

# Has the Church Lost its Moral Authority?

This topic was inspired by the Moral Maze debate on Radio 4:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000nf3p>

I will start by suggesting some ground rules for this discussion all of which I am sure will come as a relief to our religious members. Rather as science can be used for good or evil by the people who understand it perhaps the same can be said of the church. My intention is that we should debate the authority of the church AT ITS ROOTS and whether that authority AT ITS ROOTS can be described as moral.

Accordingly, I suggest **we avoid** the following typical mud-slinging items which demonstrate the harm created by the church, but which are sometimes argued to be due to people in the church but not actual christianity itself.

Some would say we should know them by their actions but in that case the debate will be over rather quickly. Let us instead give the church the benefit of the doubt and try to focus on its underlying sources of authority and moral instruction.

**So, the following topics are OFF the agenda:**

- 1) It is undoubtedly true that the churches have an unparalleled history of the sexual, physical, and mental abuse of children and that this has been covered up at the highest levels. Only this week the most senior catholic cardinal in the UK was found by the child abuse enquiry to have covered up for his priests and shown a 'total lack of compassion for children'. This is, of course, not limited to the Catholic church. No one with the smallest shred of decency could see the actions of great men of god like Archbishop Carey as anything but extremely evil. BUT for the purposes of this conversation I suggest we avoid as far as possible references to child abuse – since these are simply actions of a very large number of wicked individuals within the church but not, perhaps, the church itself. Similarly, the vast wealth and financial corruption of the Vatican is a fact to be avoided in this conversation.
- 2) None of us would defend 'the church' as it manifests in, for example, Saudi Islam or some African Christianity (where gays are an abomination). So, let us concentrate on the church as we know it– specifically in modern Europe and the UK.
- 3) Church founders such as Luther and Calvin and Augustine and Aquinas espoused the most murderous and wicked views against the Jews. They provided inspiration for the holocaust. No decent person who has read Luther's 'On the Jews and their Lies' could be comfortable following a creature like that. However, such people could be said to be men of their time, although clearly not inspired by anything good.
- 4) The vast persecutions committed by the church against people with even the slightest doctrinal differences are a matter of historical fact. Whether it is the

hundreds of years of religious wars, the burning of witches, the inquisitions or the sectarian hatreds which continue to this day these are arguably actions of humans who do not really represent the church.

- 5) The suppression of the light of science which continues to this day. Anyone with an illness that could have been treated with advanced stem cell therapies (anything from bone cancer to blindness to Parkinson's disease) should hang their heads in shame at the church's prevention of the US NIH bringing their billions to bear on the development of stem cell therapies. They are like Mother Theresa – friends not of those who suffer but of suffering itself. Science was held back for centuries. If science were even just a little more advanced Covid 19 would be a trivial inconvenience.
- 6) The church has always suppressed the rights of women. The latest events in Poland are a terrible source of suffering.

### **Does the Church Have Authority?**

The answer must clearly be Yes, very much so. It operates at several levels:

Individual members try to follow the church's rules, give the church money, support its priests, and attend its events.

The church still denies fair access to state funded education to many children in the UK (If you doubt this see: <https://accordcoalition.org.uk/> ). This is a source of division in society and ongoing intra-christian and intrareligious hatreds.

The UK has unelected representatives of the church in its legislature. The only other country to do this is Iran.

However, the authority of the church in Europe no longer extends to the total denial of education or to arrest, torture and execution etc. The five centuries or more of burning people alive and the vicious persecution of the pagans are, thanks to our secular society, now beyond the power of the church.

### **Is the Authority Moral?**

I think this is where we must examine the church at its roots in the teachings of God and Jesus.

We can probably all agree that the old testament is full of wickedness. At my Cathedral school I was always appalled that God killed every living thing on the planet (except two of each) because he was displeased. The little animals, the birds, the children – hear their screams as they drowned. Or that he asked Abraham to prove his loyalty by committing the most horrific child abuse against his own son. The primitive rules of the 10 commandments seem to be mostly about how to treat god and say little advanced about right and wrong – not killing, lying, stealing etc is pretty basic for non-psychopaths. Compare this with, say,

the teachings of the non-theist Mahavira in 600BCE. Do not injure, abuse, insult, enslave, torture or torment any sentient being. How different the world would have been if those had been the commandments. Or the golden rule which predates Jesus and was expounded by Zoroaster, Confucius, Buddha and Epictetus.

