

## Religion, Scripture, and Morality

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*Abstract:* Religion is compatible with morality if it is constrained by morality defined independently of revelation. This path is wholly open to religion, as thinkers like Immanuel Kant and John Spong have shown. Religion conflicts with morality if we regard a revealed text or priestly authority as infallibly or presumptively right such that it overrides reasoned human judgment. The biblical story of Abraham and Isaac teaches us that undeviating submission to the reported word of God is incompatible with morality. Unconscious aestheticism and the habit of associating religious devotion with intellectual passivity are among the reasons why people have confused morality with scripture. A nonfundamentalist approach that I call “liberal religion” avoids the demotion of morality and has the potential to cultivate and strengthen morality.

*Keywords:* religion, morality, scripture, fundamentalism, Abraham

They who know of no purer sources of truth, who have traced up its stream no higher, stand, and wisely stand, by the Bible and the Constitution, and drink at it there with reverence and humanity; but they who behold where it comes trickling into this lake or that pool, gird up their loins once more, and continue their pilgrimage toward its fountain-head.

- Thoreau, “Resistance to Civil Government”

### Introduction

This article reverses the familiar question – does morality require religion? – by instead asking whether religion conflicts with morality. I argue that the answer depends on the mode of religious orientation: authority-deferent religion, including fundamentalism, conflicts with morality, whereas (what I will call) liberal religion does not conflict with morality and has the potential to cultivate and strengthen morality. We avoid betraying morality in the name of religion if we define morality independently of revelation and adopt a form of religion constrained by morality thus defined. I don’t classify any major religion as either authority-deferent or liberal, but instead regard these two approaches as available to followers of any major religion.

This article asks a fundamental question of undoubted importance. If religion conflicts with morality (or doesn’t), this is something we should all know. It is worth knowing whether religion encourages wrongdoing, and if so, whether there are modes of religion that avoid this danger. The question is also relevant to understanding recurrent patterns of distrust between secular and religious perspectives. The former sometimes fear religion’s potential to be a vehicle of tyranny and injustice, while the latter regard many such fears as proceeding from an attitude of intolerance. Specifying the circumstances in which religion does and does not threaten morality may moderate this standoff, helping us avoid religious injustice on the one hand and secular intolerance on the other.

By religion, I have in mind the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – though most of my scriptural examples will come from the Bible, the primary text for Judaism (Hebrew Bible only) and Christianity (both Old and New Testaments). The primary text for Muslims is the Qur’an, together with the hadith, the reported words and deeds of Muhammad. There are obviously other religions, but I limit my attention to these three in order to keep the discussion within reasonable bounds.

By authority-deferent religion, I have in mind the position that a designated authority is infallibly or presumptively correct. The authority may be a revealed text or a priestly class.<sup>1</sup> One kind of authority-deferent religion is fundamentalism, by which I mean the view that scripture, or scripture literally

interpreted, is always right. (Perhaps a better term is literalism, scripturalism, or inerrancy.) This view goes together with the view that God's actions and commands are always right, as scripture repeatedly tells us. I shall generally refer to fundamentalism, but my ultimate target is authority-deferent religion in general. Fundamentalism in the strict sense (belief in the infallibility of scripture) shades into a broader family of attitudes that lend pronounced deference to religious authority (regarded as presumptively even if fallibly true), such that it regularly overrides, displaces, preempts, or discourages reasoned human judgment on morality. Let me note that the fundamentalist orientation is wider than often acknowledged, and describes all those who demonstrate a strong unwillingness to contradict scripture.

I criticize the practice of granting deference to religious authority in the formation of one's moral beliefs. This deference is a matter of degree. One can grant too much deference to religious authority short of full-blown fundamentalism. For this reason, those who allow tradition and reason some role in shaping their interpretation of scripture<sup>2</sup> may not escape the dangers I warn against in this article.

In what follows, I consider a well-known example that pits scripture against morality. I next argue that religion does not require literal adherence to scripture. I then discuss why morality should not be confused with scripture and why some people nonetheless confuse the two. I conclude by deriving some ethical and political lessons from my argument.

### **The Abraham-Isaac Story as a Refutation of Fundamentalism**

It is plain that fundamentalism conflicts with morality, since the Bible narrates a long list of atrocities ordered or committed by God. Several commentators have compiled lists. Elizabeth Anderson (2007, 219) observes:

God repeatedly directs the Israelites to commit ethnic cleansing (Ex. 34:11-14, Lev. 26:7-9) and genocide against numerous cities and tribes: the city of Hormah (Num. 21:2-3), the land of Bashan (Num. 21:33-35), the land of Heshbon (Deut. 2:26-35), the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites (Josh. 1-12). He commands them to show their victims "no mercy" (Deut. 7:2), to "not leave alive anything that breathes" (Deut. 20:16). In order to ensure their complete extermination, he thwarts the free will of the victims by hardening their hearts (Deut. 2:30, Josh. 11:20) so that they do not sue for peace. These genocides are, of course, instrumental to the wholesale theft of their land (Josh. 1:1-6) and the rest of their property (Deut. 20:14, Josh. 11:14)....

Anderson fills over three pages with similar material. The most glaring immorality in scripture, taught in Christian and Islamic but not (or not unambiguously) in Jewish holy texts, is the doctrine of hell – the claim that a just God will subject humans to everlasting torment for finite crimes. John Stuart Mill ([1874] 1998) describes the Christian doctrine of hell as "a dreadful idealization of wickedness" (114).

The Bible gives us a paradigmatic illustration of the problem in the story of Abraham and Isaac, told in Genesis 22.<sup>3</sup> God commands Abraham to take his son Isaac to a mountain in the land of Moriah and kill him there as a sacrifice to God. They embark on a three-day journey, but only Abraham knows the journey's purpose. When they reach their destination, Abraham lays down wood, binds Isaac, and takes a knife to kill him. At the last minute, God tells Abraham to spare Isaac. Abraham sees a ram and sacrifices it instead.

