Buddhist morality, etc. This would mean that morality at the first level is neither specifically Christian, nor specifically Buddhist, Hindu nor Sikh nor Islamic but human. Hence distinctiveness of Christian ethics cannot be situated here. Though the distinction of morality between categorical and transcendental harks back to Emmanuel Kant, in our reflection, we go by the ethically intelligibility of these two terms for our discussion.

The specifically Christian morality can be understood at the second level of transcendental principles, virtues and intentionality 2 The Christian specificity or distinctiveness of Christian morality admitted in a particular sense means also that others can have a distinctive or specific morality from their own traditions. We understand the specificity or distinctiveness of Christian morality as open to and grounded in the universal character of morality based on the nature of human person and our shared common and relational humanity lest it becomes sectarian.

Morality at the first level of particular categorical imperatives springs from nature of human person, recta ratio (right reason) and hence from natural moral law.

This is what we find in the so-called second tablet of the Decalogue that deals with interhuman obligations. This is linked to the fundamental moral law summed up as the ethical obligations: "One ought to avoid evil and ought to do good" or evil ought to be avoided and good ought to be done (*malum vitandum et bonum faciendum*). Some examples of particular categorical imperatives are: Be chaste, be truthful in speech, be just in your dealings your neighbour e.g. in the area of wages, contracts and agreements, do not utter lie, do not steal, etc.

According to Joseph Fuchs, we locate the specifically Christian morality or the distinctiveness of Christian ethics at the transcendental level. Morality at the transcendental level in the sense of fundamental motivations and intentionality, basic attitudes, dispositions, virtues and principles going beyond particular categorical imperatives embraces the whole human person and touches all areas of human life in the manner of integration, that is, it informs and shapes the whole human person, the totality of human behaviour and brings wholeness to one's lifestyle. For examples, the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity enter all aspects of the life of a believer and are not confined to particular areas or aspects one's life and brings an intentionality to the whole life. We situate the specific contribution of faith at this level. In this connection we can say that religion for that matter any religion can make a specific contribution to morality at this level.

We can now draw some of the important inferences and implications of this approach. First, there is recognition of a relative autonomy of morality at the level of particular categorical imperatives as basically human based on right reason and the nature of human person. At the same time, the deepest foundations and inspirations for the first level lie in morality at the transcendental level. Hence autonomy of morality that is human is also relative.

The transcendental vision of faith impacts on morality at the first level. We get the enlightening knowledge from faith as to who human persons are, that is, the nature of human person. Faith provides knowledge of humanity's destiny. The essential constituents of the nature of human person, namely rational, embodied and relational with call to responsibility are deeply and positively affirmed by Christian revelation without which one cannot understand and speak of the distinctive intentionality of morality that faith provides. We can say revelation or the Word of God provides an anthropology that illumines moral imperatives based on right reason and the nature of human person at the first level. We have a saying about this relationship between the two levels morality with recognition of relative autonomy of the first level: reason informed by faith.

Without this foundation, morality at the first level is disconnected and hangs in the air. This means that there is a close relationship between the two levels of morality. One cannot exist without the other. There is a dialectical relationship between these two levels of morality. The distinction between two levels of morality

is not separation. Moreover, morality that is basically human contains within itself the foundation and vision of who human beings are and what their destiny is. Integration of both the levels of morality constitutes its wholeness.

What we have said so far explains the contribution of Christian faith to morality that is basically human. Morality at the transcendental level that embodies transcendental vision of faith needs concrete historical expression without which it will remain abstract and utopian. The concretization of morality at the transcendental level embodying Christian vision of things becomes a reality in the concrete historical moral imperatives and gives the latter its foundation and dynamism through specific Christian intentionality and style of life. It nourishes sustainability of morality and makes it worthy of the human beings and their vocation. Both the levels of morality need and complement each other. Some indicate the contribution of faith and therefore of religion in the following way; faith and religion in relation to morality are much more a value raiser than an answer-giver. Another way of describing the contribution of Christian faith (and for that matter religion) with its transcendental vision and liberative message to morality is that faith becomes an enlightener and enabler for transformed life rather than a prescriber of precepts and duties though this task of religion and for us the Church through its Magisterium is not excluded provided it is understood at a secondary level but the latter in the church is exercised in an evangelical, pastoral and prophetic sense.

