

Which Moral Values?

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Reading

A librarian was working the reference desk at the public library in her community. The phone rang. The questioner, a male, wanted some information on state laws concerning rape. The librarian asked several questions to clarify the nature of his inquiry. Then, in keeping with long-established library policy designed to keep phone lines from being tied up, she explained that she would call him back in a few minutes after researching his question. She took down his first name and phone number, and hung up.

She was just getting up to do the research when a man who had been sitting in the reading area within earshot of the reference desk approached her. Flashing a police detective's badge, he asked for the name and number of the caller. The reason: The conversation he had overheard led him to suspect that the caller was the perpetrator of a rape that had happened the night before in the community.

What should she do? On one hand, she herself was a member of the community. She felt very strongly about the need to maintain law and order. As a woman, she was particularly concerned that a rapist might be at large in the community. And as a citizen, she wanted to do whatever she could to reduce the possibility that he might strike again. After all, what if she refused to tell and another rape happened the following night?

On the other hand, she felt just as strongly that her professional code as a librarian required her to protect the confidentiality of all callers. She felt that free access to information was vital to the success of democracy, and that if people seeking information were being watched and categorized simply by the kinds of questions they asked, the police state was not far behind. The right of privacy, she felt, must extend to everyone. After all, what if this caller was simply a student writing a paper on rape for a civics class?—From *How Good People Make Tough Choices* by Rushworth M. Kidder

Sermon

Several of you sent me a parody that makes fun of liberal people's reaction to last month's presidential election. Joe Blundo, a columnist with the Columbus, Ohio *Dispatch* wrote:

The flood of American liberals sneaking across the border into Canada has intensified in the past week, sparking calls

for increased patrols to stop the illegal immigration. The reelection of President Bush is prompting the exodus among left leaning citizens who fear they'll soon be required to hunt, pray and agree with Bill O'Reilly. Canadian border farmers say it's not uncommon to see dozens of sociology professors, animal rights activists and Unitarians crossing their fields at night. Officials are particularly concerned about smugglers who meet liberals near the Canadian border, pack them into Volvo station wagons, drive them across the border and leave them to fend for themselves. An Ottawa resident said "I feel sorry for American liberals, but the Canadian economy just can't support them. How many art-history majors does one country need?"

It is good to laugh. It is also good to remember that in this Unitarian Universalist congregation we have people who are Republicans, people who are Democrats, and people who are Independents. Whatever your view of last month's election, you are welcome here.

Still it is true that many in this congregation voted for the losing candidate in last month's Presidential election. For you the election and its aftermath has been a depressing experience. One part of this depression has been the exit polls that say "moral values" was the reason President Bush won the election. Some have inferred from this that only those who voted for Mr. Bush were seriously concerned about morality. One Kerry supporter wrote: "I woke up on November 3 and discovered that I had no moral values."

In the days after the election some said that John Kerry lost because he was very unpopular with people who believe moral values are the most important issues. Some said that this group of "moral values voters" is growing and Democrats are doomed until they can win them over.

However, before liberals all move to the frozen north, we need to look more carefully at the exit poll.

Which ONE issue mattered most in deciding how you voted for president? (Check only one)

	Bush	Kerry	Nader	All Voters
Moral Values	35%	8%	57%	22%
Terrorism	32%	5%	3%	19%
Iraq	8%	22%	3%	15%
Economy/jobs	7%	33%	26%	20%
Taxes	6%	5%	3%	5%
Health Care	4%	13%	1%	8%
Education	2%	7%	1%	4%

The way the pollsters designed the question, moral values was sure to be ranked high because “moral values” covers a group of current issues, while all the other choices were individual issues. If the pollsters had worded the poll differently, moral values would not have been the top issue. If, for example, the poll had put “Terrorism and Iraq,” together they would have been at the top with 34 percent. Or the poll could have combined “taxes, jobs and the economy.” Together they would have received 25 percent. If, instead of “moral values,” abortion rights and gay marriage were on the list separately, the results of the poll would be different.

Nevertheless, a poorly worded poll has stimulated a national discussion on the topic of moral values. We derive our moral values from our core beliefs about the purpose of human life. In my experience, human survival is a core human value. Most of the people I have met agree that God or nature created us with the intense desire to survive. Gradually through trial and error we have learned that certain actions are especially beneficial to survival. Religious leaders and philosophers try to put what we have learned into a few words.

The 18th century English philosopher Jeremy Bentham believed pain and pleasure to be the only absolutes in the world. From this he derived the moral value called utilitarianism: “The good is whatever brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people.”

In 1785 Immanuel Kant published *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, and formulated the Categorical Imperative. “Act only according to that maxim by which you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.”

The Golden Rule is found in many religions and philosophies, the most famous of which is the New Testament, in which Jesus said: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

The moral dilemma of the librarian that I described in the reading shows how we might apply these guidelines.

Bentham said “The good is whatever brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people.” Does this help? On the one hand, giving the name and number to the police officer will please the people who fear the rapist. On the other hand, refusing to give the name and number to the police officer will make the “right to privacy” people happy, will give them pleasure. The good is whatever brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people, but which decision will bring happiness to the greatest number of people?

Kant said: Act so your actions can become a universal standard that others ought to obey. Okay, you are the librarian. Do you want all librarians in the future always to give information to police officers whenever they ask for it? Do you want rapists to get information from the library without anyone knowing who they are? Do you want the police to have access to the names of the books everyone reads? Which decision could we make a universal law for all librarians to follow?