The biblical narration makes God's purpose clear. "God tested Abraham," we are told in the chapter's first verse. When God spares Isaac, he says he is doing so to reward Abraham for his willingness to obey God's command. "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (Gen 22:12). God returns to praise Abraham's obedience a second time, and to declare that Abraham will be rewarded

with descendants as numerous as the stars and the sand on the seashore. His descendants and humanity as a whole will share in Abraham's reward: "your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves" (Gen. 22:17-18).

This is one of the most famous stories in the Bible, its importance underscored by the traditional belief (supported by 2 Chr 3:1) that locates Isaac's binding at the site of Solomon's Temple and today's Wailing Wall (the Temple Mount or Noble Sanctuary, also home to the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque). The story is the traditional Torah reading for the second day of the Jewish New Year, near the start of the Ten Days of Repentance, Abraham's obedience providing a standard by which to measure our own conduct. In the Qur'anic retelling of the biblical story, Abraham also prepares to comply with God's instructions to sacrifice his son (generally thought to be Ishmael rather than Isaac), whom God spares at the last minute. The event is celebrated annually as the Eid al-Adha, or Feast of the Sacrifice.

Conventional interpretations of the story echo God's praise for Abraham's conduct (Green 1982; Beach & Powell 2014, chs. 1-3; Wainwright 2005). In Sunday school classes throughout the world, children are taught to admire Abraham as a man of faith who placed his trust in God. The plain meaning of the text, notwithstanding inventive interpretations,<sup>4</sup> is that God commanded Abraham to kill his child, that Abraham formed an intention to do so, that he organized his activity over a three-day period to carry out this intention, and that although he was spared at the last possible minute from having to perform the deed, he was rightly praised and rewarded for his intention to obey God's command. The reason this story draws so much attention is that it captures in concentrated form the insistent message of the Bible and Qur'an – that we must devote ourselves to God and obey his will. Humanity is repeatedly tested by God, sometimes failing and sometimes making the grade. Abraham earns his central role in the three "Abrahamic" faiths by flawlessly passing God's hardest (or after Jesus, next to hardest) test. His obedience seals his merit as the man divinely chosen to form an everlasting covenant with God, found a new community to rule over Canaan, and become the ancestor of a vast and flourishing progeny.

The problem with this story is that both God's command and Abraham's intention to obey it are morally wrong. It is a fixed point in our moral understanding that it is wrong to kill one's own child or any innocent person. This moral prohibition is an anchor for morality as a whole, one of the prohibitions that give meaning and weight to morality.<sup>5</sup> Take away the anchor, and morality is set adrift. Someone might say that while killing your child is normally wrong, God's command converts what is normally wrong into something right. This is implausible. When God orders atrocious acts, he is no longer good. If we say that God's morality operates on a logic different from our own, we drain the word "morality" of its content. To quote Mill ([1874] 1998), "the worship of the Deity ceases to be the adoration of abstract moral perfection. It becomes the bowing down to a gigantic image of something not fit for us to imitate. It is the worship of power only" (113).

In the biblical story, no reason is given for God's command. The text suggests awareness that God's command is immoral, because he retracts it at the last moment. God preserves his moral credentials because ordering filicide was not his final will, or was never his will at all, if we interpret the chapter's opening verse to say that the entire exercise was meant to test Abraham. But Abraham's situation is grimmer. He fully and always intended to kill his son as long as he understood this to be God's will. The moral stain (possibly) avoided by God is permanently attached to Abraham. God preserves his (apparent) probity while training Abraham to follow orders.

The deformation of Abraham's character and his transformation into an instrument of evil are terrifyingly captured in Caravaggio's 1603 painting of the *Sacrifice of Isaac* housed in the Uffizi Galleries in Florence.<sup>6</sup> With his powerful left arm, Abraham forces down the head of his agonized child, while with his right hand, he clenches a knife near Isaac's throat. Abraham's head is turned sharply away from his victim towards the angel delivering God's last-minute message and placing a

restraining hand on Abraham's wrist. Abraham studies the angelic messenger with concentration, poised to act as he instructs. He ignores Isaac's screams; his dependence on God's reported will leaves no room for Isaac's perspective. We see in the figure of Abraham a disciplined soul, emptied of conscience and humanity.



Michelangelo Merisi, detto il Caravaggio, *Sacrifice of Isaac*, ca. 1603, Uffizi Galleries. By permission of the Ministry of Culture. No reproduction or duplication permitted.

Embedded in the Bible, therefore, is a warning against a certain religious orientation. Abraham's example is negative: it models precisely what we should not do. The story, presented as a test for Abraham (Gen 22:1), is really a test for us, one that we fail if we think Abraham acted rightly or if (heaven forbid) we regard him as a model for our own conduct. The Abraham-Isaac story is the *reductio ad absurdum* of religious fundamentalism. It is the Bible's way of telling us that we should not obey the reported word of God in all circumstances.

The story's true lesson is distinct from its intended lesson, and can be learned only when we do not treat the biblical text, literally interpreted, as authority. The story's true as opposed to intended lesson is that we should not let claims about God's will divert us from what is morally right. Further, we should not let an authority dictate the content of morality, whether the authority is a revealed text or, as in Abraham's case, the seeming voice of God. We should not let authority displace or preempt our own reasoned judgment.

We each have a conscience. We know it is wrong to kill our own child. This judgment is tied to (and reinforces) broader principles and values. We should care about other human and sentient beings. We should avoid injuring or betraying others. We should protect those, such as our own children, who are dependent on us, both because of the obligations we have assumed towards them and because of their vulnerable condition.

