

Can Christianity Be Reduced to an Ethical System?
Ted Di Maria, Philosophy, Gonzaga University
Gonzaga Socratic Club, Friday, April 18, 2008

- I. Intro: the question is not so much whether Christianity can be reduced to morality since many have argued that Christianity's truth lies in its moral lessons and the moral paradigm of Jesus. Rather the crucial question is whether Christianity ought to be reduced to morality.
- II. What would it mean to reduce Christianity to morality?
 - A. Reduction to morality implies the truth and meaning of Christianity is exhausted by the moral truths contained within it.
 - 1. This would seem to dismiss the truth and value of spiritual concepts like Christ's incarnation, the Trinity, and revealed truths in general whose main message is not moral.
 - 2. Saying that morality can be reduced to Christianity should be distinguished from the claim that morality is essential to Christianity.
 - a. The reduction of Christianity to morality suggests that its inherent morality is both necessary and sufficient for understanding Christianity.
 - b. Recognizing that Christianity is essentially moral is to view its morality as necessary but not sufficient for understanding Christianity.
- III. Kant's emphasis in the *Religion* on the moral character of Christianity
 - A. Background discussion of the ideas of God, immortality, and freedom
 - 1. Theoretical analysis of these ideas
 - 2. God, immortality, and freedom as practical postulates
 - B. If religion is examined within the limits of reason alone it will emphasize these ideas and the advancement of a pure religion based upon them.
 - 1. Kant's distinction between religion and historical faith
 - a. The one true religion
 - b. Historical faith
 - 2. The importance of historical faith for the advancement of religion
 - 3. Christianity as natural or true religion
 - 4. The role of spiritual concepts
 - a. Salvation occurs through one's disposition to moral conduct not through belief or obedience to church (statutory) laws
 - b. Jesus as savior
 - c. Prayer, church-going, baptism, and communion as encouragements to a moral disposition
 - C. Assessment of whether Kant's treatment reduces Christianity to morality
 - 1. His interpretation of scripture and religious concepts in moral terms

2. Foregoing analysis comes very close to regarding morality as both necessary and sufficient for Christianity and thus to reducing its meaning to morality.
- IV. Should Christianity be reduced to morality?
- A. A major advantage to reducing Christianity, and the major religions, to morality would be that it would focus on a good moral disposition as the means to be well-pleasing to God, which would facilitate good works and a cooperative society.
 1. By regarding morality as the true religion this would eliminate the need to regard the differences between faiths as a source of antagonism.
 - B. Regards the differences between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam as insignificant and this seems to disregard the most distinctive feature of Christianity: the incarnation and Christ's divinity.
 - C. One can argue in a Kierkegaardian fashion that Christianity, and religion generally, have an affective dimension and truth that is irreducible to any moral construct.