But, there is much in the bible that priests dare not even speak in church. For example, it is not only Islam that prescribes death for apostasy:

Deuteronomy 13:6-10  
New International Version

<sup>6</sup> If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying, "Let us go and worship other gods" (gods that neither you nor your ancestors have known, <sup>7</sup> gods of the peoples around you, whether near or far, from one end of the land to the other), <sup>8</sup> do not yield to them or listen to them. Show them no pity. Do not spare them or shield them. <sup>9</sup> You must certainly put them to death. Your hand must be the first in putting them to death, and then the hands of all the people. <sup>10</sup> Stone them to death, because they tried to turn you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

I am not sure my daughter would approve of Exodus 21 verses 7-11:

<sup>7</sup> "If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as male servants do. <sup>8</sup> If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself, <sup>[b]</sup> he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her. <sup>9</sup>

And how about Leviticus verses 44 -46:

Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. <sup>45</sup> You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property. <sup>46</sup> You can bequeath them to your children as inherited property and can make them slaves for life, but you must not rule over your fellow Israelites ruthlessly.

I'm sure every one of us would condemn the above biblical instructions as pure evil of the worst kind. However, I will not dwell on the old testament since the church invariably argues that such teachings were updated by Jesus. It is puzzling then that Jesus so clearly supported and endorsed every letter of the old testament.

This is what **Jesus said** about the old testament:

Mathew 5 vs 18-20

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of

heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

(Note: It is hard to argue that such a clear statement needs to be interpreted. One must at least expect the son of an omnipotent and omniscient god to be a good communicator. Moreover, this sentiment is clearly echoed elsewhere, eg. in 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy.)

Of course, Jesus did, on occasion, encourage moral behaviours. People often quote the parable of the good Samaritan. But speaking as someone who stops to rescue snails from being crushed on my garden path (even at the expense of my flowers) I am not overly impressed. Moreover Jesus showed immense anger (Mark 11 12-25, Mathew 21.12 & 2 other gospels) , gratuitous cruelty to animals on an enormous scale (Mark 5:11 and two other gospels, better documented than the resurrection) and told us that to be his disciples we have to hate even our own children (Luke 14.26). Not only that but saying things like the meek and poor are blessed merely encourages a slave morality (very convenient for oppressors everywhere). And surely, we should love everybody and not merely our local tribe of neighbours? As for the widow's mite, well if I were the church, I would want to encourage the poor to **keep** their last pennies.

Not only that but the teachings of Jesus invoke fear and threat:

Mathew 13.40

"As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. <sup>41</sup> The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. <sup>42</sup> They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup> Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

John 15:6

<sup>5</sup> "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Mathew 12:30

"Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. <sup>31</sup> And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. <sup>32</sup> Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

These sentiments are echoed throughout the New Testament

2 Thessalonians:

All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. <sup>6</sup> God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you <sup>7</sup> and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. <sup>8</sup> He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. <sup>9</sup> They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might <sup>10</sup>

Revelation 20:15

<sup>14</sup> Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. <sup>15</sup> Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

Let us now consider the modern concern with the history of slavery. The old testament instructs us as to how to sell our daughters. Jesus said nothing to discourage slavery, but the New Testament is thoroughly in favour.

Ephesians 6 Verse 5:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. <sup>6</sup> Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. <sup>7</sup> Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, <sup>8</sup> because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

1 Timothy 6:

All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered. <sup>2</sup> Those who have believing masters should not show them disrespect just because they are fellow believers. Instead, they should serve them even better because their masters are dear to them as fellow believers and are devoted to the welfare<sup>[a]</sup> of their slaves.

I could go on and on and on....

## Conclusion

From all the above it is clear that the bible is a best a weak source of moral guidance and contains instructions to behave in ways that are purely evil. The new testament is not better than the old and Jesus said and did some totally wicked things. Other, older sources of non-theistic moral guidance are far superior.

So, the church still has authority, but it is and was never moral authority. Its own behaviour is certainly not moral and neither is its root in the bible. Indeed, that may explain things like the cover ups of child rape which this week we learned go as far as the Pope himself. (After all Jesus said to that be his disciple, we must hate our own children – right? The church is more important than a little bit of child rape – Ugh!).

But there are three defences:

- 1) We are not perfect yet and the church is undergoing a progressive process of moral revelation. The problem I have with this is that church morality, even at its most advanced is behind secular ethics. They still argue about gay rights and women are invariably barred from the ruling bodies. (Indeed, hiding behind the church seems to be a way for eg. gay hating bigots to justify their feelings). In contrast, if, for example, in 1950 the CofE had said be nice to animals, stop factory farming and turn science to the task of making us all healthy vegans then it might be argued that the church has a leadership position.
- 2) The church inspires a lot of good work. This is undoubtedly true, but far more good work is done by secular organisations. Moreover, the people who do this work are also contributing to the church. It parasitises their good deeds. I have yet to see a set of church accounts where the money spent of external good works exceeds the value of their gift aid tax relief (I.e money taken by the churches from the NHS etc). It is not necessary to pay for churches and priests to support schools and hospitals.
- 3) Prayer works. Well sorry but double-blind trials done to the highest standards show that it does not – and for some reason priests don't tell people that. (They are exempt from the Advertising Standards Laws).

So Mahavira was right.

**“Good men should combat the believer in divine creation, maddened by an evil doctrine”**

**David.**