Several philosophers have illuminated the nature of moral reasoning. Here I draw on the lucid account of William Talbott in *Which Rights Should Be Universal?* (2005). Human beings have the capacity to reason morally – to reach reasonably reliable, though not infallible, judgments of right and wrong. Moral reasoning entails the adoption of an impartial standpoint according due weight to relevant interests, perspectives, and values; is informed by empathic understanding; seeks to correct biases

derived from self-interest, group interest, and hierarchy-protecting social norms; and is open and responsive to criticism. When we adopt these practices, we improve the reliability of our moral judgments. If we take morality seriously, we must not delegate moral truths to a revealed text or other authority, but instead to develop and exercise our capacity for independent moral judgment. Talbott writes:

People who exercise this capacity will not regard any other person or text as a source of unquestionable moral truth. They can regard people or texts as sources of moral wisdom, to be seriously considered in deciding what to do. However, the ultimate decision about what to do will always depend on their own moral judgment. I will refer to people who develop and exercise their own moral judgment as *moral philosophers*. (4)

Taking morality seriously requires that we each become moral philosophers. Moral reasoning can sometimes modify or overturn and at other times reinforce our initial moral judgments. In the Abraham-Isaac story, it reinforces them.

We can distinguish between “reflective morality” and “textual morality.” Reflective morality is based on the moral judgment of human beings, as improved through critical moral reflection. Textual morality is based on the direct application of sacred texts. (I expand the concept of a sacred text to include what Abraham believed was the voice of God commanding him to kill Isaac.)

Fundamentalists claim that in case of conflict reflective morality should give way to textual morality. If challenged regarding the apparent immorality of some of their commitments, they may answer that they simply follow a different moral methodology and that critics achieve nothing by applying reflective morality (or as they like to call it, “secular morality”) as a basis of criticism. However, we may question whether textual morality is morality at all. It is doubtful whether “because God says so” is, in itself, a moral argument. We can always ask whether the content of God’s will is, in fact, moral. (This is the point made in Plato’s *Euthyphro*.) Further, we can ask whether a revealed text really is the word of God. As I have argued, the Abraham-Isaac story is a refutation of textual morality.

In my own observations, I have been struck that fundamentalists rarely seem content to remain within the confines of textual morality. They seem anxious to defend their controversial moral views to nonbelievers in terms that nonbelievers can accept, that is, they appeal to reflective morality. They also use reflective morality to bolster the confidence of fellow believers; they want to show that God has good moral reason for issuing his commands. These habits reveal incipient awareness of the inadequacy of textual morality.

The prophet Jeremiah and apostle Paul spoke of laws written into the hearts of human beings, a way of saying that God endowed human beings with conscience. Centuries later, their words are echoed by Rousseau’s Savoyard Vicar, who explains that the rules meant to govern his conduct are those “written by nature with ineffaceable characters in the depth of my heart” (Rousseau [1762] 1979, 286).

### **Alternative Responses to the Abraham-Isaac Story**

We can respond to the Abraham-Isaac story in different ways, each representing a different approach to the religion-morality problem.

1. We can say that Abraham was morally right when he formed an intention to obey God’s command to kill his child. As discussed above, this appears to be the lesson intended by the authors of the text. It is the view encouraged by conventional religious readings of the story.
2. We can agree with Kant, who argued that the biblical narration must be factually incorrect, because

God, who is good, would never command anything so wicked. Kant suggests two possible sources of error: Abraham misheard God, or the “historical documents” handed down to us have been corrupted. The certain knowledge that it is wrong to kill one’s child should override Abraham’s certainty that he heard God correctly and our certainty that the biblical narration is factually accurate (Kant [1793] 2009, 6:87, 186-87; Kant [1798] 1992, 7:62-65).<sup>7</sup> Kant believed that the moral law is discoverable by reason without need of scripture, and that it is God’s will for us to follow morality. This is compatible with his view that morality gives us reason to believe in God and that true religion supports morality (Kant [1793] 2009). Literal readings of scripture should be rejected when they conflict with morality, because we should construe the Bible in accordance with morality and not morality in accordance with the Bible (Kant [1793] 2009, 6:110, note).

3. We can agree with Kierkegaard, who believed that God’s command was morally wrong but that we should nonetheless admire Abraham for intending to comply with it (Kierkegaard [1843] 1985). Abraham’s greatness consisted in placing faith above morality; he suspended the ethical by ascending to a higher *telos*. Kierkegaard says (frighteningly), “What we usually call a temptation is something that keeps a person from carrying out a duty, but here the temptation is the ethical itself which would keep [Abraham] from doing God’s will” (88). Kierkegaard admits a conflict between morality and religion, and suggests that morality should give way to religion.

Kierkegaard is closely studied by Christian theologians. We hear echoes of his thought when Dietrich Bonhoeffer says approvingly of Abraham, “against every direct claim upon him, whether natural, ethical or religious, he will be obedient to the Word of God” (Bonhoeffer 1959, 111). To my knowledge, frank statements of the view are not widely broadcast. I have not heard many preachers say, “Obey God, even when doing so is wrong.” But Kierkegaard may identify as well as encourage an orientation that consciously or unconsciously guides much religious practice.

4. We can think that if the story is true as narrated, it shows that God’s command was morally wrong, and that Abraham should have refused to obey. Moral criticism or condemnation of God is not a traditional practice of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, but the option exists, and some nonfundamentalists make use of it. Abraham’s argument with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:16-33) may be cited as a possible precedent.

5. We can offer an interpretation of the text different from how it is normally read, to suggest there is no conflict with reflective morality. Maybe the text doesn’t really say that God ordered Abraham to kill Isaac or that Abraham intended to do so. Reinterpretation is a common strategy of religious apologists who are loath to admit that scripture ever endorses immorality.

In *Right from Wrong* (2022) Mark Smith convincingly shows that such reinterpretation strategies often suffer from the problem of intellectual dishonesty. Evidence is slanted to produce a pre-desired outcome, namely, a teaching that contemporaries will find morally acceptable. Scripture is then falsely given credit for affirming views that evolved externally to scripture. This strategy discourages moral reflection while reaping its contributions. Sometimes reinterpretation is plausible, but Smith gives many examples when it is not, and I do not find it credible in the Abraham-Isaac story. Even when it exhibits intellectual dishonesty, we may nonetheless welcome reinterpretation as a form of moral progress. (This is Smith’s view.) But it is a shallow form of moral progress, which may offer little protection if prevailing norms take a turn for the worse. Reinterpretation strategies run the risk of intellectual dishonesty, parasitism, and laziness.

