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**Realizing The Dream! – Give us a student, we give back a Bureaucrat**  
**ON RELIGION AND MORALS**

**Will Durant**

Shall we define our terms? Historically, religion has been the worship of supernatural powers. Webster defines morality as “the quality of that which conforms to right ideals or principles of human conduct.” But who is to determine which ideals are right? The individual himself? Reckless souls have tried to define the right as any conduct which their conscience approves of; but in that case Casanova and the Marquis de Sade were moral, for they tried to live up to their proclaimed ideal, which was to seduce or beat as many women as other commitments would allow. The word moral, of course, is from the Latin *mos, moris*, meaning “custom”; we may agree that what

At a given time or place is considered moral will depend upon the mores, customs, or standards prevailing in the group. Personally I should define morality as the consistency of private conduct with public interest as understood by the group. It implies recognition by the individual that his life, liberty, and development depend upon social organization, and his willingness, in return, to adjust himself to the needs of the community. On the basis of this definition the Church can make an impressive case for itself as an indispensable

Bulwark of morality. It claims that the current relaxation of morals in Western Europe and America is due principally to the decline of religious belief, and that the unforgivable criminals in the alleged debacle are the philosophes of the eighteenth century, and their thousands of intellectual progeny who have joined in the attack upon the Church. I can imagine some irate cardinal belaboring the infidels

You ignorant fools! When will you grow up enough to understand that your individual security and survival are the gifts of social order; that social order can be maintained only through the influence of the family, the school, and the Church; that no number of laws or policemen can replace the moral discipline inculcated by parents, teachers, and priests; that in attacking these formative and protective institutions you are sapping the dykes that have been raised through the labor and wisdom of centuries against the individualistic, disorderly, and savage impulses that lurk in the hearts of men? What will you do when parental authority has been rejected by “liberated” youth, when young ruffians make life a daily torture for the teachers in your schools, when your religious leaders are derided and defamed, when the life-sustaining structure of Christian doctrine has been weakened, when your public officials smile at their own corruption, when organized crime is more powerful than your police and your courts, when your literature and your theaters madden men with incitements to sex, when your daughters are raped, or seduced and abandoned by sex-crazed men, when you dare not walk the streets at night for fear of robbery, assault, or assassination? There is only one thing you can do: come back penitently to religion, and beg the Church to put into your children the love of Christ and the fear of a living averaging God.

I am touched by this argument, for I, too, have shot my pebbles against the Church, and now I am not at all confident that man’s unsocial impulses can be controlled by a moral code shorn of religious belief. Have I been an “unforgivable criminal” and an “ignorant fool”? I might plead that I tried to be fair to the Catholic Church in *The Age of Faith* and *The Reformation*. I gave the attack upon Christianity 182 of 799 pages in *The Age of Voltaire*, for that attack was the most important—the most widely, deeply, lastingly influential—event of the eighteenth century; but I

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stated the case for the Church with considerable sympathy in the epilogue to that book. I could never quite make up my mind whether I was an anticlerical hero or a lover harboring a secret affection for a deserted ideal.

The Ideal was deserted because it had disowned itself. The Church had overlaid the incomparable ethics of Jesus with a complex structure of incredible dogma echoing St. Paul and mostly unknown to Christ, and with an omnipresent incubus of organization and theoretical police lying heavy upon the human mind, ready to stifle any independent thought by using the powers of the state to imprison, confiscate, and kill. The local priests and nuns still remembered (and often practiced) Christianity, but the hierarchy forgot it in a lust for unassailable and infallible authority.

The Church had begun with the Prince of Peace, who had bidden Peter put his sword back into its sheath; it had become a warrior using swords, pikes, and guns against the Albigensians of France and the Jews of Spain. The lowly carpenter of Nazareth had been replaced by a pope more richly housed than most emperors, and controlling more wealth than most states. In disputes between oppressors and oppressed the hierarchy had almost always supported the oppressors and suppressed the oppressed. The success of humanists and humanitarians in freeing the mind and the serf emboldened men to demand the taming of this dogmatic, obscurantist, intolerant, and reactionary power.

Has the weakening of that power been the main cause of our moral decline? No. It has been one factor among many, but not the chief. The principal and overspreading cause of our moral “decay” has been the Industrial Revolution. Almost every aspect of that economic convulsion has affected morality. As examples:

1. The passage from rural mutual surveillance to concealment of the individual in the urban multitude has almost ended the force of neighborly opinion to control personal behavior.
2. On the farm, till 1900, the family was the unit of economic production, and the authority of the father was strengthened by his economic leadership and by family solidarity. Under industrialism the corporation and the employee are the units of production; the family is dispersed to follow scattered jobs; the son becomes financially independent of the father; parental authority loses its economic base.
3. On the farm the youth reached economic maturity—i.e., the ability to support a wife and children—almost as soon as he reached biological maturity—i.e., the ability to have children; marriage came early, and premarital continence was less difficult than in our contemporary industrial society, where the deferment of economic maturity has delayed marriage and made continence difficult.
4. On the farm the wife was a helpmate, an economic asset; children were economic assets after the age of five; there was less reason than now to defer marriage or to practice birth control.
5. The postponement of marriage and the limitation of the family have spread contraceptive knowledge and devices, removing the sanction of fear from the prohibition of extramarital relations.
6. Industrial competition among corporations and individuals has strengthened the profit motive and other individualistic instincts, and has broken down moral restraints in the conduct of business.
7. The wealth spawned by improved methods of production and distribution has enabled



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thousands of men and women to indulge in moral escapades that their ancestors could not afford.