Speaking of concretization of morality at the transcendental level in history in terms of basic morality that is human, we can say that for Christians, its paradigmatic realisation is embodied in the Word made flesh, that is, in the mystery of Jesus Christ the new Adam who is the sacrament of God and new humanity. This perspective is powerfully expressed in *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II. <sup>3</sup> It is through Christ, His Gospel and the Reign of God he proclaimed, the enrichment of morality becomes possible.

As we examine further the relationship between the two levels of morality in the light of Christian faith, especially in relation to the mystery of Christ, we need to make some important preliminary observations.

The first observation concerns the question widely debated, especially in a secular context: the relation between morality and religion. Could there be religion without morality? Can you reduce religion to morality? Is morality religion? Can there be morality without religion? This has been partly covered in the above discussion on the relation between the two levels of morality. As far as our knowledge goes, there seems to be no religion without reference to dimension of morality, be it Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism or Islam apart from Judaism and Christianity. In this connection, we refer to the book of Rudolf Otto: *Idea of the Holy*. <sup>4</sup> He describes the divine noumenon or *numinosum* characterised by three

traits: *tremendum, mysteriosum et fascinans*. There is one trait missing in Otto's account of the divine or the holy. In Judaeo-Christian tradition, the holy mystery of the divine includes also the trait of righteousness. Von Rad the great scripture scholar of the Old Testament says that the one trait that eminently characterises the divine in the revelation of the Old Testament is righteousness.<sup>5</sup> H.H Schrey, in a study prepared for the World Council of Churches states: "It can be said without exaggeration that the Bible, taken as a whole, has one theme: The history of the revelation of God's righteousness."<sup>6</sup> All this means that moral dimension of religion cannot be ignored.

The second observation concerns the position of some protestant theologians including Karl Barth at least in his early career: Theologians of this position distrust human morality based on right reason and the nature of human person because of the totally corrupt nature of human beings after the fall. Hence they affirm the need for "revealed morality" via biblical revelation.<sup>7</sup> Catholic moral tradition does not accept this position. Though human nature is wounded or weakened by sin is not totally corrupt. Through reason (*recta ratio*) moral law and its precepts can be known by humans.

Here I would like to explain the specific contribution of Christian faith to moral life in the following way: First and foremost Christian faith liberatively affirms the truth and wholeness of the human and of our humanity because God in Christ is the creator and redeemer of humankind. Here we can refer to the theology of creation in the first three chapters of Genesis.

Second, the Word of God, the Gospel and the Spirit that the believers receive and experience purify the human from all(sinful) alienations and liberate it from all sinful structures, that is, from the world in the Johannine sense as the realm and sphere of hostility and opposition to God and therefore to our humanity, its dignity and vocation.

Third Christian faith in and through the central mystery of the Triune God and the mystery of Christ as given to us the whole biblical story of faith reveals the primordial dignity of the human and the pristine greatness of its vocation( the radical identity of the human) and thus deepens and enriches the human. It also protects the human as willed by the Creator. The latter is expressed in the recognition of the relative autonomy of morality as basically human by the Catholic moral tradition and affirmed by its natural law tradition with its theological underpinnings. Moreover, Catholic moral tradition does not follow the approach of some of the Protestants opting only for the "revealed morality."<sup>8</sup> Lucien Richard sums up the position of Barth in the following way: "To gain insight into what God's will is, and therefore what is morally right and good, one needs to turn to Scripture. Ethics grounds itself in God's word; it does not need grounding from us"<sup>9</sup>

Fourth Christian tradition in its hope-filled eschatological tradition characterised by “the already” and “not yet” dynamism calls us in our moral commitment towards greater integration and wholeness and fuller humanity until the eschaton and future of God for humankind. All moral striving would reflect this dynamism of growth and fulfilment.

I would like offer in a summary way some more explanations and illustrations of the concretization of the transcendental vision of Christian faith, above all the mystery of Christ and the sacramental and ecclesial embodiment of the same in relation to moral life.

Before we deal with this question according the paradigm of Christ, we have to mention this kind of integration of the two levels of morality already in the First Testament, namely the covenant morality of Decalogue with its two versions in Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21. Behind the Ten Commandments , stands the experience of liberation of Israel by Yahweh from Egypt the house of slavery and the covenant Yahweh makes with Israel to reveal to them that He is their God and that they are His people( cf Exodus 19: 3b-6). It is this liberational and relational event that brings about the new reality of covenantal people and covenantal fellowship or family. It generates an intentionality specific and proper to the living of the commandments and brings a new quality and depth to the way Israel live the precepts of the Decalogue of which the second tablet of interhuman obligations in their material content are expressions of morality that is human (natural moral law). The covenantal relationship does not destroy the basic human morality of the second tablet. It does not replace it with a “revealed morality”. Instead it affirms and protects it. If it were to replace it, it would amount to emptying humanity of its precious moral dimension, a gift of God to humanity He created in His image and likeness.