The preceding remarks refer to literal reinterpretation, meaning an attempt to recover the text’s literal meaning. That is to be distinguished from nonliteral interpretation, which applies values external to the text to reshape or filter its message. An example of the latter is Kant’s recommendation to construe the Bible according to morality and not the other way around. Nonliteral interpretation is one way of rejecting fundamentalism.

6. Nonliteral interpretations include allegorical ones, which read the text as a symbolic representation of a lesson beyond the text's literal meaning. Except when the text manifestly invites or requires allegorical readings, as in the case of Jesus's parables, we understand that allegorical interpretation is a departure from literalism.<sup>8</sup> That is especially true if an allegorical reading conflicts with the explicit moral teaching of the text, such as God's praise for Abraham's willingness to kill his child in obedience to God. Kant did not try to reinterpret the story of Abraham and Isaac, but simply regarded it as false.

7. We can say that the story marks a stage in the moral development of God's people. The ethic of obedience taught by this text will be replaced by the fuller moral understanding of the wisdom literature and prophets found later in the Bible.<sup>9</sup> This view moves away from fundamentalism by conceding that scripture isn't always right.

8. We can disregard the story because, although we follow an Abrahamic religion, our way of being religious doesn't involve close attention to scripture. (This response may be available to some of those who call themselves "cultural" Jews, Christians, or Muslims, though many such people deny that they are religious.)

9. We can disregard the story and others like it, because we are atheists or not deeply religious or because we follow a non-Abrahamic religion that doesn't pose similar problems. (Many "cultural" Jews, Christians, and Muslims would fall in this category.)

My goal in this article is to discourage the first and third responses, because, avowedly or not, they create a conflict between morality and religion and subordinate the former to the latter. We can avoid this outcome in different ways, either by saying that God would not issue commands in conflict with the human conscience (the Kantian approach); or that when he does, we should refuse compliance (the dissenting approach); or that we misinterpret scripture when we think it conflicts with reflective morality (the reinterpretation approach); or that we give the story an interpretation different from its literal sense (the allegorical approach); or that the story expresses a flawed view, later corrected (the developmental approach); or that we don't focus on scripture (the extra-scriptural approach); or that we reject or discount Abrahamic religion (the atheist or heathen approach).

It is troubling that Jacques Derrida (2008) has written in defense of God and Abraham. Derrida figures God's command as a claim by the "absolute other," a claim that greets us constantly from every quarter, because we can never help some without sacrificing others. For Derrida, Abraham's predicament is one that we face at every moment. But it isn't necessary to rehabilitate Abraham in order to make the familiar point that interests conflict and that we can't help some individuals without taking time away from helping others. Killing Isaac saves no one. It never seems to occur to Derrida that Abraham should disobey God. We are to assume that he must obey, and then figure out why. The biblical story may exert an attraction for those with a taste for paradox and hyperbole, and as I indicate later, readers too often mistake the story's aesthetic power for moral instruction.<sup>10</sup> To quote Burke ([1757], 42), terror "produces delight when it does not press too close."

### **Liberal religion**

Abraham's mistake (to repeat) is that he lets authority displace or preempt his own reasoned judgment. To avoid Abraham's error, it is not necessary to abandon religion (though there may be other reasons to do so). Nonfundamentalist religion can avoid conflict with morality because it allows the Kantian, dissenting, allegorical, developmental, extra-scriptural, and heathen approaches. (The reinterpretation approach tries to reconcile fundamentalism with reflective morality, but as I have suggested, raises problems.)

We have to remind ourselves of the possibility of nonfundamentalist religion – religion willing to reject parts of scripture, or religion that takes a non-literal approach to scriptural interpretation. A Jew can reject parts of the Hebrew Bible; a Christian can reject parts of the Old and New Testaments; a Muslim can reject parts of the Qur'an and hadith. In addition, Jews, Christians, and Muslims can interpret scripture in a non-literal way.

There are several formidable religious criticisms of fundamentalism. I will draw on John Shelby Spong's *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (1991) and Rich Lang's *Left Wing Jesus* (no date). Spong is the late Episcopalian bishop of Newark, New Jersey. Lang is the pastor of the Lake Washington United Methodist Church near Seattle. I also examine the work of Khaled Abou El Fadl, an Islamic studies scholar at UCLA Law School.

Spong argues that the Bible contains far too much in the way of contradictions, scientific misinformation, frightening moral teachings and examples, and ethno-religious hate for us to treat it as the literal word of God. Centuries of scholarship have taught us a great deal about the human authorship and editing of the Bible. The text largely reflects the values of the age in which particular passages were written, together with the biases and political and ideological agendas of individual authors. When we undertake a contextual and non-literal reading of the Bible, seeing in it the struggle of fallible authors to make sense of the world, we discover a richer fund of meaning: "there is so much more biblical truth and biblical beauty once we escape the stricture of a literalistic approach to the Bible" (Spong 1991, 74).

In order to find the word of God, we need to lift the "transcendent presence out of its ancient context and place it with integrity inside our own spiritual journeys as a resource" (75). The Bible and the creeds are not the truth, but rather "windows into truth" (233). Ancient myths are an attempt to reach the truth, and "we must seek the truth that lies beneath mythology of the distant past so that we might experience that truth" (237). Spong does not see a conflict between Christianity and human conscience, because he believes that "true Christianity ultimately issues in a deeper humanism" (242).

Spong (20) and Lang (5) write that the God portrayed in some parts of the Bible is "repulsive." Like Spong, Lang believes that we should apply our own reason and experience to the study of scripture and reject teachings and examples in conflict with values of justice and love, which represent the Bible's deeper message (21-22). Jesus's refusal of Satan's third temptation, inviting Jesus to display his supernatural powers, is a warning to us not to use religion for ill (12-13). "The words of the Bible are not magical," but rather "human words inspired by faith" (51). We should not encounter the Bible passively, but engage it as if in a "wrestling match requiring our full attentiveness" (5). Lang concludes:

Through dialogue, and living practice, the Biblical words become God's words to us. And we become like Israel, a name meaning God-wrestler, given to Jacob when he wrestled the angelic stranger upon his return from exile. We are to wrestle with God, and one another, not for the sake of wrestling but for the sake of being truly human: the image of God on earth. (52)

I suggest that we might go even farther than Lang. Rather than wrestle with odious or harmful passages, we may simply want to reject them. A religious person can treat scripture as an important resource for personal and moral development, without thinking that every passage contains buried treasure or deserves intensive study.