8. Improvements in communication and transportation have given to local immorality and disorder a publicity that stimulates similar deviations elsewhere; and those improvements have facilitated the conspiracies of criminals and their flight from the scene of their crime.
9. The spread of education, while widening the classes that abstain from crime, has made the new generation increasingly familiar with the historical and geographical diversity of moral codes and their human origin; the inherited code has been thereby weakened, and much doubt has been cast upon its allegedly divine sanctions and source.
10. Technology has extended and depersonalized war, and has vastly developed man's ability to murder or destroy.

The character and frequency of modern war is second only to the Industrial Revolution as a cause of moral change. To fight such a war great numbers of young men are trained to use lethal weapons, and to kill with zest and a good conscience. The survivors, returning to civil life, keep some of the habits and temper of war, find it difficult to endure poverty amid surrounding wealth, and apply in the cities the techniques and principles learned in the camp and on the battlefield. The military class rises in prestige and influence, and its ways of thought, freed from moral considerations, affects the government and the people. Lying becomes a major industry of states. News and history are colored to inculcate hatred now of one enemy or competitor, now of another. Nationalism overrides morality, defers social reform, and becomes a religion stronger than any church.

From this résumé of old and familiar facts we conclude that morals would have changed even if religious beliefs had not been impaired by the conflict between religion and philosophy. Obviously the old moral code was adjusted to an agricultural society, and could not be expected to fit, without many alterations, the conditions of modern industrial life. Therefore we should speak of a moral change rather than a moral decay; the present age is experimenting, at its own peril, to find how far individual freedom can comport with the stability of society, the protection of women, and the security of person and property.

Such a transformation is bound to involve transitional chaos and some reckless extremes, but extremes often cancel themselves into moderation, and the chaos may compel new forms of discipline; the proposal for requiring two years of national service may be one of such forms, but it may also be the door to authoritarian government. As our young anarchists (barring a few congenital knights of the road) reach economic competence and place, and mature into intellectual perspective and some knowledge of the nature and limitations of man, they will probably adjust themselves to the discipline of industry and parentage; the radicals of today will become the liberals of tomorrow and the frightened conservatives of declining years. Which of us, if really alive, was not a rebel in his youth?

I am not sure, but I can reasonably hope, that as the United States has maintained a stable government for almost two centuries despite the separation of church and state, our industrial society will gradually develop a secular ethic that—with lessened poverty and widened education—will function as effectively as a theological morality. We must not imagine that past generations were much more moral than our own; the historian does not find them so, and the elders in every one of them thought them abandoned to Satan. Having freed ourselves from an



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oppressive hierarchy, we must not run away from our perilous liberty to seek mental quiet and asphyxiation in the womb of a loving but tyrannical Mother Church.

I have been reading with pride and amusement the argument that I made, in a little book published in 1917, for Socrates's view that intelligence is the highest virtue, and that education in intelligence can be made the basis of a natural morality. I must confess that I underestimated the role of sympathy— fellow feeling—in moral sentiments, as analyzed by David Hume and Adam Smith; and I realize that desire, instinct, and passion are the motive forces behind human behavior, even behind human reason. But I defined intelligence as the coordination of desires through a "forecasting of effects," and as delayed reaction allowing fuller perception of the situation and a more adequate response. Intelligence does not claim to be the source of action; it is the harmonious and effective unification of the sources.

Such intelligence is hard to teach, but it can be taught, in varying degrees, to differently developed minds. It does not seem impossible to make youth understand that the stability of a society, and the prevalence of moral restraint, are prerequisites to personal security, and that moral self-restraint is one of the surest guarantees of personal advancement and fulfillment. Actually crime and immorality, by and large, are least frequent in the best-educated ranks of a nation. Imagine what a natural ethic could do if as much time and care were spent in teaching it as the Church spends in inculcating a supernatural code. Let every grade in school, from kindergarten to PhD, have an hour per week of moral instruction, using a succession of textbooks of rising complexity from simple primers to mature treatises written by well-behaved philosophers, clergymen, and men of affairs, and rewritten by men allergic to preaching and gifted with clarity. Let such courses be humanized with readable biographies of moral leaders in thought and life: Confucius, Buddha, Socrates, Jesus, St. Francis of Assisi, Maimonides, Spinoza, Florence Nightingale, and Schweitzer. I dream of all churches welcoming to their naves, an hour each week, all persons, of whatever theology or none, for discussion of practical ways in which human behavior, even in a secular world, could approach to the ideals of Christ. If more and more each new generation should receive more and more education it is reasonable to believe that morals would improve.

They will never satisfy the moralist, for morality is unnatural, goes against the grain; we are equipped by nature for a hunting life in woods and fields, rather than a mechanical life in cities, offices, and factories. But the problem of moral degeneration must be solved, for in the last analysis morality and civilization are one.