In the Second Testament, first and foremost the basic paradigm of new humanity is Jesus Christ for the Christian believers. It is the incarnate mystery of Christ brings an intentionality to morality lived by Christians. In Jesu Christ we see the finest exemplar of authentic humanity, its greatness and vocation. In him and from him we learn a humanism which we could call as Christian humanism that is challenging and inviting for Christians but also for others. The finest humanity embodied in Jesu s Christ is also universalisable with openness to insights and enrichment coming from other religious traditions. As concrete historical person Jesus is the embodied model and norm for transformed moral life.

We shall point out and delineate the specifically unique features of Jesus as the incarnate or historically concretised and embodied paradigm and exemplar of humanity as accessible to all and thus embodied model and norm for moral life. Here I follow the Hans Kueng 10 As concrete, historical person Jesus possesses the following features, namely impressiveness, audibility and realizability. Jesus

as concrete person and model is not an abstract principle. People in his ministry encountered him, were impressed by his person and authority. In his healing, in his relation to people and his table-fellowship with outcasts and sinners, he recognised the faith of the people and restored their dignity and worth in the very act of healing or forgiving by saying your faith has saved you (Lk 7:50). We see the impressibility of the concrete person that Jesus is and that Jesus was for his contemporaries. As Kueng says: "Only a living figure and not a principle draw people, can be "attractive" in the most profound and comprehensive sense of the term: *verba docent, exempla trahunt*, words teach, examples carry us with them" 11 The next feature of Jesus, the concrete paradigm and norm is he "possesses audibility" 12 His words are the Gospel and word of life. People listen to the powerful words in their encounter and touch with the person of Jesus, words that embody the authority of the person. These embodied words are a call, an invitation, a challenge and a proclamation of the Gospel of the Reign of God for all people. Audibility of words as accessible to all is an inseparable feature of the concrete model and norm that Jesus is.

Only a concrete historical person has a name and a face. The very name of Jesus stands not only for his being our redeemer and redeemer of humankind, but also stands for grace, peace, compassion, healing power, offer of forgiving love of God, for life. By this name know as Kueng says that Jesus "is opposed to inhumanity, oppression, untruthfulness and injustice, and stands for humanity, freedom justice, truth and love" 13. A concrete person who has words and a voice can call and make appeal. "Only a living figure and not a principle can make sweeping demands". 14 Jesus is the Word of God that pitched his tent among us.

### **Realizability of the Paradigm of Christ as the Model and Norm of Moral Life.**

In Jesus again as a historical person we encounter the model and norm that is realizable. Jesus by all that he was, did, spoke with call and appeal to his followers and to us today in the Church displays a grace-enabling realizability of the model that he is for renewed and fuller humanity which God wills. His life is the indicative for the imperative for transformed humanity now and is always the Word, the Son and the light and life for all. As historical person and as the Word made flesh is ever encouraging, enabling and engendering new life and renewed and transformed humanity in the Spirit and in the Church. In the Spirit this model and norm is accessible to all. The incarnate paradigm of Jesus in its impressiveness, audibility and realizability for moral life challenges and invites in a normative way to the goal of what sort of persons Christians become. It provides a vision or viewpoint and standpoint to look at whole of life for formation and transformation of persons and community for mission of service and witness.

I would add here in a summary way the argument and explanation of the specific contribution of faith to moral life according to Richard A. McCormick 15