Jesus said: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Following the golden rule I need to test my actions by putting myself in another person’s shoes. So I imagine calling the library and asking for information about the state laws concerning rape. This is something I might do if I were counseling a victim of such a crime. I wonder, would I want my name given to a police officer? What might happen to my relationship with my family or my relationship to this congregation if it became public that the police considered me a suspect in the case? If I had pledged confidentiality to the victim I was counseling, I would have no way of explaining myself, except by breaking my word.

On the other hand, if I were the librarian, I would ask, if I were the victim, what would I want the librarian to do? I might feel that, if the caller on the phone had a legitimate reason for calling, he should not object to being inconvenienced, by the police investigation. If I were the victim, I would want the librarian to give the name to the police officer.

Having looked at this from the point of view of three principles of moral philosophy, what advice do I have? Of course, self-interest plays a role in every moral decision. I know that in this congregation there are several librarians and no police officers. I know that the Librarian’s Professional Association has an ethical guideline that says they should never give out information about who checks out which books. This rule protects our democracy by guaranteeing the free flow of information. I know that many Unitarian Universalists are deeply concerned about civil liberties, for the right to privacy. Some have called the ACLU, founded by a Unitarian, the secular arm of the Unitarian Church.

If I advise the librarian to refuse the request of the police officer, my guess is that this would be a popular position to take in a Unitarian Universalist Church. It might make for smoother sailing next time the Board of Trustees evaluates my ministry. A popular position also makes fund raising easier. Ministers think about such things.

On the other hand, more than thirty years ago someone raped a friend of mine. Her description of how that terrible event harmed her is still with me. Remembering that, I would want everything possible to be done to catch a rapist. In my mind, this personal experience from my past, tops everything else. I am willing to sacrifice civil liberties. I am willing to risk offending members of my congregation. I would advise the librarian to give the information to the police.

In being influenced by personal experience, I am not alone. A few years ago the Gallup Organization asked a cross-section of the American people “By what means do you determine the truth?”

42 percent answered “personal experienc”.
32 percent answered “scriptural teachings”.
15 percent answered “parental guidance”.

6 percent answered “scientific analysis”.

So of what value are philosophy and religion, if in the end I make my moral decisions based on my personal experience? The moral values of Utilitarianism, the Categorical Imperative and the Golden Rule are valuable because they guide us to use our reason as well as our emotion in making an ethical decision. If we use these moral principles, they do not replace our emotion. They intermingle, mix and interact with our emotions in a thoughtful process that leads to a decision.

One of the major moral values debated in the election was gay marriage. On this issue I find it easy to apply the three principles from moral philosophy. From the utilitarian point of view, gay marriages bring great happiness to gay couples without hurting heterosexual couples in any way. Such marriages help the survival of the human race by potentially keeping our population down, providing committed adults to serve as parents to children who need parents, and decreasing the spread of AIDS by encouraging monogamy. From the perspective of the Categorical Imperative, my officiating at such weddings as a minister can and should become a universal standard for all clergy. From the point of view of the Golden Rule, by officiating at gay weddings I am treating others the way I would like others to treat me. Finally, from the point of view of my own experience, gay and lesbian people are not sinners or mentally ill. They are spiritually healthy and mentally healthy. Gay marriages may not yet be popular, but it seems obvious to me that they are moral.

Another major moral value debated in the election was abortion. The key issue in the abortion debate is the definition of when life begins—at conception or at a later point in the development of the fetus. The principles of moral philosophy are of no help in answering this question of definition.

My own view is a compromise. I believe that life begins at the point when a fetus is strong enough to survive on its own, the point of viability. Before that time I support the right of any woman to choose to have an abortion. After that time I believe only the most serious claims of a woman’s life can justify the destruction of the fetus. When it comes to abortion that is my utilitarian answer, my universal standard, my attempt at following the Golden Rule.

Another important moral issue of this past election is the war in Iraq. When it comes to American policy, what will bring the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people? We can increase the number of our troops as the President is now doing. We can continue to try to create a democracy in the hopes that eventually this will create the greatest happiness for the greatest number. All I know is what I read and hear in the news. It appears that these efforts to bring democracy to Iraq have created a terrible civil war in that county with thousands of deaths.

We could withdraw from the country. But I fear that our withdrawal will not end the terrible killing. I fear that if we withdraw those who have supported us, who have trusted us, will be slaughtered because they were collaborators with the United States.

So I would withdraw from Iraq while making it possible for all those Iraqis who put their trust in our country to be able to leave Iraq and come live in the United States, where they will be safe from reprisals. Given the situation as it is today, this is my guess about which approach is most likely to bring the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people. This would be my universal law. If you invade a country, you have the responsibility to take the people who helped you with you when you leave. This is how I would do unto the Iraqis as I would have them do to me.

Many of those who were elected in last month's election do not share my moral values, regarding gay marriage, abortion, Iraq and other issues. Yet I do not want to leave for Canada.

In the history of the United States our foremothers and forefathers ended slavery, gave women the right to vote, and fought poverty with the Social Security program and with the union movement. We have moved in the direction of equality with the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, the Native American Movement, the Hispanic Movement and the Gay Rights Movement. We have moved in the direction of cleaning up our air, water and earth, through the Environmental Movement. Unitarian Universalists have been part of all of this and more. In the short run there will be set backs. But over time I have faith that these progressive movements will become the moral values of most people in this country.

We are part of the continuing struggle for survival, part of that long journey that began thousands of years ago in the swamps, the forests, the mountains, and the savannahs of this earth. Progress is not easy. No doubt the person who invented the wheel had to contend with someone who called her invention wishy washy. But she was determined and persistent. She eventually prevailed over the old dogmas. We will prevail also. It just takes tenacity and patience.