



## Divine Command Theory and Civil Religion

*The God of the Bible . . . is a God who not only governs history, but who orientates it in the direction of establishment of justice and right. . . . He is a God who takes sides with the poor and liberates them from slavery and oppression. His might is at the service of justice. His power is expressed in the defense of the rights of the poor.*

—GUSTAVO GUTIERREZ, *The Power of the Poor in History* (1993)<sup>1</sup>

*The religious perspective is the conviction that the values one holds are grounded in the inherent structure of reality, that between the way one ought to live and the way things really are there is an unbreakable connection.*

—CLIFFORD GEERTZ, *Islam Observed* (1968)<sup>2</sup>

On September 11, 2001, a group of terrorists affiliated with al-Qaeda flew two hijacked planes into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center of New York City killing almost 3000 people, including the terrorists and passengers aboard the planes. What motivated the terrorists to carry out the slaughter of thousands of apparently innocent people? Among the pages of directions found in a bag belonging to one of the terrorists was the statement: “You’re doing a job which is loved by God, and you will end your day in heaven where you will join the virgins.” In the mind of the terrorist his action was morally correct and perhaps even obligatory based on a divine command.

The association between morality and what God supposedly commands is not limited to terrorists. Divine command was also invoked by President George W. Bush in his response to the radical Islamic terrorists and, in his decision to run for president. Bush believed that he was given a divine mandate to carry out God’s will. “I feel like God wants me to run for president,” he told Texas evangelist James Robinson regarding his running for a second term. “I can’t explain it, but I sense my country is going to need me . . . I know it won’t be easy on me or my family, but God wants me to do it.”<sup>3</sup>

How should we respond if someone, whether a terrorist or the president of the United States, justifies the morality of his actions based on a divine command? What is the connection, if any, between morality and religion? In this

chapter we'll be studying the relationship between religion and morality. In this chapter we will be examining theories which claim that morality is relative to God's commands, whether for an individual (divine command theory) or a culture (American civil religion). According to divine command theory something is morally right for an individual simply because God commands it. There are not independent criteria for judging the morality of an action. American civil religion is similar to cultural relativism in that God's commands are relative to a particular culture.

It is important to note that not all religious moral theories are based in ethical relativism. In Chapter 9 we'll be studying natural law theory, which is grounded in universal moral principles. These principles may have been created by God but according to natural law theorists, they exist independently of God and are valid for all people, whether they believe in God or not.

## Religion and Morality

### **Connections**

On what grounds do Buddhists extend moral rights to all living beings? See Chapter 10, pages 390–391.

### **Connections**

In what ways are Confucian ethics similar to Kantian deontology? See Chapter 9, pages 310–313.

The term *religion* is notoriously ambiguous. Some people use the term broadly to refer to any set of beliefs concerning the nature, cause, and purpose of the universe. Others use it more narrowly to refer to a set of institutionalized beliefs about God. In this text, we use the narrower definition of **religion** as an institutionalized system of beliefs and values shared by a group and grounded in faith and the worship of a supreme transcendent being(s). Although occasionally referred to as nontheistic religions, Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism and Confucianism, which address questions of the meaning of life and what makes a life valuable, are more akin to philosophies such as those of Plato, Aristotle, and Kant.

During religious worship, people praise that which has the highest worth or value.<sup>4</sup> God is worshipped because God represents perfect goodness. By imitating God, believers express their morality. Worshipping reaffirms these moral values.

The concept of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is so intimately connected to the concept of moral goodness that the moral code is incorporated right into the doctrine of these religions. The study of sacred scriptures is important, in part, because it teaches right from wrong. However, this by itself does not imply that religion or scripture is the only source of moral guidance or that morality is relative to religion. In the Jewish religion, Roman Catholicism, and mainstream Protestant religions, the basic moral principles are also held to be universal and discoverable through other means such as the use of reason or intuition. We'll be looking more at the theory, known as natural law theory, that morality is universal and that God commands something because it is moral in Chapter\*\*.

In contrast, some Muslims, like some fundamentalist Christians, maintain that ethics rather than be universal and the same for all people, is inseparable from and relative to religion. An action is right simply because God commands it. The sovereignty of Allah is the starting point of Islamic political philosophy and law.<sup>5</sup> In some Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Morocco, the law of the sacred texts—the Qur'an—is the law of the land and applies to everyone living in that country. Humans are not expected to discern right from wrong but to submit unquestioningly to God's will.



The authority rests with none but Allah. He commands you not to surrender to any one save Him. This is the right way (of life).

—Qur'an<sup>6</sup>

Religion also plays a prominent role in American politics. While the U.S. Constitution guarantees separation of church and state, the United States is unusual among Western nations in its willingness to blend religion and politics.<sup>7</sup> According to a Pew Research Center poll, 32 percent of Americans believe that religion and the Bible should be more important than the will of the people in government and political decisions, especially decisions concerning moral issues such as abortion, war, homosexuality, stem cell research, and the death penalty.

There are two different theories regarding the relationship between morality and religion. Divine command theory claims that morality is dependent on or relative to God's commands and, therefore, can change from time to time and person to person. Civil religion, which blends religion and cultural relativism, is a variant of divine command theory. It claims that God's commands are relative to a particular nation or culture. Natural law theory, in contrast, maintains that morality is based on universal, unchanging principles and that God commands or approves something because it is right prior to the command. We'll be looking at natural law theory in more depth in Chapter\*\*.



## Exercises

1. Discuss how your religious beliefs, or lack thereof, have shaped your morality. Is there a difference between religious and secular morality in your life? If so, what are the differences? If there are differences, how do you resolve a conflict between religious and secular morality?
2. When religious people use the words *right* and *wrong*, are they using these words in a different sense than someone who is an agnostic or an atheist? Discuss the differences and similarities.
3. If you believe that religious morality is different from secular morality, what role should religious morality play in forming public policy? Is religious morality, if it is irrelevant to our public life, morality at all? Support your answers.

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## The Divine Command Theory

*There is no Good save obedient behavior, save the obedient will. But this obedience is rendered not to a law or a principle which can be known beforehand, but only to the free, sovereign will of God. The Good consists in always doing what God wills at any particular moment.*

—EMIL BRUNNER, *The Divine Imperative* (1947)

In Plato's *Euthyphro*, Socrates asked: "Do the gods love holiness because it is holy, or is it holy because the gods love it?" The **divine command theory** claims the latter: Something is holy or moral because God loves it (see excerpts from *Euthyphro* at end of this chapter).

