

Morality and Behaviour in School

Can schools teach morality? This was the theme of an article on education written for *Today Magazine*, June 7, 1980. It centred on values education.

What is involved in values education? The article says that this variety of teaching methods – loosely lumped together under that label – has been developed gradually since the mid-60s, when religious education was dropped by most public school boards. Thus values education is a response to the question how to help children confront basic moral precepts and values, without injecting a religious bias. One of the most controversial techniques is reported to be values clarification, a method taught through exercises in which children are encouraged to come to their own conclusions.

Teachers are instructed to teach that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers to any ethical issues the class may discuss. The result is a type of moral relativism. For resource books the teachers have available to them such titles like "*Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students*," a book now in use in Ontario and Saskatchewan schools. The article states: "In it is an exercise recommended for 10-year-olds called Write Your Own Obituary, which lets the child 'look at life by viewing it from the perspective of his/her own deaths.'"

Another strategy is called 'values voting' – 'Hands up those who think, stealing is okay under some circumstances.'" This approach has its many critics. It is said that because of the fragmentation of educational administration across Canada, it is difficult to tell how many schools actually use these strategies. Apparently many boards of education have hired "values consultants" whose job concerns the way ethics are taught.

Can schools teach morals without "injecting a religious bias?" This is a crucial question which touches the raw nerve of ethicists. Philosophers and historians Will and Arlen Durant have remarked that one of the most difficult problems of our times is to build a social order upon a system of morality independent of religious belief. "The twentieth century approaches its end," wrote the Durants, "without having yet found a natural substitute in persuading the human animal to morality."

I suggest that no moral code can dispense with a religious basis. During the 18th century French revolution, the hope was expressed that in every moral choice the individual, in return for protection and many community services, would recognize the good of the community to be the overriding law. They wanted morality without religion. But after a decade of revolution in France, even some skeptics, who had discarded all belief in God, had come to doubt that a moral code unsupported by a religious faith could resist "unfettered passions." However, the question never is morality with or without religious support.

We must always ask: "Which religious persuasion should be the basis for moral teaching? There are different systems of morality. Pragmatists claim that you can do what seems to work without regard for fixed principles of right or wrong. Humanists

teach that society formulates the norms of behaviour. So humanist norms are relative as mankind develops and changes in attitudes through new insights gained into the nature and behaviour of man.

If the basic reality for each of us is his individual conscious self, each of us may sit in judgment upon every tradition, norm, law or creed. There are the Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist moral systems. For example, Islamic law (the Shari'a) teaches the Muslim what to do and what to leave alone. Every aspect of life whether national or international, public and private, matters of morality, religious observance and social conduct, is covered.

In our fragmented society, the principles for behaviour are constantly reviewed. We seem to live in a new tower of Babel era where the sense of our own autonomy is supreme. Man decides what is right or wrong. He had become a standard unto himself.

What is the Christian position? Christians teach that norms come from and are propounded by God. In the Christian moral system God is the ultimate authority. He has revealed His will to us through His word. Christians believe that the Biblical norms are not just for the community of the redeemed, but that they are obligatory for all mankind. The "thou shalt" or "thou shalt not" are not out-of-date ethics that were formulated in the ancient past in the rugged Sinai desert. They are imperatives for today. The laws of the God, who has revealed Himself through Christ and the Scriptures, stand eternally firm and secure. They are unchangeable and are the standards for the life to which God expects us to conform. Christian morality doesn't consist of merely a series of negatives.

The law of God is God's gracious provision for our well-being. It doesn't undermine life. It affirms it. According to the Bible – just think of Psalm 119 the law of God serves life. And Scripture insists that man must "do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God."

Dr. Kathleen Gow, a sociologist who published a book entitled "*Yes, Virginia, There is Right and Wrong: a Values Education Survival Kit*," writes: "Of course we need values education, which is willing to tackle the realities of students' lives. Certainly children do not need an autocratic, prepackaged, obvious answer laid on them. But some of this stuff could convince children there is no right and wrong, that it's what they believe in that counts. I, for one, do not think lying, cheating and stealing should be negotiable behaviours."

She is right. Lying, cheating and stealing shouldn't be negotiable behaviour patterns. But on what do we base behaviour? The Christian answers: "On the revealed will of God."

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