In the work of the Islamic studies scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl, we can see a similar turn away from fundamentalist methodology towards an emphasis on reflective morality. Abou El Fadl argues that to follow Islam we should seek to do what morality actually requires, and that to identify morality's requirements we should employ our God-given faculties of thought and feeling rather than focus exclusively on the collection of specific rules written in scripture. "When God commands people to

pursue ethical values such as justice, mercy, compassion, kindness, or faithfulness,” he writes, “I assume that these words have meanings” (Abou El Fadl 2015, 482). Moreover, God cannot, by the power of command, transform wrong into right. Some would have us believe that “all right and wrong comes from the sheer will of God, and if God so willed, God could have made what is wrong right, and vice versa. God could have ordered us to disbelieve, be unjust, tell lies, or commit murder, and it would have been fair and good because God said so. But this line of thinking is flawed because it argues the impossible” (483). The key point here is that for Abou El Fadl morality has content independent of God’s will – lying is wrong, murder is wrong – and that what is wrong independently of God’s will cannot be commanded by God.

Abou El Fadl writes that “Muslims bear a responsibility not just towards themselves, but also towards humanity and the world.... It is a basic theological premise in Islam that if one fails to bear witness for God and against what is wrong and immoral [*al-munkar*], then one becomes an accomplice to this wrong” (474). God has given us the tools to pursue this mission: “The fact is that as human beings, we are subject to the laws of humanity that are etched into our very being – these laws are embedded in our cognition and consciousness, and are as stable and unwavering as the laws of mathematics or the logic that defines material reality. These are laws of rational elements that allow us to have a shared language about justice, ethics, values, happiness, misery and beauty” (483). The search for morality unites Muslims and other cultural traditions in a shared task. At various stages in history, Islamic scholars have sought wisdom from other cultures, and have contributed wisdom in turn (474-75).

Though Abou El Fadl writes that Muslims regard the Qur’an as the “literal, authentic, and unadulterated word of God” (Abou El Fadl 2005, 114), he argues at length against narrowly literal modes of interpretation.<sup>11</sup> If we take seriously our religious obligation to seek justice, mercy, and compassion, we must not surrender moral principle to literalist readings of scripture, but instead interpret scripture in light of moral ideals. “The particular and specific rules set out in the Qur’an are not objectives in themselves.” They “are contingent on particular historical circumstances that might or might not exist in the modern age” and that at the time of their revelation “were sought to achieve particular moral objectives such as justice, equity, equality, mercy, compassion, benevolence, and so on” (156). The “Puritanical-Salafists” against whom Abou El Fadl has waged a career-long polemic go off course when they treat the Qur’an as “a military manual setting out the marching orders of the high command” (Abou El Fadl 2015, 478). Since God gave us powers of moral understanding and had foreknowledge of a subsequent history of moral learning and moral progress, “it would stand to reason that God would produce a text that is immanently negotiable and dynamic” (484). God did not intend “to lock the epistemology of the 7th century into the immutable text of the Qur’an,” nor “to hold Muslims hostage to this epistemological framework for all ages to come” (484). Should we go as far as saying that troubling passages in scripture are wrong? As far as I know, Abou El Fadl does not explicitly take this step, instead preferring to say that we should fix our attention on the moral purposes that such passages served in a historical setting very different from our own, and stressing the fallibility of our interpretive efforts. But the step that Abou El Fadl is unwilling to take is, I believe, open to Muslims who are otherwise moved by his arguments.

An important reason to create space for nonfundamentalist religion is the possibility that religion can make distinctive contributions to morality. There is little doubt that scripture has inspired moral conduct. It contains valuable as well as harmful teachings. Beyond scripture, religious practices such as confession, atonement, prayer, and community building have the potential to deepen moral reflection and develop moral character. Religion can also be the vehicle for moral education in the form of story-telling, personal reflection, and extended exercises in moral reasoning. A rich literature in religious ethics has contributed to moral understanding. Religion has provided the organizational infrastructure for social justice movements, famously including the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, and a vast amount of philanthropy. Scripture itself is filled with wisdom. It is possible that there are some moral truths taught by scripture that we can learn in no other way.

I will give the name “liberal religion” to what I regard as the preferable alternative to fundamentalist religion. Liberal religion, as I define it, retains observances (such as self-examination, ethical theorizing, and community building) that can contribute to moral education. Inasmuch as it preserves a role for scripture, it treats it as a resource for moral development, regarding it less as an authority than as an occasion to rouse the imagination, spark dialogue, and deepen reflection. Religious liberals look for meaning in scripture, but consult their own reasoned judgment as the final arbiter of right and wrong. Their attitude to scripture is one of openness and (sometimes contentious) dialogue, meaning that they believe study of scripture may yield moral understanding.

Religious liberals claim permission to “talk back” to scripture<sup>12</sup> – to argue with and when necessary reject its teachings, to identify and learn from its mistakes, to notice the questions it poses, and to take them in a different direction from scripture itself.<sup>13</sup> Consider the example of the Jewish feminist Judith Plaskow who affirms her adherence to Judaism while emphasizing the harmfulness of many biblical passages and the patriarchal values that shape scripture as a whole. She writes that Jewish sources “have been partial and oppressive, occasionally ugly and simply wrong” (Plaskow 1990, 21). She claims a connection to the Bible while refusing to place it above criticism: “I take for granted my critical freedom in relation to the Bible; but I also take for granted my connection to it, the value of examining its viewpoint and concerns. I pronounce the Bible patriarchal; but in taking the tie to explore it, I claim it as a text that matters to me” (13).<sup>14</sup>

Religious liberals are ecumenical. It is unreasonable to presume that one’s own religious tradition has a monopoly on the truth. Other religious traditions can contribute distinctive insights and shed light on blind spots and errors in one’s own religious tradition. Religious liberals will also draw on the resources of nonreligious moral philosophy. Finally, religious liberals will invite others to criticize their religious views and religious traditions. Outsider criticism is crucial for helping us see our blindspots and errors. One can criticize religions, even harshly, without demeaning or insulting people by virtue of their religious identity. We can separate religious criticism, including blasphemy, from hate speech.