### Connections

What is ethical relativism and what are the different types of ethical relativism? See page 75.

Divine command theory, as we noted earlier, is a type of ethical relativism. According to this theory, morality is dependent on or relative to God. Morality does not exist independently of God's will. Just as morality for the cultural relativist is relative to cultural norms and commands, for the divine command theorist, morality is relative to what God commands or wills whether it is an act of charity or an act of terrorism. There are no independent, universal moral standards by which to judge God's commands. No other justification is necessary for an action to be right other than that God commanded it.

The divine command theory could be compared to a parental command theory. Our parents tell us to do something that may seem unfair by our standards. So we ask, "Why?" The reply is, "Because I said so!" And that's the end of the conversation. Your parents' saying so makes it right. Similarly, with the divine command theory, God does not have to give any reasons. God's command is right simply by virtue of God having commanded it.



Thus, to say that God is good is not to attribute any particular characteristic to God. To say that God is perfectly good is simply to say that “what God wills, God wills.” God’s reasons are ultimately unknowable to humans, and therefore, we must accept God’s commands—whatever they are—on faith. To question God’s commands or to demand independent nonreligious reasons for accepting a divine command shows lack of faith.

In divine command theory, God’s commands are meant for a particular person or group of people at a particular time. Do *not* confuse divine command theory with the biblical Ten Commandments or Decalogue, which were meant to be universal moral laws that apply to all people at all times. The Muslim Qur’an also contains a universal moral code similar to the Decalogue that is a universal “message to all the worlds” (81:27).



*Abraham and his son Isaac. As a test of his faith and obedience, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.*



## Discussion Questions

1. Was Abraham morally correct in his willingness to obey God’s command to kill his son? Was it morally relevant that God spared Isaac at the last moment? Explain.
  2. How would you respond if your roommate told you that God a) commanded him/her to join the Peace Corps after graduation, or b) to join al-Qaeda? If your response was different in the two cases, explain why. Relate your answer to divine command theory.
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**Connections**

How do natural law ethicists interpret the story of Abraham and Isaac? See Chapter 5, page 159.

The biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, in which God orders Abraham to take his son Isaac onto the mountain and sacrifice him, is sometimes used as an example of the divine command theory.<sup>8</sup> According to this interpretation, Abraham did not question God's command, because God, being omnipotent and the source of all morality, can change the moral rules at any time simply by an act of will. Abraham's righteousness stemmed from his unquestioning obedience to the will of God.

According to Dostoyevsky, if morality is reducible to or relative to the will of God, then without God, there can be no morality. However, the divine command theory does not offer a much better alternative to Dostoyevsky's bleak prognosis for a godless world. If God does exist, and if morality is dependent on God's will, then morality is arbitrary. Anything is permissible *as long as God wills or commands it*.

*Other Examples of Divine Commands*

Abraham was not the last parent to claim that God commanded them to kill their child. Many murder defendants, especially those in insanity cases, claim they were acting on a divine command. In 2001, Texas housewife Andrea Yates drowned her five children, ranging in age from six months to seven years, to save them from Satan. Her reason—that God commanded her to do so—was the same as that which motivated Abraham. Did God command her to kill her children? How are we to know what was in the mind of God? To dismiss her claim as a symptom of a deranged mind is to sidestep the whole issue of faith and its relation to morality. After all, we do not regard Abraham as deranged but as a righteous man of great faith, yet he was also willing to kill his son for God.

In the same year, on September 11, radical Muslims hijacked two passenger planes and flew them into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City killing almost 3000 people. In correspondence found later, the terrorists justified their action on the grounds that God commanded them to do. As believers in divine command theory, this alone made their actions on 9/11 morally right, or even imperative, in their eyes.



If God doesn't exist, everything is permissible.

—FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880)

If we respond by arguing that God would not command these people to do such terrible things, we are implying that there are independent moral standards that we can use to appraise the morality of God's commands. If this is the case, then we should judge Abraham to be immoral because it is generally believed that parents have a moral duty to protect their children. The fact that

God substituted a lamb at the last minute and saved Isaac from death does not negate Abraham's willingness to kill his son. Similarly, if we accept divine command theory, then we have to accept the terrorists' actions on 9/11 as morally justified.

### Key Claims of Divine Command Theory

- God is perfectly good and just.
- Morality is dependent on and relative to God's will.
- God's commands to particular people and groups override universal moral principles when there is a conflict.

How should we respond if someone claims that they are acting on a divine command? Should we simply accept their word for it? What if their claims come into conflict? In the following section, we'll examine these and other questions.



### Exercises

1. Imagine that Abraham and Andrea Yates have told you that God has commanded them to kill their children. Assuming that neither of them has yet carried out the act, discuss how you would respond to them.
2. Philosopher Philip Quinn argues, regarding God's command that Abraham kill his son Isaac, that "few people, if any at all, have actually been given such harsh commands [therefore] there is no reason for a divine command theorist to believe, or for others to fear, that widespread slaughter of the innocent will be prescribed or in any way encouraged." Discuss Quinn's statement in light of the terrorist attacks of September 11.
3. Discuss whether divine command theory is compatible with democracy and the rule of the people, or if theocracy (a form of government in which God is recognized as the supreme rule) is a more appropriate form of government. Support your answer.

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### Critique of Divine Command Theory

The primary concern with divine command theory is its apparent arbitrariness since there are no objective criteria for us to use to determine whether a particular claim or action was actually based on God's command.

1. *Morality is independent of God's commands.* Unlike Dostoyevsky, philosopher Kai Nielsen says that, as far as morality is concerned, it does not really matter whether God is dead or alive.<sup>9</sup> The divine command theory, Nielsen

argues, is logically unsound. If morality is dependent on or relative to God's will, then morality is arbitrary. Anything—rape, murder, genocide, killing one's own children—is permissible as long as God wills or commands it.

God cannot be used as a fundamental criterion for moral goodness, nor is God necessary for morality. Instead, the claim that what God wills is good is *dependent on a previous belief that there exists a being worthy of worship*. Thus, rather than God being the foundation of morality, a belief in God is dependent on our *already* having a concept of moral goodness.