McCormick states that there is only one destiny possible to humankind, and therefore stipulates that "there is existentially one morality common to all people regardless of their being Christian or non-Christian." According to him, that which is distinctive about Christian ethic "is found essentially in the style of life, the manner of accomplishing the moral tasks common to all persons, not in the tasks themselves." 16 Thus for him Christian morality in its historical concreteness and materiality is human morality. It is the humanum and morality that is basically human are "illuminated by the person, teaching and achievement of Jesus Christ." Christian tradition believes that Jesus embodied authentic humanity in the deepest and the fullest sense. Hence Jesus becomes the normative paradigm for the authentic humanum and morality. This explanation shows that the distinctive contribution of the Christian faith to morality does not replace the human morality but affirms it, liberates and redeems it, enriches and deepens it and integrates it with a call to greater and fuller humanity towards the eschaton and the future of God as we have explained above. What the Second Vatican Council says will confirm this understanding when it asserts that "faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God's design for man's total vocation, and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human." 17 The same document says further: "But only God, who created man to His own image and ransomed him from sin, provides a fully adequate answer to these questions. This he does through what he has revealed in Christ, His Son, who became man. Whoever follows after Christ, the perfect man, *becomes himself more of a man.*" 18 By way of application of the faith perspectives to the human and morality, one could illustrate as McCormick does with regard to old people. In a technologically advanced society one tends or is tempted to view the humanity of old people or senior citizens in a functional way and thus devalue their intrinsic dignity and their humanity. Technological mindset can take over our way of viewing human persons in this way. But our love and faithfulness to Jesus Christ, the perfect man has by incarnation revealed and guaranteed the divine affirmation of the meaning and dignity of human persons in all stages of life. Faith anchored in the decisive meaning of the saving deeds and events of Jesus provides a decisive way of viewing and understanding humanity and the world and a new way of interpreting them in the light of the saving incarnation and eschatological reign of God Jesus proclaimed. The whole Christian story with its affectively charged symbols nourish this way of living life and viewing the world redeemed by Christ. In this light we hierarchise values, discern moral priorities and give a quality focus and orientation to moral life and commitment.

### **Gospel and Morality of Power.**

One more illustration to show the contribution of faith morality in the N.T, especially the Gospel in relation to power and its morality. We distinguish power in two senses: Power of dominance and power of service. Power in the first sense named as power of dominance shows itself in the use of power to dominate others,

exercise control over others, to exploit, to oppress and thus it becomes power of vested interests, privilege and prestige all of which will go with exclusion of the powerless poor and promote elitism. In the political realm, it can degenerate into tyranny and dictatorship. It becomes power politics with its imperiously selfish use of naked power reducing people to its slaves and its victims in contrast to politics of power for freedom, liberation, and empowerment of the powerless and service of the wellbeing of all people. The whole mystery of Christ's servanthood is a rejection of and protest against the power of dominance described above. The historical paradigm and norm of Jesus for the power for freedom, and for the service of the wellbeing of people is embodied and unambiguously attested in Jesus' act of washing of the feet of his disciples (John 13:3-16). This deed of Christ becomes the sacrament of humble loving service, the purpose of all authority. He eternally changes the meaning of authority as we read in Mark 10: 35-45, especially 41-45): " So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them , and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many." According the normative paradigm of Christ, the ultimate and the only valid meaning of authority is service. Ethics of authority is deepened, enriched and transformed by the model of Jesus Christ, the Servant. Christ's kenosis is a basic expression of the way of salvation (see Philippians 2:6-11).

### **Ecclesiological Specificity of Christian Faith and its Specific Contribution to Morality.**

For Catholic Christians, the contribution of faith to morality includes the sacramental reality of the Church that continues the mission of Christ. Being Church and being in the church belongs to specificity of Christian faith and its lifestyle, and hence the way and the quality of moral life and commitment common to all humankind. The community of the church is a fellowship of the people of God and a communion of the disciples of Jesus. The Church is the sacrament of Christ just as Christ is the sacrament of God and continues the mission of Christ in a visibly sacramental way. Hierarchy and magisterium as service leadership and charism of the Church given by Christ authoritatively clarify, enlighten and teach the soundness of moral positions compatible with the Gospel of Christ.

### **The Church as the Bearer of the Memory of the Mystery of Christ.**

One of the most significant dimensions of being Church is that it is the bearer of the memory of the total mystery of Christ. It is a sacramental bearer of the memory of Christ in all that the Church is, all that church does and speaks. " Do this in memory of me" at the Last Supper has made the whole being of the Church and its ecclesialness to be an anamnesis of Christ. The Church in all its being is eminently living anamnesis of the whole life and mission of Christ and of the Gospel Jesus proclaimed. The Church being eminently the bearer of the memory of Christ is the



sacrament of salvation “at once manifesting and actualizing the mystery of God’s love for men”<sup>19</sup> It is this living *anamnesis* of the mystery of Christ, crucified and risen by the Church that informs and influences in a uniquely specific way the lifestyle of Christians and the moral life and commitments they have to live and thus bear witness to the Gospel. The being of the Church as the bearer of the memory of Jesus Christ brings a distinctiveness to the morality that Christians live by way of a specific intentionality and lifestyle. This “distinctiveness of Christian ethics can only be the consequence of an ongoing incarnation.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover the specificity that marks the Christian ethic is open-ended. In this sense it can enter into dialogue with specificities that other religions can bring to the task of living morality common to all humankind without in any way diluting and compromising its own unique Christian specificity of which it is the faithful bearer.