I have sought to make a case for liberal religion, an alternative to both fundamentalism and atheism, but I am aware of moral arguments for rejecting religion even in its liberal form. Because the Abrahamic religions are associated with their respective scriptures, the fundamentalist temptation will persist. Unless we take the further step of renouncing Abrahamic religions, it may be argued, the dangerous passages in scripture are a loaded gun waiting to go off.

### **Why People Confuse Morality with Scripture**

Our problem is that too many people confuse morality with scripture. Seeking to be moral, they become disposed to follow Abraham’s terrible example. The confusion rests on the conjunction of two beliefs: (1) that morality depends on religion, and (2) that true religion is fundamentalist. The first claim is dubious, but even if true, does not entail the second.

Though above I noted that religion may make distinctive contributions to morality, I do not mean to imply that morality requires religion.<sup>15</sup> The claim is puzzling, because the world gives us abundant examples of moral nonreligious people and immoral religious people. Nonreligious people can speak articulately about the beliefs, values, and commitments that underpin their adherence to morality. To claim that morality depends on religion is to say that these people’s beliefs purporting to explain the reality, primacy, and motivational power of morality are mistaken. It is to claim, for example, that Miep and Jan Gies, two atheists who shielded Anne Frank’s family and four other Jews from the Nazis at great risk to themselves, were wrong to trust the beliefs that they thought gave them a moral obligation to protect their fellow human beings from the Nazis.<sup>16</sup>

Someone might say: God exists and instructs us to be good. By believing in God, we see an important

reason to be good. Nonbelievers fail to see this, and therefore miss an important reason why we should be good; their moral understanding is at best incomplete. I do not want to foreclose this possibility. Even if it is true, however, it falls short of showing that morality depends on religion, since nonbelievers may have powerful and sufficient reasons to follow morality.

Many people are taught from an early age that morality requires religion. The belief, thus inculcated, is not easily dislodged. In addition, some people make the error of thinking that because throughout most of recorded history moral education has taken place within a religious frame it could occur in no other way. As Mill writes, “It is usual to credit religion *as such* with the whole of the power inherent in *any* system of moral duties inculcated by education and enforced by opinion” (Mill (1874] 1998, 77). What’s worse is that some of the main improvements in morality – including the value placed on freedom, toleration, and democracy – have often been achieved despite the furious resistance of religion, only to have religion later take credit for them.<sup>17</sup>

One may believe that morality requires *God* without believing that it requires *religion*, meaning *belief* in God. It is possible that the moral reasoning and moral motivation of nonreligious people (or even religious people) depend on God in ways they do not perceive. The world could be filled with atheists reasoning and acting morally without awareness of the divine underpinnings of morality. Several theistic moral theories leave open this possibility.<sup>18</sup> On this view (to repeat), morality does not require religion.

But the view that morality depends on God (as distinct from religion) may also be doubted. Plato’s *Euthyphro* famously poses the question whether acts are right because God commands them or God commands acts because they are right. The second alternative challenges the dependence of morality on God, because it holds that acts are right independently of whether God commands them. The first alternative, adopted by divine command theory or theological voluntarism, appears to make morality dependent on God, but troublingly implies that there is no right or wrong apart from God’s command and that God could cause atrocious acts to be morally required and noble acts to be morally prohibited merely by will. Divine command theorists must fight off the suspicion that their view gets rid of morality.

Recent years have seen a revival of divine command theory with complex philosophical arguments for and against.<sup>19</sup> Note that the claim that God’s command makes acts right has little practical import in itself, since it does not address the epistemic question of how we identify the content of God’s commands. It is possible that the content of God’s commands lies closer to the conclusions of reflective morality than to the message of scripture. Unsurprisingly, some divine command theorists, such as the prominent philosopher of religion William Wainwright, locate God’s will in revelation (Wainwright 2005, 103, 107-08), but this move raises obvious problems. It is striking that Wainwright, after defending divine command theory, later in the same book defends the Kierkegaardian view that God’s command ordering Abraham to kill Isaac violates morality and that Abraham may have reason to violate morality in obedience to God (201-08). The contradiction with divine command theory passes unnoticed; what links the otherwise clashing views is the premise that we should obey God.

Morality involves the idea of constraint – we are sometimes required to act contrary to inclination – and an external God who delivers commands would appear to serve this function. In this way, it is natural to associate morality with God. But this falls short of proving the dependence of morality on God, since there are ways to make sense of the idea of moral constraint that do not involve God. Moreover, an over-emphasis on constraint may distort morality’s true meaning.

Some people think that morality depends on punishment and reward. Constraints require “teeth,” and moral constraints are no exception; for moral constraints to be meaningful, therefore, we need a God who stands ready to punish their violation. The premise is mistaken. An act is wrong independently of

whether it will incur punishment, and we rightly criticize those who are deterred from immoral conduct only by fear of punishment. As Cicero warns, “If virtue is sought for its rewards, not for its own intrinsic merits, then the only virtue will be the one most rightly called wicked conduct.... For that is the most unjust thing of all, to seek a reward for justice” (Cicero [55-54 BCE] 1999, 123). Moral motivation implies that we are motivated by something other than fear of punishment – by some mixture of a sense of duty, fairness, love, empathy, loyalty, respect, honesty, and integrity.

However, we can tie morality to religion and still avoid Abraham’s mistake, the mistake of viewing scripture as an infallible guide to morality. The best theistic morality is the Kantian one, according to which God requires us to be truly moral, and therefore, in order to discover God’s will, we must apply our capacities of thinking and feeling to determine the content of morality. On this account, the search for morality, through the exercise of reasoned judgment, is the search for God.