Morality represents what people already believe to be moral *independently* of their belief in God. For example, most people would reject a voiced command to kill their children as not being the voice of God. In other words, we do not depend on religion but rather on nonreligious criteria to discern right from wrong. We accept the ethical teachings in the scriptures as the revealed word of God *because* they are consistent with what we already believe to be moral. Although a moral code is incorporated into the doctrine of most religions, moral controversies can be resolved without appealing to religion.

2. *There are no criteria for determining whether God actually issued a particular command.* Because divine commands are issued to particular individuals or groups rather than being grounded in universal principles, we are left with no rational or objective means of determining if a person or group such as the September 11 terrorists actually were commanded by God or if they were mistaken or delusional.

We cannot even look to universal moral principles, including those contained in scripture such as the Bible or the Qur'an, since universal moral principles are *prima facie* and can be overridden by a divine command. For example, the Qur'an states that ". . . anyone who murders any person who had not committed murder or horrendous crimes it shall be as if he murdered all the people" (5:32). This moral precept is violated when terrorists and suicide bombers, apparently acting under a divine command, endanger the lives of innocent civilians, just as Abraham violated God's rule in Genesis 9:6 not to shed human blood when he prepared to kill his son. However much we may admire Abraham and despise the terrorists, in both cases we're left with no criteria for judging whether or not they were acting under an actual divine command.

3. *The theory provides no objective criteria for determining which claim to accept if two particular groups or individuals present conflicting claims based on divine commands.* Because divine commands can be particular rather than universal, they may come into conflict. When there is disagreement, there is no method of resolving the dispute or deciding if God actually issued one or both of the conflicting commands.

For example, God seems to have given George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden conflicting divine commands. What are we to do in cases like these? Should we have supported Bush and rallied behind the troops? Should we quit school and join al-Qaeda? Or should we just sit tight and wait for God to give us our marching orders?



This brings us back to a problem inherent in all types of ethical relativism: Relativistic theories do not allow for rational discussion of what is the right thing to do, thus contributing to a rigid “either you’re with us or against us” mentality.

4. *The theory is based on the assumption of the existence of a just, loving, and infallible personal God.* While this premise may be true, it has not been proven by divine command theorists. Not everyone believes in this concept of God. In many cultures and belief systems, the debate over the relationship between such a god and morality makes little sense.

Furthermore, even if we do believe that a particular command is an expression of God’s or a god’s will, this does not imply we are morally obligated to obey. In Hinduism, for example, the gods are not fallible and do not always act in a morally exemplary manner or give good advice to humans. Other belief systems are based on nature or ancestor worship. Yet people in these and other non-theist cultures, for the most part, have a concept of the moral and act in accordance with fundamental moral principles.



I can’t combine faith in God with Auschwitz. Either there is no God, or I don’t belong to him.

—MILAN MACHOVEC (Polish Marxist philosopher)<sup>10</sup>

5. *The existence of a perfectly good God who is the source of all morality seems inconsistent with the presence of so much suffering and evil in the world.*<sup>11</sup> If God is perfectly good and commands only that which is moral, why does God allow so much pain and suffering in the world? In addition to suffering caused by other people’s actions, each year natural disasters, including hurricanes, droughts, genetic disorders, and disease, are a cause of suffering and death for millions. Indeed, the presence of so much apparently senseless suffering and evil in the world is one of the primary reasons people lose faith in God.

In a variation of philosopher Gottfried Leibniz’s (1646–1716) “best of all possible worlds” theme, theologian John Hick attempts to resolve the problem by arguing that the purpose of suffering is the perfection of our souls. Thus, the problem of evil disappears in what he calls a “vale of soul making.” Under this view September 11, tragic as it may have seemed, actually brought about more good than harm by providing people with an opportunity for moving toward moral perfection. In his address on the fifth anniversary of September 11, President Bush told the nation: “On 9/11, our Nation saw the face of evil. Yet on that awful day, we also witnessed something distinctly American: Ordinary citizens rising to the occasion, and responding with extraordinary acts of courage.” Indeed, many people observed how much nicer people in New York City seemed to be to each other following the terrorist attacks.

On September 11, 2001, radical Islamic terrorists hijacked two passenger planes and flew them into the twin towers in New York City, killing almost 3000 people.



## Analyzing Images

1. Would God command people to engage in mass murder? If not, what is the source of morality and is God, if there is a God, bound by moral laws that exist independently of “His” commands? Support your answers.
2. Anwar Aulaqi, allegedly the spiritual advisor to the terrorists of September 11, 2001, said that “telling people to give their [lives] for their faith is not an unusual idea. That’s the same thing as telling marines in this country [the United States] *semper fidelis* [always faithful]. Critically analyze Aulaqi’s analogy.

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Nevertheless, the anguish of those who survived these tragedies and the death of thousands of innocent people just to benefit others hardly seems a befitting action of a perfectly loving God. Hick is aware that evil and suffering can lead to bitterness, fear, mental and emotional breakdown, and even death. Because of this, he argues, the business of soul-making and striving after moral perfection must continue in the afterlife.

In summary, divine command theory offers little guidance when it comes to everyday morality or determining whether a particular command is in fact from God. On the other hand, these problems do not disprove the theory.

We cannot logically disprove divine command theory. For us to respond in turn that, without proof, the theory is false would be to fall prey to the fallacy of ignorance. The most we can conclude is that we do not know if divine command theory is a correct interpretation of morality. This being said, the best approach when confronted with someone or a group who claims to be acting on God's command is probably skepticism, especially if the purported command conflicts with fundamental, universal moral principles.



## Exercises

1. Fyodor Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) writes, "If God doesn't exist, everything is permissible." Discuss his claim that morality is dependent on the existence of God. Discuss what, if anything, would be different about your moral beliefs and behavior if God did not exist.
2. You are attending a graduation ceremony where a high-ranking government official is the keynote speaker. In the middle of the ceremony, a young man from the audience jumps up and reveals a bomb strapped to his body. He declares that God has commanded him to blow up the auditorium and everyone in it. However, just before he pulls the cord to set off the bomb, he turns to you and asks how he can be absolutely sure this is what is commanded and also whether he has a moral obligation to follow God's command in this case. Discuss how you might answer his questions.
3. Discuss whether divine command theory, with its presumption of a good and just God, adequately addresses the problem of evil in the world.