### **Dialogue with Specificity of Ethic in Other Religions.**

In this paper we have examined and reflected on the specific contribution of Christian faith to moral life common to all humans. As Christians living in a religiously plural world, especially in India and Asia, we have to briefly reflect on what we have seen about Christian faith in relation to other religions. The project of interreligious dialogue launched by the Church must embrace the realm of morality in which right answer to many contemporary ethical issues urgent and crucial to the future of humankind is integral to the mission of the Church.

First such a dialogue calls Christians and the Church to recognise that other religions can also through their specifically positive religious traditions make contribution to morality. Morality considered at the transcendental level of basic vision and goal of life derived from their own religious texts and traditions can impact on morality common to all in a positive and liberative way. Through dialogical experience we recognise that different religions can and do offer from their own religious resources an intentionality that can add a qualitative depth to moral living and light on moral issues and thus enrich and enhance moral living of believers. Second because of this followers of different religions can come together and cooperate on common moral issues that afflict society and humankind. This will also promote interreligious harmony and peace between religious communities and the same in the larger society. This means that all peoples can come together to build a civilisation of love and promote a culture of peace and life. Before concluding this essay, I would like to point out two areas regarding which for example Indic religions can come together in dialogue with Christianity because we believe that these religious traditions can make a valuable contribution through their worldviews and transcendental vision and goal of life to our world in crisis for moral renewal.

First I would mention the dharma of ahimsa-non-violence which stands out as supreme dharma in Indic religions. This value is of tremendous importance for interreligious cooperation. Christianity with its Gospel of non-violence and peace-making can come together with all religions with their own commitment to non-

violence can work for peace and reconciliation. Second the value for which Indic religions can contribute is respect for life, especially human life. These two values are quite important in the contemporary situation of a global moral crisis for which engagement in interreligious dialogue can be fruitful. In this way, we can engage in interreligious dialogue in many other issues of morality in relation to our life in common.

### End Notes:

\* The topic has of late been studied by a number of authors from various angles. Most of the significant articles in this area have been collected together under the title: "Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics" in *Readings in Moral Theology*, vol. 2 edited by Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, New York, Paulist Press, 1980. Cf also Lucien Richard: *Is There A Christian Ethics?* New York, Paulist Press, 1988.

1. Cf "Is There a Specifically Christian Morality?" in *The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics* ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick. N.Y, Paulist Press, 1980, pp.3- 19).
2. Fuchs, *ibid.* p.6.
3. Cf *Gaudium et Spes*, 22, 32, 41 and 45.
4. Rudolf Otto: *The Idea of the Holy*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1959.
5. John R. Donahue: "Biblical Perspectives on Justice" in *The Faith that Does Justice*, ed. John C. Haughey, S.J., New York, Paulist Press, p. 68.
6. Quoted by Donahue, *ibid.* p. 68.
7. Cf Lucien Richard: *Is There A Christian Ethics?* New York, Paulist Press, 1988 pp. 35-35.
8. Cf on Karl Barth's position on Christian ethics, Lucien Richard, pp. 30-35).
9. *Ibid.* p.30.
10. Hans Kueng: "The Criterion for Deciding What is Christian" in *Introduction to Christian Ethics* ed. Ronald P. Hamel and Kenneth R. Himes,, New York, Paulist Press, 1989, pp. 120-132, esp. 125-127.
11. Kueng, p. 125.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.* p.126.
14. *Ibid.*
15. cf Richard A. McCormick: "Does Religious Faith Add to Ethical Perception?" in ed. Ronald P. Hamel and Kenneth R. Himes,, New York, Paulist Press, pp.140-150.
16. McCormick, p.143.
17. The Documents of Vatican II, New York, America Press, 1966, p.209.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Gaudium et Spes*, 45.
20. Lucien Richard, p.122.