This is the step that fundamentalists refuse to make. Why? A banal reason for fundamentalism’s staying power is that religious authorities have insisted that belief in scriptural infallibility is an essential component of true religion. Indoctrination, fear, and community pressure keep the doctrine aloft, and shallow observers are impressed by the sheer number of (professed) adherents. The doctrine is further reinforced by a desire to draw a sharp distinction from secular culture and an assumption that greater reliance on scripture indicates purer religiosity.

But I think a conceptual mistake is also involved. The mistake is thinking that God’s authority is somehow diminished if we grant human reason a role in determining the content of God’s will. The thought is that human submission to God requires a kind of intellectual passivity. Hence the attraction of an account which tells us that morality is found in the content of God’s will and that God happens to have provided us an infallible record of his will in the form of scripture. The story has an appealing simplicity, but we need the courage to say, whether we are religious or not, that it is not believable. It is not believable that a moral God would issue commands and permissions such as many of those found in the Bible, Qur’an, and hadith or that Abraham acted admirably in forming an intention to kill his child in obedience to the reported will of God. We can further point out that the fundamentalist story conflicts with the religious teaching that God endowed human beings with reason and conscience. It makes little sense that a moral God would issue commands that outrage our God-given conscience.

A major unappreciated reason why many people confuse morality with scripture is that they mistake the powerful aesthetic motives pulling them towards religion for motives of morality. Because of this, they give aesthetic motives free rein in the name of morality and at the expense of morality. In this way, aesthetic motivation can become dangerous when disguised or unconscious. This point is masterfully developed in George Kateb’s article “Aestheticism and Morality: Their Cooperation and Hostility” (Kateb 2006).<sup>20</sup> The motives that draw us to religion include an attraction to beauty - for form, shape, purity, identity, pattern, and dualism (126).<sup>21</sup> Individuals seek to give their own experience and that of their group “the form of a story, pattern, or properly unfolding narrative” (128). An attraction to the sublime also drives people to religion. Under the concept of the sublime, Kateb (with debts to Burke and Kant) includes aspects such as “the unbounded or boundless; the indefinite, indeterminate, or infinite; the transgressive; the overwhelming or overpowering; excess or extravagance; the massive; the massively ruinous; the oceanic; the abyssal; the overweening or overreaching; the awe-inspiring, wondrous, astonishing, or unexpectedly mysterious; and the uncanny” (129). The craving for the sublime is recognizable in the enthusiastic emphasis that much religious discourse places on the power of God and the comparative puniness of human beings. It is indulged by the doctrine that God’s will as revealed in scripture is the final word to which humans should simply submit, even in defiance of common sense and decency, and by claims that our terror of God should only deepen our love and reverence for him. An aesthetic appreciation for the sublimity of God’s power and Abraham’s “leap of faith” is the predominant mood of Kierkegaard’s discussion in *Fear and Trembling*.<sup>22</sup>

Religion is entwined with group identity and other aesthetically driven ideals that are ranked above morality (Kateb 2006, 118-23). The problem is that the aesthetic motives operative in religion and other supra-moral ideals are not recognized as such. In the case of religion, they often parade as morality. Wickedness is thus emboldened, and “the innocent assault on morality is enormous” (131). Kateb describes religion’s unacknowledged subordination of morality:

Although supposedly the origin of morality, the God of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is worshipped for his very favoritism, bloodthirstiness, and caprice, not only in spite of them. And the God made by some Christian theologians exercises sovereign predestination and constructs a place of eternal torture for many of his creatures who are guilty of uneternal crimes. By moral standards God is, in some respects, a practitioner of wickedness. But to call God wicked is considered a heinous sin, yet to hold God to a moral standard is considered impiety. (119)

Kateb notes the irony “that the God of morality is made to do immorality innocently and to sponsor the same in his adherents” (120).

Unconscious aesthetic feelings motivate religious fundamentalism in spite or because of its moral implausibility. Kateb believes that aesthetic motivation is inescapable (142). Other critics of religion, noting the aesthetic needs satisfied by religion, have sought to articulate aesthetic outlooks that function as a safer and more beneficent substitute for traditional religion.<sup>23</sup> Kateb recommends what he calls a “democratic aestheticism” that takes conscious notice of our aesthetic needs and cultivates an attitude of receptivity and responsiveness to the world around us. It “seeks to assert morality’s supremacy and then educate the sense of beauty and sublimity so that it serves morality rather than harming it” (144).<sup>24</sup>

## **Conclusion**

My argument has been that fundamentalist religion (and authority-deferent religion more broadly) necessarily conflicts with morality, but that a nonfundamentalist approach I have called “liberal religion” can harmonize with and potentially strengthen morality. The Abraham-Isaac story is a parable that proves the moral unacceptability of religious fundamentalism. To avoid immorality, followers of Abrahamic religions should adopt a nonfundamentalist relation to scripture.

To put it another way, you can choose no more than two of the three options of morality, religion, and fundamentalist methodology. If you commit yourself to both morality and religion, you must give up fundamentalist methodology, the view that religion is identical with scripture. If you commit yourself to morality while identifying religion with scripture, you must reject religion. If you adhere to religion and identify religion with scripture, you renounce morality.

This argument holds lessons for nonreligious people, religious people, public discourse, and legal doctrine. The lesson for nonreligious people is not to assume that religion is in conflict with morality. There are ways of being religious that do not subordinate morality. The lesson for religious people is that they should refuse pressure to transgress reflective morality in the name of scripture, and that such refusal in no way implies that they are less religious. Religious authorities and institutions should make a similar refusal.

When religious authorities and institutions subordinate morality to scripture, they become complicit in injustice. To say this is not to imply that such complicity must be subject to legal prohibition. (Sometimes it should and sometimes it should not.) It is wrong to assume that if an institution, norm, or practice is unjust, then there must be a state remedy. We should stop regarding the state as our moral tutor, and take responsibility for the injustices we commit as individuals and collectivities, whether or not state involvement is warranted.