## Civil Religion, Society, and National Morality

*No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of man more than those of the United States. Every step by which we have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token providential agency.*

—GEORGE WASHINGTON'S "First Inaugural Address" (April 30, 1789)

Civil religion claims that morality, at least to some extent, is relative to a particular culture or nation. Religion, like cultural norms, can offer powerful external motivations for behaving morally. We are expected to behave morally because it pleases God. Eternal damnation awaits those who fail to heed religion's moral commands; prison or social ostracism awaits those who break cultural norms. Those who are obedient to their religion's moral code can look forward to eternal salvation and reward; similarly, those who adhere to social norms get their rewards, such as social approval and economic prosperity,

here in this life. The melding of these two sets of sanctions—religious and cultural—can make civil religion a powerful force in our lives.

### *Religion as the Worship of Society*

French sociologist and philosopher Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) argued, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, that God stands in the same relationship to worshippers as society does to its individual members. God is the symbol of society, and each society creates God in its own image. God thus becomes a symbol of cultural unity. Religion is the worship of society, thereby acting as a mechanism for justifying the moral norms of a particular culture. By sacralizing cultural norms and values, religion gives these cultural norms a transcendent moral authority that they would otherwise lack. In this sense it is similar to cultural relativism.

Unlike Durkheim, who admired how religion united people around a common set of values, Karl Marx denounced religion as a destructive force. He argued that religious institutions, rather than uniting people in a common interest, exist primarily for the purpose of maintaining the status quo and legitimizing the interests of the ruling class by deifying their norms. According to Marx, religion, rather than motivating us to work toward a more just society, serves as the “opium of the people” by lulling us into a sense of false security. Religion also prevents those who are oppressed from overthrowing their oppressors by extolling meekness and submissiveness.

#### **Connections**

What type of society did Marx envision as being the most moral? See Chapter 10, pages 368–369.



Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

—KARL MARX

United States sociologist Robert Bellah (b. 1927), in his essay “Civil Religion in America,” maintains that Christianity and Judaism are no longer the dominant religions in the United States; a new form of religion has emerged which he calls *American civil religion*. Bellah suggests that the primary role of civil religion is the creation of a sense of cultural or national identity and purpose. He defines **civil religion** as an institutionalized set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that provide a religious dimension to a nation’s collective life. These principles come from God and represent a “higher standard” by which the experiences of a nation are interpreted and judged.<sup>12</sup> Civil religion played an important role in Egyptian civilization as well as in the Roman Empire with its pantheon of gods and goddesses. Today, the belief that the United States was established as a special nation under God exerts a powerful influence on Americans’ beliefs regarding their role in world affairs. (See selection from Bellah’s essay at end of this chapter.)



*American flags are found inside many, if not most, American churches—a tribute to the power of American civil religion in the United States. Many religious organizations also celebrate national holidays (“holy” days) during religious services.*



[God] is actively interested and involved in history, with a special concern for America.

—ROBERT BELLAH, “Civil Religion in America” (1967)

### *American Civil Religion: One Nation under God*

American civil religion provides the nation with a set of moral principles as well as a divine purpose to act as a beacon of liberty and freedom for the rest of the world. Sociologist Robert Bellah writes: “God is actively interested and involved in history, with a special concern for America.” [See selection from Bellah at end of this chapter.] Although some of it is selectively taken from the Judeo-Christian tradition, American civil religion is not the same. For example, the Bible says nothing about democracy. American civil religion is also very specific when it comes to America’s mission and moral authority in the world.

**Connections**

How do American civil religion and cultural relativism reinforce each other? See *Chapter 4*, pages 121–124.

Civil religion has been part of American politics since the nation's inception. The Declaration of Independence makes reference to God as the Supreme Judge, and "our firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence." Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are taken to be inalienable rights "endowed by their creator" who takes a special interest in the American democratic experiment. This new democratic social order is identified with God's divine plan for human progression toward moral perfection. Hence, Americans distrust of nondemocratic nations. [See selection from Bellah at end of this chapter.]

American civil religion expresses itself in symbols such as the American flag, the national anthem, war memorials, national holidays (holy days), and documents that outline our special status and mission as a "chosen" nation, such as the U.S. Constitution. In addition, references to God appear in the Pledge of Allegiance, on our money, and in oaths for public office.

Our ultimate moral obligation as a nation and as American citizens is to carry out God's will on earth. See selection by Bellah at the end of this chapter. In his 2009 inaugural speech, President Barack Obama invoked God's guidance and "the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain future."

The intensity of American civil religion fluctuates over time. It is most powerful when the nation or national ideals are threatened. Accordingly, wars or "operations" to spread God's "plan for humanity, including bringing democracy to "tribal" areas of the world," are often couched in terms of a holy war—of good against evil. America's prosperity and status as a major world power are regarded as evidence of God's favor. On Easter Day 2009, U.S. Navy SEAL snipers killed three Somali pirates who were holding American Captain Richard Phillips hostage. The Easter killings were hailed by the media as God's special response to the prayers of all Americans.

In American democracy, although sovereignty officially resides in the people, it is implicitly understood that the ultimate sovereignty rests with God and that our country's actions are judged by a higher law. If the majority of citizens or elected officials make a decision that the president, as "head" of American civil religion, deems to be at odds with God's plan, then he can refuse to go along with the majority. This happened when Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation (1863). The proclamation was grounded, not in the will of the majority, but in Lincoln's belief that slavery was an offense in the eyes of God and that the Civil War may have been punishment from God. The taboo on socialism and the belief that capitalism, though never mentioned in the Bible, is God's plan also draws support from American civil religion. This has led to what is almost a demonization of the concept of socialized medicine in this country.

*The Dangers of Civil Religion*

At its best, American civil religion is grounded in a natural law theory and natural rights ethics that hold a nation accountable under a higher moral law.

In this capacity, civil religion provides a powerful motivation for mobilizing citizens to rally behind a higher moral ideal.

There is an ever-present danger, however, that civil religion may become unanchored from its roots in universal moral principles and a transcendent reality and instead identify national interests with God's plan for humanity. When this happens, civil religion becomes supplanted by cultural relativism, which we'll be studying in the following chapter. By sacralizing cultural norms and values, civil religion gives them a transcendent authority that they would otherwise lack. Rather than looking to natural law to judge a nation, the nation itself becomes the object of worship, and any dissent or moral criticism is oppressed in the name of patriotic duty.

The belief that America itself is the higher power can lead to arrogance as well as the implicit assumption that the people of nations we invade in order to spread the God-given principles of liberty and democracy will welcome us as liberators. Those who don't rally behind our cause or who resist our divine mission are, by definition, evil, or at least morally deficient.

The assertive civil religion in the United States has often been a cause of friction between the United States and European nations, where religion plays a more minor role in political life. As far back as 1826, Alex de Tocqueville, in his book *Democracy in America*, noted:

For the last 50 years no pains have been spared to convince the inhabitants of the United States that they are the only religious, enlightened, and free people. They perceive that, for the present, their own democratic institutions prosper, while those of other countries fail; hence they conceive a high opinion of their superiority and are not very remote from believing themselves to be a distinct species of mankind.

When a nation comes to regard itself as the higher power—what Bellah terms the “idolatrous worship of the state”—the creative tension between civil religion and cultural relativism is lost. The worship of national interests—such as expansionism and the spread of capitalism and representative democracy—guides the nation's public policy rather than an understanding of the nation's purpose in light of a higher, transcendent reality. In addition to justifying Manifest Destiny and our otherwise unconscionable treatment of Native Americans, civil religion was used to rationalize slavery. In American slavery, “men convinced themselves that a system which was so economically profitable must be morally justifiable. They formulated elaborate theories of racial superiority. Their rationalizations clothed obvious wrongs in the beautiful garments of righteousness. . . . Religion and Bible were cited to crystallize the status quo.”<sup>13</sup>

When a person or group struggles to bring American civil religion back to its roots in universal moral principles, the creative tension may manifest in civil disobedience. Civil rights leaders such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Martin Luther King Jr. called upon the moral principles embodied in documents such as the U.S. Constitution.

### **Connections**

What is religiously-based natural law theory and how does it differ from civil religion? See Chapter 5, pages 158–159.

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### **Connections**

What is Manifest Destiny and how was it morally justified? See Chapter 4, page 108.

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### **Connections**

What, according to King, is the relationship between religion and the state? See Chapter 5, pages 170–171.

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In the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (August 1963) Martin Luther King Jr. delivered the following speech:

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. . . . this will be the day when all of God’s children will be able to sing with new meaning “My country ’tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrims’ pride, from every mountainside let freedom ring!”

Civil religion is also at risk for abdicating to divine command theory. This is most likely to happen during times of crisis, such as September 11, when people are unsure of how to react and a powerful national leader claims to have knowledge of God’s divine plan for the world. However, since divine commands do not need justification, there is no way of determining whether the commands actually come from God. Thus, rather than holding our national leaders to a higher moral law, divine command theory discourages critical analysis of their motives. When civil religion mutates into divine command theory, the use of unprovoked military force and the violation of human rights can be justified as God’s way.

Although civil religion can stray from its roots in universal moral principle, in its truest form it can act as a powerful incentive to justice. The moral ideals of the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution have never been fully realized in this country. While these documents may not be sacred and are certainly not perfect, to their credit, the founders of this country sought to discern natural laws and incorporate them into our nation’s thinking.



## Exercises

1. Roger Williams, cofounder of Rhode Island, opposed the mixing of religion and politics, arguing that government corrupts religion and religion corrupts government. Discuss his claim and whether his concern applies to civil religion.
  2. Discuss the influence of civil religion in the United States on Americans’ concept of morality. Use specific examples to support your answers.
  3. Discuss ways in which cultural relativism and divine command theory may have influenced our current interpretation of civil religion and our “mission” in the world. What is your moral obligation, as a citizen, when you have reason to believe that civil religion is being misused to support unjust public policies?
  4. Although there have been presidents such as Lincoln who never belonged to a church, there has never been a president who was not a believer in God. To what extent did the religious beliefs of the candidates in the 2012 presidential election influence your view of their moral integrity? Would it be possible for an atheist or an agnostic to be elected president of the United States? Support your answer.
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## Religion and the Moral Community

*God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. And God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."*

—GENESIS 1:27–28

*Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, round beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. . . . I was seeing in the sacred manner of the shape of all things of the spirit and the shapes as they must live together like one being. And I say that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that make one circle, wide as daylight and starlight. . . . And I saw that it was holy.*

—BLACK ELK, *The Sacred Hoop*

The assumptions of different religious traditions regarding the nature and purpose of humans in this world have a profound influence on our definition of moral community. Just as cultural relativism defines moral community in cultural terms, religious ethics tends to define moral community in relation to God, or at least that community's concept of God. The more a being is like God, the greater that being's moral value.

The teachings of the scriptures in Western religion not only affirm human dignity but also imply a special moral bond between God and humans and a special role for humans in creation. Because humans are created in the image of God and bear the greatest likeness to God—having been created in God's image—humans have the highest moral value. Other creatures, in contrast, exist only to satisfy the needs of humans.

### *Religion, Sexism, and Racism*

Religious morality that has been tailored to support certain cultural beliefs can lead to the subjugation of those with less power in a society. Besides placing humans above other animals, religion has been used (or as some might argue, "misused") to support a hierarchy of moral values within humanity based on racial differences and the "different natures" of males and females. Theology, as thus interpreted, has been used to legitimate discrimination against women. Women's essential nature, "is seen as having less of the divine image and more of the physical nature."<sup>14</sup> Carol Christ, in her essay "Why Women Need a Goddess," argues that patriarchal religions centering on the worship of a male God create an atmosphere and worldview "that keep women in a state of psychological dependence on men and male authority, while at the same time legitimating the political and social authority of fathers and sons in the institutions of society."<sup>15</sup> This, in turn, has led to unjust social structures and the marginalization of women in society.

Theologian James Cone points out that the portrayal of God as a White man has also had a demoralizing effect on the psyche of African Americans.

**Connections**

What is liberation ethics and why does it reject civil religion based on the prevailing cultural norms? See Chapter 10, page 370.

Given this, it is not surprising that only five percent of American churches are racially integrated.<sup>16</sup> Cone rejects the “white American ‘Christianity’ that is built on racism,” calling for the dissolution of current Christianity and its God and a “reevaluation of all values.”<sup>17</sup> By calling for a reevaluation of traditional Christian values, Cone asks for a recognition of our common humanity and a rejection of our racist and hierarchical concept of the moral community that rotates around a white-skinned God.