Scripture and magisterial pronouncements placed above criticism have authorized terrible injustices past and present. Women, children, LGBTQ people, nonbelievers, heretics, and apostates are among those who have been and still are targeted by religious injustice. Exposing the injustices for what they are is everyone's concern. Some of the injustices are not of a kind that warrant legal prohibition, while others are. In addition, many of the injustices have been inflicted by agents of the state acting in the name of religion or influenced by religion. Immoral religious teachings increase the probability of state crimes and injustices, and this is one reason, though not the only one, to call them out. Fundamentalism and authority-deferent religion in general is a primary vehicle of such teachings.

In our public discourse, we should learn to be less automatically deferential to moral claims made in the name of religion. Religion should not be a shield from moral criticism. People's religiously-based moral beliefs may rest on confusion, insensitivity, stubbornness, or an unjustified refusal to consider reasoned objections. Scriptural backing does not confer a presumption of moral justification. "Wives should obey their husbands" is an odious view. "Wives should obey their husbands, Ephesians 5:22" is no less odious.

The best arguments for religious toleration are ones that imply the need for self-examination and self-criticism on the part of religious people. Martha Nussbaum's (2008) argument for religious freedom is that "the faculty with which each person searches for the ultimate meaning of life is of intrinsic worth and value, and is worthy of respect whether the person is using it well or badly" (168-69). The faculty is worthy of respect whether I use it well or badly, but if I do not even *try* to avoid using it badly, then I do not respect its intrinsic worth and value – I do not take it seriously at all. I should therefore invite other people, through moral criticism, to help me avoid using this faculty badly, and I should be willing to return the favor.

Freedom of religion is a great value, entitled to constitutional protection. Governments become tyrannical when they believe themselves authorized to stamp out every individual or collective injustice, including those authorized by religion. Courts must carefully weigh the question which religious injustices should be immune from legal prohibition on grounds of freedom of religion. This question is beyond the bounds of this paper, and I shall limit myself to the observation that courts have sometimes gone astray when they show excessive deference to the moral self-understandings of traditional religious communities. This is arguably what happened when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled (in *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 1972) that an Old Order Amish community was constitutionally permitted to stop educating their children after the eighth grade as a means of keeping them tied to the community, because their religion told them that this was the right thing to do.

While governments must exercise some restraint in the use of legal prohibition to prevent religious injustice, individuals are not similarly constrained to withhold criticism of injustice defended in the name of religion. The next time someone uses religious texts or invokes religious authorities to defend an immoral position, you can respond, "If God is good, he (she/they) does not take the side of injustice, cruelty, or oppression."

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## Notes

1. The official teaching of the Catholic Church is that the magisterium (the bishops in communion with the pope) is entrusted with the task of interpreting divine revelation including scripture (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 85). Whether the Catholic Church encourages believers to cultivate moral judgment unconfined by scripture, tradition, and the magisterium is a question to which there is no simple answer, since the official guideline can be interpreted in different ways and dissident views are also possible. For a discussion of the tensions between traditional and liberal strains in Catholic thought, see Gaillardetz 2018.
2. For one example, see Williamson's *Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture* (2001).
3. I use the New Revised Standard Version.
4. See Palmquist and Rudisill (2009).
5. In J. M. Bernstein's words, Abraham "was prepared to transgress the unshakable center of human morality by sacrificing his son" (Bernstein 2017, 264).
6. J. M. Bernstein (2017) offers an extended reading of Caravaggio's painting. He treats it as a refutation of Kierkegaard's defense of Abraham (see below), and suggests that it marks the beginning of moral modernity (259).
7. Citations are to volume and page number of the Academy edition, as found in the margins of most translations.
8. For a defense of nonliteral readings of scripture, see Schneiders 1993 and 1999.
9. I am grateful to Victor Muñiz-Fraticelli for bringing this view to my attention.
10. Derrida's discussion is strongly criticized by Bernstein in "Remembering Isaac" (2017).
11. For example, Abou El Fadl 2005, 106.
12. See also Schneiders (1993, 32), who writes with reference to the Bible that texts "are capable of creating readers who will criticize the text in the name of the text. This self-subverting capacity of the text is inherent in the classic as a text. The text, as we have seen, is not an inert container of facts about the past but is a semantically autonomous literary structure that, in interaction with different readers in different circumstances, can give rise to a plurality of valid interpretations, including some not foreseen or intended by the author."
13. Khaled Abou El Fadl does not go this far, and I therefore would not classify him as a religious liberal as I use the term. However, he moves towards liberal religion.
14. Generally speaking, the Reform and Reconstructionist movements in Judaism create space to criticize and reject portions of scripture, though practice varies.
15. For powerful criticisms of this claim, see Smith (2022) and Anderson (2007).
16. I take the example from Smith (2022, 169). Jan had long been an atheist, while Miep became one during the war. See Gies and Gold (2009, 241).
17. Smith documents this pattern in *Right from Wrong*.
18. For a review of historical and contemporary theistic moral theories, see Wainwright (2005).
19. A leading exponent is Adams (1999). For a lucid review of the debate and a defense of divine command theory against its critics, see Wainwright (2005), chs. 5-8. Linda Zagbeski (2004) has developed a variant theory that locates moral goodness in God's motives rather than God's will.
20. Previously published, in identical form, in *Political Theory* 28 (February 2000): 5-37.
21. Mill ([1874] 1998) writes, "Religion and poetry address themselves, at least in one of their aspects, to the same part of the human constitution: they both supply the same want, that of ideal conceptions grander and more beautiful than we see realized in the prose of human life" (103).
22. When Kierkegaard writes that religion "is the only power capable of rescuing the aesthetic from its conflict with the ethical," he means that religion has the power to place the aesthetic above the ethical (Kierkegaard [1843] 1985, 119-120).
23. Examples include Mill ([1874] 1998); Russell (1957); and Bell (2018, 237-58). These writers sometimes do and sometimes do not refer to their proffered substitute as a kind of religion.
24. See also Kateb (2014).

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