*Native American Attitudes*

For many Native Americans, the whole earth is sacred and contained within the moral community.<sup>18</sup> Their concept of moral community has led to antagonism and conflict between them and the European Christians who settled here—particularly around the concept of private ownership of land. Because the earth is sacred or has intrinsic moral value, in many Native American philosophies, it cannot be owned or sold. To do so is to treat the environment as having only instrumental value.

During his life, Black Elk (1863–1950), a Sioux holy man and philosopher, saw his people all but destroyed by European settlers. As a child, Black Elk began having visions calling him to bring his people back into the sacred hoop where they could be happy and prosperous again. The medicine man told Black Elk that he must enact his vision of a more inclusive moral community for the people on earth.

His journey took him to Pine Ridge, South Dakota, where in December 1890, the starving Sioux had gathered to surrender. Instead of accepting the surrender, twenty-five White soldiers killed almost three hundred Native Americans that day at Wounded Knee. Black Elk managed to escape into the Badlands. He eventually returned to Pine Ridge, where he lived the rest of his life with his broken dreams. In the 1930s, Black Elk’s visions were written down by John Neihardt. His book, *Black Elk Speaks*, is widely acclaimed as one of the greatest books about Native American life, moral values, and religion.

Much of contemporary Native American religion is a countercultural movement against the traditional Judeo-Christian depiction of the moral community. As Amanda Porterfield writes:

The universally agreed-upon tenets of American Indian spirituality include condemnation of American exploitation of nature and mistreatment of Indians, regard to precolonial America as a sacred place where nature and humanity lived in plentiful harmony, certainty that American Indian attitudes are opposite to those of American culture and morally superior on every count, and an underlying belief that American Indian attitudes toward nature are a means of revitalizing American culture.<sup>19</sup>

The American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 served as an acknowledgment by the U.S. Congress that certain places are sacred space to many Native American tribes. Although all of the earth and those upon it are sacred,

a sacred space has special spiritual power or significance—it is a place where human beings experience a strong sense of being connected to the universe. The notion of sacred spaces in nature is also found in many other religions. For example, in Japan, Mount Fuji is considered a shrine; Ayers Rock is a sacred space for Australian aborigines.

The traditional Judeo-Christian concept of moral community, in contrast, places humans outside and above nature. Environmental ethicist Lynn White writes that “by destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.”<sup>20</sup> The destructive effects of the exclusion of nonhuman animals and the environment from our moral community have only recently begun to be realized.

Eagle Man, an Oglala Sioux lawyer and writer, warns us that “the plight of the non-Indian world is that it has lost respect for Mother Earth, from whom and where we all come.”<sup>21</sup> The environmental destruction and pollution we are now experiencing, he says, are a warning from Mother Earth that we must change our attitudes and lifestyle. This change, however, can only come through a radical paradigm shift regarding our definition of the moral community.

### **Connections**

What are the four common moral values shared by Native Americans? See Chapter 4, page 120.



## Exercises

1. Draw a mandala of the moral community of your religion or one of the major religions in your country. What criteria are used for the inclusion and exclusion of different beings? How are these criteria justified? How does the mandala of the religion's moral community resemble and differ from that of the moral community in the United States?
2. The belief that we, as humans, are all children of God has been a powerful force for motivating people to respect the dignity and rights of other humans and to work toward social justice for all humans. Is the belief that humans are a special creation necessary to motivate people to respect others? Would a belief in the equal dignity of all living beings, such as that espoused by many Native American and Eastern philosophers, weaken the moral value of humans, including ourselves? Support your answers.
- \*3. Discuss how religious depictions of God affect a society's concept of the moral community. Relate your answer to your community service work. Do you agree with the solutions proposed by James Cone and Carol Christ?
4. Discuss Lynn White's claim that the anthropocentric moral community supported by Christianity has been the primary culprit in our current ecological crisis. Relate your answer to the philosophy espoused by Black Elk and Eagle Man. Discuss how adopting their philosophy would change your lifestyle.
5. Discuss whether religious beliefs and values, including those of American civil religion, are adequate for addressing the moral issues involved in climate change and environmental degradation. To what extent do your religious

beliefs, or lack thereof, affect how you think about our moral obligation to other animals and to the environment? Use specific examples to illustrate your answer.

6. Discuss how American civil religion shapes our views of the moral community and the social hierarchy.

## Does Morality Need Religion?

*The love of other human beings and the ethical life in general are autonomous in that they justify themselves, requiring no support from religion. But there is a religious dimension to life and it has its effect on the whole life. On the religious view it is God's concern, as it were, how man behaves towards his fellow and the love of the neighbor is the love of God.*

—LOUIS JACOBS, "The Relationship Between Religion and Ethics in Jewish Thought" (1996)<sup>22</sup>

### Connections

What is natural law theory and how does it differ from divine command theory? See *Chapter 5, page 158–159.*

Religion has been credited with inspiring people—such as Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mother Teresa—to reach a higher moral standard than that required by everyday life. Morality that is beyond what is normally expected of an individual is known as **supererogatory**. Acts such as giving away one's belongings to the poor or risking one's life in the name of a moral cause are examples of supererogatory actions. Some religious ethicists claim that it is faith in God that inspires people to engage in supererogatory actions. The belief that God is the creator of moral law gives morality its authority and motivates the believer to behave in accordance with moral law even when it conflicts with human laws.

There is no shortage of examples of social reform movements and courageous acts of civil disobedience that have been inspired largely by faith in God. On the other hand, belief in God does not seem necessary to motivate someone to place morality above human law and to engage in supererogatory moral acts. Some natural law ethicists do not believe in God, thinking it unnecessary to postulate a God to justify the existence of a natural (moral) law.

Gandhi did not believe in a personal God. For Thoreau, discovery of the natural law came through the individual's dialogue with nature rather than with God. Yet, this lack of faith did not weaken the commitment of these two men to the moral law. The nineteenth-century feminist movement had religious underpinnings; the current women's liberation movement, however, has been a secular movement. The animal liberation movement and environmental movements have also, for the most part, eschewed religion and adopted philosophical ethics as the basis of their moral beliefs.

Also, there is no shortage of atrocities committed in the name of religion and God. Slavery in the South was supported by the majority of White Christians at the time as morally acceptable and part of God's natural law. Herbert Spencer's contention that civilized Christians are more peaceful than their "primitive" non-Christian counterparts is hard to substantiate in the light of

### Connections

How was Spencer's re-interpretation of Darwinism used to justify imposing Western-Christian values on other cultures? See *Chapter 4, pages 110–111.*

the many wartime atrocities and acts of terrorism committed in the name of God. The Crusades of 1095–1272, which were carried out in the name of God and the Christian faith, and the Inquisition that followed the Crusades cost countless lives and created untold misery.

On an individual level, religious people are no more likely to engage in acts of moral heroism than are nonreligious people. Surveys of Americans, including those who claim that religion is very important to them, show that religion has little effect on people's everyday moral values or on their ideas of social morality.<sup>23</sup> Even being a member of the clergy does not guarantee exemplary moral behavior.<sup>24,25</sup>

### *Spirituality versus Religiosity*

Discussions of morality and religion should be separate from discussions of the role of spirituality in morality. In Western thought, spirituality is generally associated with being religious. In Eastern philosophies, spirituality is not associated with being religious—at least in the Western sense of being religious. Religion is a social phenomenon involving the institutionalization of a particular set of beliefs about a transcendent God. **Spirituality**, on the other hand, is an inner attitude of reverence or deep respect for the ultimate moral worth or sacredness of oneself and others, independently of a belief in a transcendent God or any particular religious or cultural doctrine.

Some religions encourage spirituality; others do not. Some people who are nonreligious or even antireligious regard themselves as highly spiritual. Gandhi, as we already noted, did not believe in a personal God. Yet he was a highly spiritual person who believed in the power of the soul-force. Gandhi maintained that it is the soul-force that gives people the moral strength to persevere in nonviolent action and to love our oppressors and to engage in nonviolent action to overthrow unjust social structures and to overcome evil.

Being religious, on its own, does not ensure moral behavior. Indeed, studies show that church members, as a group, are *more racially prejudiced* than nonmembers. (For example, the Ku Klux Klan considers itself a Christian organization.) On the other hand, studies have also found that the most active members of the church are the least prejudiced of both church members and nonmembers.

Psychologist Gordon Allport explained this discrepancy by making a distinction between intrinsically religious people and extrinsically religious people.<sup>26</sup> *Intrinsically religious people* join churches because faith is meaningful to them as an end in itself. Because of this, they are more likely to be active in their church. Intrinsically religious people, studies find, are also more autonomous and *committed at the moral level* and are more likely to reject or protest cultural norms when these conflict with universal moral principles.

*Extrinsically religious people*, on the other hand, join churches because of the secular benefits, such as social status. Although they are likely to be “indiscriminately

proreligious,” their religious faith does not usually translate into being a “nuclear church member.” These are the heteronomous moral reasoners who uncritically accept the tenets of civil religion—including its narrow view of moral community.

In a study of the differences between people who helped to rescue Jews during World War II and those who did not, it was found that religious affiliation was not a major factor. However, one’s *interpretation of the nature of their religious commitment* was important. Rescuers were more likely to define their moral community broadly to include all of humanity, whereas nonrescuers were more likely to use narrower cultural definitions of moral community.<sup>27</sup> Truly moral people, unlike heteronomous moral reasoners, strive to live the good life and to be a certain kind of person—compassionate and just—not because God or their religion orders them to do so but because it is the right thing to do.

### *Morality Is Independent of Religion*

Most philosophers and theologians agree that morality exists independently of religion. Although religious beliefs may strengthen moral conviction in intrinsically religious people, such as Martin Luther King Jr., religious ethics is not fundamentally different from philosophical ethics. When people who are religious use the terms *right* and *wrong*, they mean the same thing as someone who is not religious.

Religious differences tend to fall away in most serious discussions of moral issues, such as slavery and abortion, not because religion isn’t important to the participants but because moral disputes can be discussed and even resolved without bringing religion into the equation. For example, many people initially regarded the protest against slavery as a religious issue. Most of the early petitions to congress regarding slavery were presented by members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) and were, for the most part, dismissed by Congress as the “mere rant and rhapsody of meddling fanatics”<sup>28</sup> trying to force their religious views on Southerners. People living in the South particularly resented the “very indecent attack on the character” of the slave states and slave owners by these religious fanatics. As the debate over slavery moved further into the public arena in the 1840s and 1850s, however, the discussion shifted from religious differences to the moral issues involved. Currently, the debates over the morality of abortion, cloning, and same-sex marriage are being sidetracked by religious issues.

When debating moral issues that are associated with the doctrinal positions of specific religious groups, we must take care not to commit the circumstantial fallacy by assuming that a person must hold one particular view simply because he or she is a member of a particular religion. The current abortion debate, for example, is regarded by some people as a specifically Catholic issue; however, the debate can be carried on without any reference to religion. Indeed, according

to the Gallup polls, the position of Catholics on the morality of abortion and stem-cell research does not differ significantly from that of non-Catholic Americans.<sup>42</sup> Some religions take an official stand regarding different moral issues—such as slavery, war, abortion, and pacifism—but this does not imply that these issues are specifically religious rather than moral issues. In debating these and similar issues, we must be careful to separate the moral issues involved from religious doctrine.

Religious ethics that are not securely moored in autonomous universal ethics but rather demand uncritical acceptance of official doctrines promote heteronomous moral reasoning. It is easy for religious ethics, once set adrift, to become grounded on the rocky shores of cultural relativism. When this happens, religion can become a destructive force by sanctifying cultural customs that are unjust and limiting one's conception of the moral community.



## Exercises

1. Can science and our everyday existence give our life meaning? Or do you agree that without God there is no purpose or meaning in life and, consequently, no reason we should be moral? Support your answer.
2. In his book *God and Human Anguish*, theologian Paul Schilling writes:

Whether or not he recognizes his situation, [the atheist] is confronted by the problem of good, which is at least as difficult for him as the pervasiveness of evil is for the theist. In a godless universe, how are we to account for the manifest fact that high values are sought for and realized? How can we reconcile with an absurd, meaningless cosmos that cares nothing for human striving, the patent reality in human experience of the pursuit and discovery of truth, the creation and appreciation of beauty, and the quiet strength of self-sacrificial love?<sup>29</sup>

How would you respond to Schilling's questions? Support your answers.

3. What is the difference between religious faith and spirituality? Is spirituality necessary for moral autonomy? Why or why not? Does spirituality play a role in your moral life? If so, what role does it play?
  4. Think of some religious people you know—either personally or as public figures—who have committed acts that are highly immoral. Discuss ways in which these people are either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated.
  5. Choose a controversial issue, such as same-sex marriage, that is sometimes regarded as a religious issue. Can the debate over the morality of this issue be carried on without using religious doctrine? If not, what happens when a religious principle seems to conflict with a moral principle? Or is such a conflict even possible?
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## Summary

1. *Religion* is an institutionalized system of beliefs and values shared by a group and grounded in faith and the worship of a supreme transcendent being(s). *Worship* involves lifting up and praising that which has the highest worth. God is worshipped because he represents perfect goodness and the highest values.
2. In some religions morality is dependent on religion.
3. The *divine command theory* states that an act is moral because God commands it.
4. *Natural law theory* states that morality is autonomous; that is, it is independent of religion and God's commands.
5. The actions of groups such as the 9/11 terrorists are examples of divine command theory.
6. Divine command theory is problematic in that there are no independent criteria for determining if an action carried out by someone was actually commanded by God.
7. Émile Durkheim argued that God is the symbol of society and religion is the worship of society.
8. David Hume and Karl Marx regarded traditional religion as destructive to morality.
9. Sociologist Robert Bellah suggests that the primary role of modern religion is to create a sense of national unity. *American civil religion* is the dominant religion in the United States.
10. The traditional Western religious concept of God is *anthropocentric*, *patriarchal*, and *racially biased*. Several philosophers, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Carol Christ, James Cone, Black Elk, and Eagle Man, suggest that we need to move beyond a definition of moral community that is based on Judeo-Christian concepts of moral worth.
11. A *supererogatory* action is one that is above and beyond everyday morality. There is no evidence that religious people are more likely to engage in supererogatory acts.



## Euthyphro

Plato

SOCRATES: Then tell me. How do you define the holy [moral] and the unholy [immoral]?

EUTHYPHRO: Well then, I say that the holy is what I am doing, prosecuting the wrongdoer who commits a murder or a sacrilegious robbery, or sins in any point like that, whether it be your father, or your mother, or whoever

it may be. And not to prosecute would be unholy. . . .

SOCRATES: . . . my friend, you were not explicit enough before when I put the question. What is holiness? You merely said that what you are now doing is a holy deed—namely, prosecuting your father on a charge of murder.



EUTHYPHRO: And, Socrates, I told the truth.

SOCRATES: Possibly. But, Euthyphro, there are many other things that you will say are holy.

EUTHYPHRO: Because they are.

SOCRATES: Well, bear in mind that what I asked of you was not to tell me one or two out of all the numerous actions that are holy; I wanted you to tell me what is the essential form of holiness which makes all holy actions holy. I believe you held that there is one ideal form by which unholy things are all unholy, and by which all holy things are holy. Do you remember that?

EUTHYPHRO: I do.

SOCRATES: Well then, tell me what, precisely, this ideal is, so that, with my eye on it, and using it as a standard, I can say that any action done by you or anybody else is holy if it resembles this ideal, or, if it does not, can deny that it is holy.

EUTHYPHRO: Well then, what is pleasing to the gods is holy, and what is not pleasing to them is unholy.

SOCRATES: Perfect Euthyphro! Now you give me just the answer that I asked for. Meanwhile, whether it is right I do not know, but obviously you will go on to prove your statement true.

EUTHYPHRO: Indeed I will.

Socrates has now received an answer to his question. Euthyphro has finally proposed necessary and sufficient conditions for something's being holy. Socrates proceeds to test this proposal by trying to determine whether the conditions identified really are necessary and sufficient.

SOCRATES: Come now, let us scrutinize what we are saying. What is pleasing to the gods, and the man that pleases them, are holy;

what is hateful to the gods, and the man they hate, unholy. But the holy and unholy are not the same; the holy is directly opposite to the unholy. Isn't it so?

EUTHYPHRO: It is. . . .

SOCRATES: Accordingly, my noble Euthyphro, by your account some gods take one thing to be right, and others take another and similarly with the honorable and the base, and good and bad. They would hardly be at variance with each other, if they did not differ on these questions. Would they?

EUTHYPHRO: You are right.

SOCRATES: And what each one of them thinks noble, good and just, is what he loves and the opposite is what he hates?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, certainly.

SOCRATES: But it is the same things, so you say, that some of them think right, and others wrong, and through disputing about these they are at variance, and make war on one another. Isn't it so?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes it is.

SOCRATES: Accordingly, so it would seem the same things will be hated by the gods and loved by them; the same things would alike displease and please them.

EUTHYPHRO: It would seem so.

SOCRATES: And so, according to this argument, the same things, Euthyphro, will be holy and unholy.

EUTHYPHRO: That may be.

SOCRATES: In that case, admirable friend, you have not answered what I asked you. I did not ask you to tell me what at once is holy and unholy, but it seems that what is pleasing to the gods is also hateful to them. Thus, Euthyphro, it would not be strange at all if what you now are doing in punishing your father were pleasing to Zeus, but hateful to Cronus and Uranus, and welcome to Hephaestus, but odious to Hera, and if any other of the gods disagree about the matter, satisfactory to some of them and odious to others.

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A second reading is available online at [www.mhhe.com/bossefl6e](http://www.mhhe.com/bossefl6e). This reading is titled "Civil Religion in America" by Robert N. Bellah. Go to the website and read the article before answering the following questions.



## Discussion Questions

1. Critically analyze Socrates' objection to Euthyphro's definition of "holy" [moral] as that which is "pleasing to the gods." Discuss also how Bellah might respond to Euthyphro.
  2. Bellah maintains that Christianity and Judaism are no longer the dominant religions in the United States; rather, it is American civil religion. Do you agree? Discuss the implications of this for the prophetic role of religion in calling political leaders to be morally accountable.
  3. American exceptionalism—the belief that the United States is unique and superior to other nations—is one of the key concepts in American cultural identity. Discuss this concept in light of Bellah's description of American civil religion. Is it American exceptionalism consistent with the idea of American civil religion being based on a universal morality; or, is American exceptionalism an example of civil religion as a type of ethical relativism? Use examples to support your answer.
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